



Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba
gov.scot

Interim Evaluation of Best Start Grant



EQUALITY AND WELFARE



Contents

Contents	i
Executive Summary	iii
Introduction	1
Best Start Grant: Description	1
Best Start Grant and Sure Start Maternity Grant	2
Development of Best Start Grant.....	2
Best Start Grant Accessibility	2
Promotion of Best Start Grant.....	3
Recent developments	3
Evaluation aims	3
Methodology	5
Overview of evaluation design and logic model	5
Evaluation questions.....	7
Summary of data sources.....	7
Bespoke Commissioned Research.....	7
Official Statistics	8
Limitations.....	8
Findings.....	10
Achievement against short-term Best Start Grant policy outcomes	10
Promotion of grant	10
Application process is clear and easy.....	11
Payments are well administered.....	11
Grants are taken up	12
Grants reach people at key transition points in child's life, and Low-income families supported at key transition points in child's life	14
Increased regular income	14
Achievement against medium-term Best Start Grant policy outcomes	15
Reduced pressure on household finances	15
Increased child-related spend.....	15
Children able to participate in social and educational opportunities.....	15
Evidence of positive development against long-term Best Start Grant policy outcomes	16
Reduced incidence of debt	16
Reduced incidence of material deprivation.....	17

Improved health and well-being (of children and their families)	17
Evidence of positive impacts on long-term government outcomes for children and their families.....	17
Conclusion	19
Annex A: Additional statistical information.....	20

Executive Summary

Background

Since its inception, the Scottish Government has made a clear commitment to eradicating child poverty. A renewed commitment to tackling child poverty was made in the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017. This renewed commitment aims to utilise, where possible, the wider powers devolved to the Scottish Parliament following the 2014 independence referendum, the Smith Commission and, in particular, the range of social security powers devolved via the Scotland Act 2016.

The Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 introduced a range of new benefits devolved to Scotland. The Best Start Grant (BSG) is one of those new benefits and forms part of the strategic commitment outlined in the Scottish Government's Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan (2018-2022) - "Every Child, Every Chance". The Best Start Grant aims to reduce financial pressures on low income families. It is also part of the wider Scottish Government strategic objectives focusing on early years, early intervention and improving health, well-being and educational outcomes for low income families.

This evaluation aims to provide learning about the overall implementation of the benefit and the extent to which the objectives of BSG have been met. In doing so, it can also assess the likely contribution of BSG to wider long-term outcomes for children, alongside other Scottish Government interventions outside of social security that are also designed to support children and their families.

Importantly, although BSG is fully rolled-out, fuller impacts may only be assessed after at least 5 years from the roll-out when eligible families have had a chance to receive multiple payments for the same child. At this point, we are only reporting from the impact of the first payments.

Moreover, due to limited availability of other data at the time of this interim evaluation, this report focuses primarily on findings from the qualitative research that was commissioned externally and undertaken by ScotGen Social Research, which is summarised below and attached in full in Annex B. Official statistics are also discussed briefly. Other data may be available in time for the full evaluation in the future including data from established surveys (e.g. Scottish Household Survey, Family Resources Survey), the Social Security Scotland Satisfaction Survey, and additional Management Information.

Applying for the Best Start Grant

BSG recipients consulted in the evaluation research (hereafter 'respondents') became aware of the BSG in a range of ways, most commonly through word of mouth. Health and social care staff, parental support organisations, money advice teams and social media were all cited as ways in which respondents heard about the grant.

Respondents applied for BSG in order to help with additional expenses associated with having a baby, or their child attending nursery or school with the resulting financial implications. There were respondents who said they would have struggled to meet these expenses without the grant.

In general, respondents applied when they heard about the payment, or applied as soon as they were eligible. A few respondents had to wait until their child reached a certain age to apply.

Overall, respondents said that the application process was straightforward, which was helped by clear and easy to understand wording and format, a variety of application formats (online, paper, telephone), the option for data to be used from other applications (e.g. Baby Box), text and letter confirmations that the application had been received and awarded, payments being made directly into respondents' bank accounts, and helpful call handlers if advice was needed.

The most common negative factor reported by respondents was having to wait longer (for example, up to 5-8 weeks) than advertised to receive the grant. Respondents were also not always sure if they were eligible for the BSG.

Use of the Best Start Grant

Respondents generally had specific plans for the grant and used the money as they had intended. Those who did not use the grant in this way cited the extended length of time taken to receive the payment, or receiving these items by other means, as the reasons for this. There were respondents who spent the payment as soon as it arrived, whereas others bought items over time, or saved some of the payment to buy specific items at a later date.

Items bought were often essential items needed at these specific transitional stages, for example, cots, prams, nursery or school uniforms.

In addition to essential items, respondents used the BSG for social and educational activities for children and the whole family, for example, outings during school holidays. A small number of respondents said that the grant payment had been used to pay bills and household expenses during times of financial strain.

Respondents who received more than one of the BSG payments reported spending the grant in similar ways to those who only received one. Purchases

relevant to the transitions of the age group were again the most commonly reported uses of the grant, with remaining funds going towards social and educational activities.

With each of the BSG payments, parents and carers tended to spend the money in similar ways regardless of different family characteristics.

Impact of the Best Start Grant

The consensus among respondents was that the BSG had a very positive impact on their household finances. It was said that the grant prevented respondents from going into debt or having to cut down on other essential household spending, such as for food and bills. The grant enabled respondents to buy what they needed at key transitional stages of their children's life, and some claimants were also able to buy items for older children or to organise social and educational activities for the family.

BSG was also thought to have a positive impact on the health and well-being of respondents. Parents and carers said that the grant reduced financial stress and enabled them to feel prepared for key transitional stages in their child's life. Respondents expressed feelings of pride and increased self-esteem in being able to provide for their child rather than being dependent on others, and also as they could buy the items they wanted without having to compromise due to cost. Some purchases, such as social outings, provided opportunities for parents, carers and the children to bond as a family.

Respondents perceived that the grant had a positive impact on their children in a number of ways. The BSG enabled children to take part in social and educational opportunities that families would otherwise have been unable to afford. Children experienced excitement at picking out new clothes, toys or participating in activities. Items such as new uniforms allowed children to feel as if they fitted in with their peers. Educational purchases were thought to aid children's development (e.g. language and number skills, hand-eye co-ordination).

As the respondents' views of the impact of the BSG were overwhelmingly and similarly positive, it was not possible to draw out any differences by family characteristics.

Suggested improvements to the Best Start Grant

The BSG was very well received by the respondents. The straightforward nature of the application process, the ability to spend the payment at key transitional stages of the child's life and its perceived positive impact were all reported by the parents and carers. The respondents were unanimous that, if eligible, they would apply for another payment in the future and would also recommend the grant to others.

It was commonly reported that the BSG did not require any modification. Those respondents who did propose changes suggested that only slight adjustments were necessary, the benefit did not require a radical overhaul. Suggestions to improve the BSG centre around two broad themes; the application process and promotion of the grant.

Applying for the Best Start Grant

Respondents gave a number of suggestions which might improve the application process in the future. These were:

- Improved communication in order that applicants are notified if the process is likely to be delayed, for example, through the use of a tracking system for individual applications.
- The provision of dedicated staff for each BSG payment type at busy times to ensure applications are being processed promptly.
- The provision of support and advice in terms of completing the grant application for those who experience difficulties in reading and writing, and for those who do not have English as a first language.
- The availability of a greater choice to applicants regarding how they can communicate (e.g. online live chat function) or receive information about the application process (e.g. email, letter or text).
- Online application format to be made more compatible with phone screens.
- Streamline the process for those making multiple applications for different children within a specified time period.

Promoting the Best Start Grant

Respondents gave a number of suggestions related to the wider promotion of all three BSG payments to all eligible parents and carers, as there was a view that the grant is not yet widely known about. These suggestions were:

- Placement of posters and information in nurseries, libraries, doctor surgeries and shops.
- BSG information to be included in the 'Birth to Five' book given to new parents.
- Increased advertising and promotion of BSG on buses, billboards, TV and social media.
- Informing and/or training relevant health and social care professionals and support organisations about the BSG in order that they can promote it consistently to eligible parents and carers.
- Letters being sent by the Scottish Government to eligible individuals.

- Tailored and targeted promotion of the BSG to fathers, kinship carers, LGBTQ+ and Black and Minority Ethnic parents and carers to ensure that all eligible parents and carers are aware of the grant. Promotional material should include information about eligibility criteria.

Other suggested modifications

A few additional changes were proposed by respondents:

- Provide option to receive the BSG payment in instalments to help them with household budgeting.
- Pregnancy and Baby Payment: potential for the first payment for a family to be £600, even if it is not for the first child.

Conclusions and implications for policy and practice

The Best Start Grant was viewed very positively by the respondents in the evaluation. The consensus was that the BSG application process was straightforward, the use of the grant led to positive outcomes for child and parent alike, it was not stigmatising to receive the payment and the BSG should be promoted in order that all eligible individuals apply for it. Importantly, the BSG was perceived as easing financial strain on low income families at key transitional stages for their children, and prevented some families from going into debt. As the respondents thought of BSG as an entitlement and not as a donation, it allowed them to spend it appropriately, increasing their confidence as parents and carers. As a result of the very positive reception for the BSG, any proposed modifications were relatively minor. This suggests that the BSG is already operating smoothly and successfully across Scotland, and only relatively minor changes should be considered in the near future.

Assuming that the BSG continues to operate in Scotland, consideration should be paid to the suggestions made by recipients to improve the benefit, particularly those which would enable greater awareness of eligibility for the grant.

Future research should also be considered. A quantitative survey of BSG recipients would enable the Scottish Government to examine the longer-term impact of BSG across Scotland. Follow-up qualitative research, also involving those who applied unsuccessfully for the grant, should also be considered to explore the views of key interest groups in more detail.

Introduction

This section introduces Best Start Grant (BSG), the rationale behind its implementation and the overall evaluation aims relevant to this report.

Best Start Grant: Description

The Social Security powers that have been devolved through the [Scotland Act 2016](#) give the Scottish Parliament responsibility for £2.8 billion of social security expenditure (around 15% of total benefit expenditure in Scotland) which are enacted by the [Social Security \(Scotland\) Act 2018](#).

The Best Start Grant is one of the new benefits implemented with the use of those devolved powers and it forms part of the strategic commitment outlined in the Scottish Government's Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan (2018-2022) - "Every Child, Every Chance". It was designed to replace and expand the Sure Start Maternity Grant paid by the UK Government. The BSG aims to reduce financial pressures on low income families. It is also part of the wider Scottish Government strategic objectives focusing on early years, early intervention and improving health, well-being and educational outcomes for low income families.

The Best Start Grant is comprised of three possible payments to parents or carers of children. These three payments are:

- Pregnancy and Baby Payment: a payment of £600 on the birth of a first child and £300 on the birth of any subsequent children
- Early Learning Payment: a payment of £250 for children between 2 and 3.5 years old to support child development
- School Age Payment: a payment of £250 around the time a child is first old enough to start school to help with the costs of preparing for school.

Parents and carers over the age of 18 are eligible for the Best Start Grant (whether they are in work or not), if they are receiving one of these benefits: Universal Credit, Child Tax Credit, Working Tax Credit, Housing Benefit, Income Support, Pension Credit, Income-based Jobseekers Allowance (JSA), Income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). Parents and carers aged 18/19 do not need to be in receipt of a qualifying benefit if they are dependent on someone else, i.e. they are named on their parent or carer's benefit claim. Parents and carers under the age of 18 do not need to be on any payments or benefits to qualify for Best Start Grant.

Social Security Scotland began taking applications for each of the BSG payments at different dates:

- Pregnancy and Baby Payment: 10 December 2018
- Early Learning Payment: 29 April 2019
- School Age Payment: 3 June 2019

Claimants must make separate applications for each BSG payment – and may not qualify for every payment, since BSG eligibility is usually tied to receipt of particular benefits. This means that a claimant may make a first application at any point in the BSG trajectory (i.e. first or only payment could be Pregnancy and Baby, Early Learning, or School Age Payment).

Best Start Grant and Sure Start Maternity Grant

The BSG replaced and expanded on the Sure Start Maternity Grant (SSMG), administered by the Department of Work and Pensions, in Scotland. It represents a significant additional investment by the Scottish Government in comparison to SSMG provision.

The SSMG provides £500 for the birth of a first child and, with some exceptions for multiple births, does not provide support for second and subsequent children. The BSG Pregnancy and Baby Payment increased provision for a first child to £600. Additionally, a £300 Pregnancy and Baby Payment is made for each qualifying second or subsequent child.

BSG also introduced two additional £250 payments: the Early Learning Payment and the School Age Payment.

As a result, by providing support at key transition points in a child's early years, the BSG aims to help alleviate material deprivation, tackle inequality, and contribute to closing the educational attainment gap.

Development of Best Start Grant

Final BSG policy was developed based on consultation and engagement with stakeholders, including the BSG Reference Group, and people with direct personal experience of the current benefits system. Evolving application processes were continually tested with prospective clients to make them as user-friendly as possible. Feedback from people who use the service continues to inform improvements.

Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods (BSFs) share an integrated application process. This means that in order to apply for both BSG and BSFs, parents and carers complete one simple application form, rather than two. This streamlined application process means that applicants will be awarded all the BSG and BSFs payments that they are entitled to, regardless of which element they may have intended to apply for. This simple application process was designed to reduce effort for the applicant, support income maximisation and increase take up of the benefits.

Best Start Grant Accessibility

Social Security Scotland is committed to accessibility. To maximise this, multiple application channels are available: digital, paper and telephone. The digital application process is compatible with assistive technologies and clients can

request phonecalls and letters in a variety of formats e.g. in over 100 different languages, using BSL video calls, or in braille, easy read and large print.

Promotion of Best Start Grant

Social Security Scotland delivered an integrated communications and marketing campaign to support the introduction of BSG. Work is ongoing to promote BSG across the country, to help to ensure families get the payments they are entitled to. Activity has included: using social media; utilising paid-for digital and outdoor marketing; issuing media releases to local newspapers; circulating social media toolkits to stakeholders; and distributing flyers, factsheets and posters.

Awareness of BSG has been raised with professional stakeholders and the advice sector, ensuring they are equipped to help people access the BSG. Key groups such as Nurse Directors, Heads of Midwifery and Health Visitors have been engaged with to raise awareness of BSG and answer questions about the benefit.

Recent developments

Starting in early August 2020, letters were issued to families who may be eligible for BSFs and BSG inviting them to apply.

In response to COVID-19, to give clients an additional way to contact Social Security Scotland, a temporary web chat function was introduced in May 2020. Clients can use this web chat for general enquiries and to ask for progress updates on their application. New applications cannot be made through this web chat.

Evaluation aims

The Scottish Government published their approach to evaluating the first wave of the devolved social security benefits, including BSG, in November 2019¹.

This evaluation aims to provide learning about the overall implementation of the benefit and the extent to which the objectives of BSG have been met. In doing so, it can also assess the likely contribution of BSG to wider long-term government outcomes for children which take account of wider Scottish Government interventions outside of social security which are also designed to support children and their families.

Specifically, the evaluation objectives are to:

1. Evaluate the extent to which BSG achieved its intended outcomes
2. Assess the likely contribution of BSG to wider, long-term government policy impacts in relation to outcomes for children and their families
3. Discuss any implications for future policy development

¹ Scottish Government (2019) [Devolved benefits: evaluating the policy impact](#)

The findings will provide groundwork for policy improvement and feed into the development of future social security for children.

It is important to note also that although BSG is fully rolled-out, its impacts may be assessed fully only after at least 5 years from the roll-out by which time eligible families will have had a chance to receive multiple payments for the same child, if they remain eligible. At this point, we are only reporting from the impact of the first payments.

Methodology

This chapter provides an overview of the evaluation approach for BSG. It introduces the logic model and research questions driving the evaluation activities, and gives a summary of the different data sources used.

Overview of evaluation design and logic model

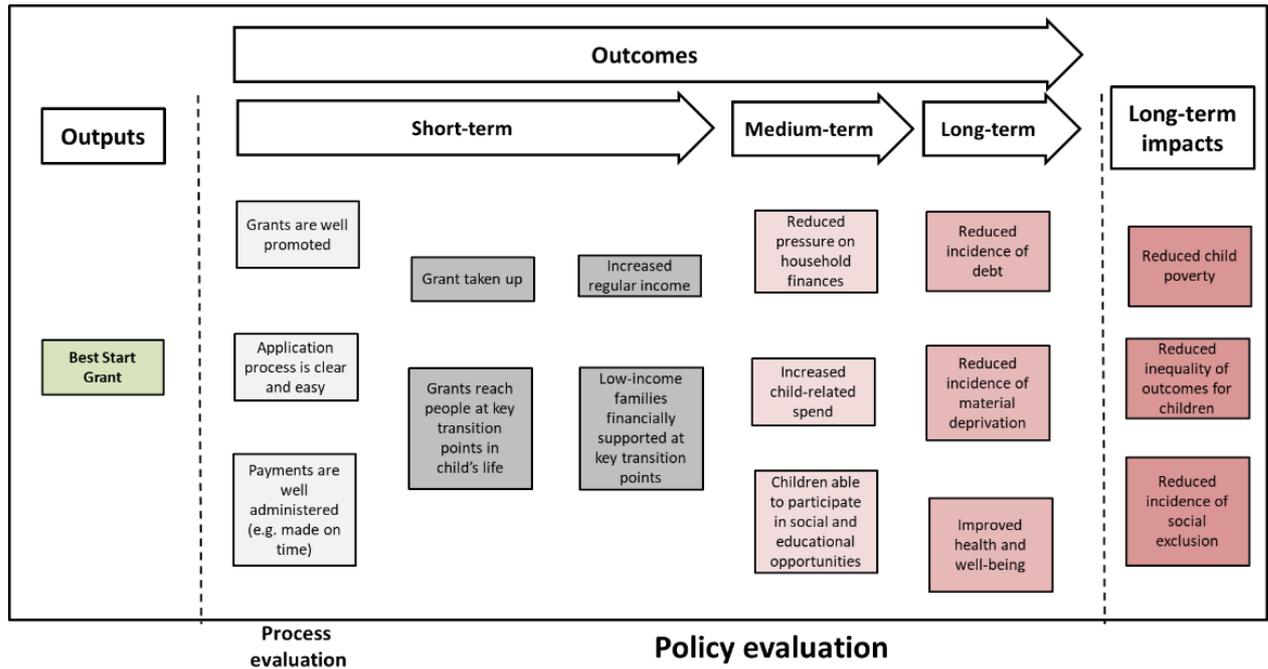
The approach to evaluating the policy impact of BSG uses a “theory of change” model. This approach develops logic models to show the mechanisms whereby interventions (such as BSG) have a chain of short and medium-term outcomes that, if met, can generate longer-term outcomes and contribute to wider Scottish Government policy impacts in the long-term.

The long-term impacts that the Scottish Government are trying to achieve for children, such as reduction in child poverty and inequality of outcomes, or reduced incidence of social exclusion, will take time to determine and are affected by a range of factors of which social security is only one. Some of the intended outcomes of the BSG (i.e. improved health and well-being for children and families, or reduced incidence of debt and material deprivation) may contribute to those wider impacts in the long-term but they are also likely to be affected by a range of other SG government policies.

As a result it is difficult to measure and attribute change in these long-term outcomes and impacts to a single benefit, such as BSG. However, we can reasonably expect that if success against short and medium term policy outcomes associated with BSG is achieved, then this could *contribute* (to some extent) to better outcomes in the future. Moreover, we do present some evidence (albeit very limited) of how BSG may have been achieving its longer-term intended outcomes and thus contributing to the wider Scottish Government policy impacts with regards to children and their families.

The logic model for BSG is below at Fig. 1.

Figure 1: Best Start Grant logic model



The short-term BSG policy outcomes are highlighted in grey. The first three (light grey) are outcomes related to process evaluation and the others are related to policy impact evaluation. The focus in this evaluation report is primarily on the policy impact though any findings related to process are discussed too.

Short-term outcomes (Process Evaluation)

- Grants are well promoted
- Application process is clear and easy
- Payments are well administered

Short-term outcomes (Policy Evaluation)

- Grants are taken up
- Grants reach people at key transition points in child's life
- Low-income families supported at key transition points in child's life
- Increased regular income

Medium-term outcomes

- Reduced pressure on household finances
- Increased child-related spend
- Children able to participate in social and educational opportunities

Long-term outcomes and impacts

The long-term outcomes and impacts in the logic model relate not only to BSG but to the wider government outcomes for children and their families, and are influenced by all social security interventions, as well as other interventions designed to support families with children across the Scottish Government. As such, BSG will play an important, but not exclusive, role in contributing to these.

Evaluation questions

Below are the key questions that informed the evaluation design:

1. To what extent did BSG achieve its short-term, medium-term and longer-term policy outcomes?
2. Is there any evidence of BSG contributing to positive development against the wider, long-term government policy impacts in relation to outcomes for children?
3. What are the implications of the evaluation findings for future policy development?

Summary of data sources

In accordance with the evaluation strategy, multiple data sources fed into the evidence collected and these are described below:

Bespoke Commissioned Research

ScotCen Social Research was commissioned by the Scottish Government to carry out qualitative research with BSG recipients to explore any impact BSG may have had on their lives.

The qualitative research mainly focussed on families' experience of receiving the benefit and the ways, and extent to which, the impacts mapped onto BSG policy objectives. The findings have been used alongside the other data sources in this report to provide a comprehensive understanding of the implementation and impact of BSG.

In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted by telephone² between March and July 2020 with 36 people who have received any of the BSG payments for their child (some of them claimed more than one payment but for different children). The full report from ScotCen is available at Annex B and the key conclusions have been incorporated into the findings below.

Official Statistics

Social Security Scotland collects certain information on BSG applications, payments, and clients in the process of delivering the benefits. Some of this information is published as official statistics and is used in this evaluation report supplemented with additional data tables based on the same information. All official statistics discussed in this report are the latest available and cover the period up to 31 August 2020, with the exception of equalities data that is available for the period up to 31 May 2020.

Limitations

This section explains what we can and cannot determine from the data available, and how this influences the extent to which we can draw conclusions about the overall impact of BSG.

Limited quantitative data: Existing survey datasets (e.g. Family Resources Survey and Scottish Household Survey) were inspected to see if they could be used to assess the performance of BSG against its intended outcomes in a more robust way, for example allowing attribution of the role of BSG in observed changes in the long-term outcomes and impacts generated by the sum of all government policies. However, the subset of BSG recipients in those surveys was too small for any robust analysis. Therefore, the only quantitative data used are official statistics on applications and payments.

Role of qualitative research: This evaluation is largely dependent on the findings emerging from bespoke qualitative research commissioned by the Scottish Government. As would be expected with qualitative work, findings are not representative across the entire BSG caseload. There were limitations on the diverse representation across subsets of clients and inherent reliance on recipients' *perceptions* of impacts, which are outlined in further detail in the full qualitative findings report available in Annex B.

Longer-term impacts will take time to determine: To understand the true impact of BSG, we would ideally measure whether there is lasting change in the longer-term outcomes and impacts, and be able to isolate the influence of BSG from the other factors contributing to this. This is difficult due to the considerations regarding attribution outlined above.

² One interview was conducted face-to-face before the coronavirus-related restrictions and guidelines on social distancing came into force.

Future research: Some information, particularly around BSG recipients' experience of Social Security Scotland, is still to be analysed and so cannot feed into this evaluation. In August 2020, the Social Security Scotland Satisfaction Survey was sent to over 165,000 people who had received a Social Security Scotland benefit, or reached decision stage on a benefit application. The survey collects equalities information as well as client experiences of receiving the relevant benefits and interacting with Social Security Scotland. Depending on response, this may contribute to outstanding data gaps in this area.

As it was not possible (by the time this evaluation was conducted) for families to have received all three payments in relation to the same child (if they remain eligible), we intend to commission a further evaluation to report in 2025 on these families' experiences.

Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the evaluation in terms of the achievement of Best Start Grant against short-term and medium-term policy objectives. In doing so, it also highlights the likely contribution of BSG to wider long-term government outcomes for children. It also discusses the policy implications identified through the qualitative research.

Achievement against short-term Best Start Grant policy outcomes

This section assesses BSG against the following policy outcomes:

- Grants are well promoted
- Application process is clear and easy
- Payments are well administered
- Grants are taken up
- Grants reach people at key transition points in child's life
- Increased regular income
- Low-income families supported at key transition points in child's life

The section draws on data from the commissioned research and Official Statistics.

Promotion of grant

The primary source of information we have on whether grants were well promoted is the qualitative data from the commissioned research which, as explained in the Methodology chapter, is based on a small, non-representative sample of a population. As noted in the previous chapter, the Social Security Scotland Satisfaction Survey was sent to over 165,000 people who had received a Social Security Scotland benefit, or reached decision stage on a benefit application. The survey collects information on client experiences of interacting with Social Security Scotland and when available the results may provide a more comprehensive picture of how well the grants were promoted. The question on how well the grants were promoted could also be answered indirectly with official statistics data which may provide an objective assessment of the impact of promotion (see section on 'Grants are taken up' outcome below).

Findings from the commissioned research were that respondents became aware of the BSG in a range of ways, most commonly through word of mouth but also via schools, nurseries, parental support organisations, money advice services, healthcare practitioners, social media, and letters about another benefit were all cited as ways in which respondents heard about the grant. Some stated that they became aware almost by chance and some were surprised that BSG was available to them. The report from the qualitative research concluded:

“The consensus of the respondents was that the BSG was not yet widely known about and they had been relatively fortunate to hear about the grant at all. Respondents agreed that one way to improve the grant would be to promote and advertise it more widely. [...] Respondents suggested that the BSG should be advertised in a range of different places to ensure that eligible individuals are aware of the grant.” (Annex B, p. 39)

Application process is clear and easy

As with the previous outcome above, the Social Security Scotland Satisfaction Survey may provide a more comprehensive picture of performance against this short-term outcome. Nevertheless, the commissioned qualitative research concluded that respondents found the application process straightforward. Some compared it favourably to application processes for other benefits. The appropriate level of detail/information asked for in the form, length of the form, layout, clear wording, use of ‘tick boxes’, a telephone helpline, the option to choose to complete the form online - on paper or over the phone, were mentioned as features that made the application process easy. Options to link personal details from other benefit applications or prior BSG applications were found useful by some but others reported that it didn’t work for them as they expected.

Payments are well administered

[Official statistics](#) provide some information on the administration of payments in terms of processing times understood as time between the application date and a date when the Agency made a decision on that application. To maximise uptake, BSG and BSFs share a combined application form. Since the introduction of BSFs in August 2019, each application requires two decisions (BSG and BSFs) to be made at the same time. The key outcomes for processing times are:

- “In total, around 48% of the applications [89,795] that were received since December 2018 and decided by 31 August 2020 were processed within 10 working days. Around 22% of all applications took 21 days or more to be processed. This processing time includes time spent waiting to receive copies of documents from clients, but does not include additional time to make payments.”
- The proportion of applications processed within 10 days was at its highest (92%) in May 2019 and at its lowest (7%) in March 2020³
- “By the end of August 2020, the median average processing time since December 2018 had increased to 11 days.”
- The median processing times have been as low as 1 day (April 2019) and as high as 28 days (August 2020)

³ Full “lockdown” related to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic was announced from 23 March 2020

The commissioned qualitative research found that recipients viewed positively the option of receiving payments directly into their bank account and in general felt the payments were delivered to them quickly, although some reported longer waiting time than they may have expected. It is impossible to verify this nor determine what the reason for that could have been.

As with the previous outcome above, the Social Security Scotland Satisfaction Survey may provide a more comprehensive picture of performance in terms of payments administration.

Grants are taken up

The best way to assess the performance against this outcome would be to use estimates of take-up expressed as the number of people who received a benefit payment among all those eligible for that benefit (including those who did not apply). Such information would also allow an assessment of the BSG against the three other short-term outcomes discussed above. More specifically, it could be expected that grants that are well promoted, easy to apply for, and well administered have high take up.

Provisional take-up estimates were provided for BSG Pregnancy and Baby Payment in the [Social security: benefit take-up strategy](#). It was estimated that the take up was 67 per cent for births occurring between 1 December 2018 and 31 March 2019 (53 per cent for first births and 77 per cent for subsequent births)⁴. [Official statistics](#)⁵ indicate the scale of BSG payments in absolute terms (i.e. how many payments were made including by various social and demographic groups) which may give a sense of the reach of BSG payments in broad terms. Further secondary analysis of the management data for the period from 10 December 2018 to 31 August 2020 indicates:

- The number of issued payments⁶ was 102,640. This includes 32,365 Pregnancy and Baby Payments, 37,740, Early Learning Payments, and 32,535 School Age Payments.
- The majority of payments were issued to people living in more deprived areas – i.e. 45% (46,455) for those in SIMD⁷ quintile 1 and 26% (26,945) in SIMD quintile 2, followed by 15% (15,385) payments for recipients in SIMD quintile 3, 9% (9,410) in SIMD quintile 4, and 4% (4,090) in SIMD quintile 5.
- Local authority areas where most payments were issued are: Glasgow City (17,515 or 17% of all payments issued), North Lanarkshire (8,290 or 8% of all payments), Fife (7,905 or 8% of all payments), South Lanarkshire (6,285 or

⁴ Updated estimates for take-up of BSG will be part of the next version of the Benefit Take-up Strategy in October 2021

⁵ Further data is also set out in Annex A: Additional Statistical Information

⁶ These figures will differ slightly from the “applications authorised” in the published statistics because of the lag in issuing payment.

⁷ Read more about SIMD (Scottish Multiple Index of Deprivation) here: <https://simd.scot/>

6% of all payments), Edinburgh City (6,115 or 6% of all payments), and Dundee City (3,800 or 4% of all payments).

- The most common qualifying benefit among recipients was Child Tax Credit (57,055), followed by Universal Credit (44,810), Working Tax Credit (23,560), and Income Support (18,030). Other qualifying benefits were much less common among BSG payment recipients.
- The vast majority of payments (94%) were received by the parents of the children in question. Around 1% were received by another family member. Information is incomplete for 4% of applicants
- 41% of payments were issued to couples (26% to families with more than one child, 12% for the first child and 4% unknown). 59% of payments were made to single parents (28% with more than one child, 24% for the first child and 7% unknown)
- Around one in five payments were issued to people who were 18-24 years old (just under 20% or 19,630 in total). Recipients under 18 years old accounted for less than 1% of payments issued. The largest recipient groups by age were 25-29 years-old (30% or 30,285 payments issued) and 30-34 years-old (27% or 27,305 payments). Recipients in the 35-39 age bracket accounted for 16% (16,505) of all payments issued and 8% (8,240) payments were issued to those aged 40 or more. For the 18–24 years old group, Pregnancy and Baby Payment was the most frequently issued payment while for those aged 25-34 it was the Early Learning Payment, and for those aged 35 and above it was the School Age Payment.

Official statistics also give us a view of equalities characteristics of people who applied for BSG between 9 December 2019 (when the equalities questions were made a mandatory part of the core application form) and 31 May 2020. The figures summarised below refer to those who have applied for any of the three BSG payments but some of them may have been denied a payment. Detailed information on the number of applicants approved and denied by the equalities groups is available in the [official publication](#). The headline figures on applicants only are:

- 89% (30,320) of applicants identified themselves as 'white', 4% (1,355) as Asian, 2% (685) as African, 1% (260) as Mixed or multiple ethnic groups, less than 1% (105) as Caribbean or Black, and 1% (470) as other ethnic group.
- 91% (31,255) of applicants identified themselves as women, 7% (2,245) as men.
- 16% (5,540) of applicants identified themselves as having a physical or mental condition or illness lasting or expected to last 12 months or more. 6% (2,205) preferred not to say.
- 91% (31,165) of applicants identified themselves as heterosexual, 2% (520) as bisexual, less than 1% (125) as gay and lesbian, 1% (195) in another way, and 6% (2,205) preferred not to say.

- 1% (250) of applicants identified themselves as transgender and 3% (1,155) preferred not say.
- 66% of applicants (22,455) did not identify with any religion. 12% (3,995) identified as Roman Catholic, 6% (1,960) as Church of Scotland, 5% (1,770) as other Christian, 5% (1,870) as Muslim, and other religious groups were 1% or less.

Grants reach people at key transition points in child's life, and Low-income families supported at key transition points in child's life

The commissioned research reported that “most of the grant was spent on items families needed at the key transitional stages of birth, nursery and school” (Annex B, p.17) and that it may have reduced the experience of financial stress among parents and carers at those transitional stages by easing the heightened financial strain on low income families. There was also an indication that this made parents and carers feel prepared for key transitional points in their child's life. In addition, BSG enabled parents and carers to buy required items at transition points exactly when they needed them without having to delay the purchase:

“Receiving the BSG also allowed parents and carers to buy what they needed for the children *when* they needed it. Without the grant, there were parents and carers who said they could not afford the items at the appropriate times, and they would have had to go without the items until they had saved up enough money. (Annex B, p. 27)

Delays in purchasing items would not necessarily have negative impact on families in all cases, but they would have in some cases. For example, interviews with recipients indicated that a lack of BSG payment would have “resulted in families not being able to go outside as quickly without access to a buggy, children having to wear old or cheaper shoes that hurt their feet, or sleep in a bed or cot that they had outgrown.” (Annex B, p. 27)

There was also an indication that Early Learning Payment specifically helped people feel confident at a transition point of their child becoming a toddler.

“Parents and carers reported spending some of the Early Learning Payment on items related to their child becoming a toddler. This included purchases of beds for toddlers, and specific bedding and items related to toilet training. Respondents said these purchases helped them feel confident in this key transitional stage.” (Annex B, p. 21)

Increased regular income

As above, the commissioned research suggested that BSG provided additional income to families at key transitional points in child's life that they could use to buy a range of essential items and various services for children for whom BSG was claimed and sometimes for their siblings. Their regular income was often insufficient to buy the items at a time they felt was right and they would have to

either delay the purchase or find alternative sources of income beyond their regular income. For example, there was also an indication that BSG may have prevented some families from going into debt to buy items they needed with their regular income. It was also reported that there was a consensus that the grant assisted the recipients to manage their own budgets and increase their own sense of financial independence that would have presumably less available with their regular income alone. From this it is a reasonable conclusion that if regular income was not necessarily greater, it would have been less likely to be needed to spend on one-off items, or greater debt required to pay for them.

Achievement against medium-term Best Start Grant policy outcomes

This section assesses BSG against the following policy outcomes:

- Reduced pressure on household finances
- Increased child-related spend
- Children able to participate in social and educational opportunities

This section is largely informed by the qualitative research. The full qualitative research report from ScotCen Social Research can be found in Annex B.

Reduced pressure on household finances

The commissioned research found that “respondents were unanimous” in the view that the BSG had made a positive impact on their household finances” (Annex B, p. 24). Some have said that BSG gave them more freedom in a sense of not having to choose between paying bills or buying items for children.

In addition to this, there was evidence that BSG may have helped receiving families avoid debt (see next chapter).

Increased child-related spend

The qualitative research found that BSG helped low income families purchase much needed items and services for children for whom BSG was claimed as well as for other children. However, it concluded also that these purchases would have almost certainly been made, regardless of the grant being available and that a number of respondents said that without the BSG they would have gone into debt because they did not have the finances to buy these items (Annex B, p. 24). Therefore, it cannot be confirmed whether BSG resulted in increased child-related spend or whether it offered an alternative source for similar spend.

Children able to participate in social and educational opportunities

The commissioned research found that BSG enabled a number of families to take part in a range of social opportunities (e.g. visiting soft play and trampolining centres, theme or activity parks, eating out) that they would have otherwise been unable to participate in” (Annex B, p.32). It also enabled parents and carers to

obtain items (e.g. clothing, equipment) and services (e.g. tuition “that would allow their children to take part in more physical activity either individually or socially with the family” (Annex B, p. 32). Some recipients reported being able to travel further and experience memorable days out with the whole family.

BSG helped some children and their families to take part in educational opportunities, too. This involved visits to museums or purchasing educational toys and other items for use at home.

Evidence of positive development against long-term Best Start Grant policy outcomes

This section will focus on the following wider government outcomes:

- Reduced incidence of debt
- Reduced incidence of material deprivation
- Improved health and well-being (of children and their families)

As outlined in the Methodology chapter, it is difficult to evaluate the impact of BSG on these outcomes. Not only will these long-term outcomes take time to determine, but the contribution of BSG is difficult to measure and attribute given wider factors feeding in to achievement against these outcomes. We have looked at existing survey data (e.g. Family Resources Survey and Scottish Household Survey) to see if it could help assess the performance of BSG against these outcomes. However, the subset of BSG recipients in those surveys was too small for a robust analysis at this point in time (though it may be large enough in future editions of these surveys). Nevertheless, while we cannot measure or even be certain of any impacts on these outcomes, the commissioned research provided some indication on how BSG may be affecting them.

Reduced incidence of debt

We do not have robust quantitative data to assess this outcome. However, qualitative data collected and analysed in the commissioned research suggested that BSG may have a positive impact on debt reduction. In particular, the report noted that:

“There were respondents who reported that the BSG had helped ensure that their household finances did not lapse into debt. The BSG payments were used to purchase items that their children needed at a key transitional time; purchases that would have almost certainly been made, regardless of the grant being available. Therefore, without the BSG a number of respondents said that they would have gone into debt because they did not have the finances to buy these items.” (Annex B, p. 24)

“Among the group who stated that without the BSG they would have gone into debt, there were a number of respondents who reported that they would have

taken out a loan, either with a formal body or with a family member, to purchase the items they needed for their children. Borrowing money in this way would have resulted in these respondents having to repay the loan, and they also thought that it would have negatively impacted on how they felt about themselves.” (Annex B, pp. 24-25)

Reduced incidence of material deprivation

We do not have robust quantitative data to assess this outcome. However, as noted in one of the sections above, qualitative data from the commissioned research suggested that BSG provided additional income to families at key transitional points in child’s life that they could use to buy a range of essential items for children for whom BSG was claimed and sometimes for their siblings. This could suggest that BSG can help reduce material deprivation in families with children.

However, as was noted above, it is likely that key expenditure on children would have still taken place in the absence of the grant, but at the risk of greater likelihood of taking on debt. Therefore, while reduced deprivation cannot be measured at this time, it suggests a potential role for BSG in helping to prevent debt may have a positive impact on material deprivation in the long-term.

Improved health and well-being (of children and their families)

Again, we do not have robust quantitative data to assess this outcome but qualitative data from the commissioned research suggested that BSG is likely to generate positive feelings and behaviours among children and their families, while reducing negative ones, which could potentially translate into improved health and well-being for both children and their families. For parents and carers, this involved in particular reduced stress, anxiety and other negative feelings related to financial worries as well as increased self-esteem and other more positive feelings thanks to ability to provide children with what they thought they needed. For children, their parents and carers reported positive feelings such as sense of excitement in the children as they were able to pick items for school (e.g. new shoes, school bags, toys). They also reported better bonding between themselves and their children as well as among siblings in families with more than one child thanks to purchases of items or services that enabled such bonding.

Evidence of positive impacts on long-term government outcomes for children and their families

The long-term outcomes and impacts that the Scottish Government are trying to influence with regards to children, such as reduction in child poverty and inequality of outcomes for children, or improved health and well-being, will take time to determine and are affected by a range of factors of which social security is only one. As such, BSG will play an important, but not exclusive, role in contributing to these.

Evidence discussed above indicated the extent to which BSG may have achieved the short- and medium-term policy outcomes and that it could have contributed to the long-term outcomes, too. We can expect that if success at that level can be demonstrated, there may have been a positive contribution to the wider Scottish Government policy impacts on children in the long-term. However, we are unable to measure this in any robust way with the data available, given that BSG is just one intervention that we may expect to be feeding in to these wider impacts of the Scottish Government policy. Nevertheless, Scottish Government does continuously measure and monitor changes in child poverty in Scotland⁸ and BSG is one of the policies among others feeding into tackling child poverty and social inequalities.

⁸ Child Poverty Statistics are available at: <https://www.gov.scot/collections/child-poverty-statistics/>

Conclusion

Although Best Start Grant is fully rolled-out, its impacts can only be fully assessed after at least 5 years from the roll-out by which time eligible families will have had a chance to receive multiple payments for the same child. We intend to commission a further evaluation to report in 2025 on these families' experiences. This evaluation only considers the impact of the first payments and relied predominantly on qualitative data from commissioned research and some official statistics. Other data may be available in time for the full evaluation in the future including data from established surveys (e.g. Scottish Household Survey, Family Resources Survey), the Social Security Scotland Satisfaction Survey, and additional Management Information. This may enable evaluating impacts of BSG on the longer-term policy outcomes and impacts on wider SG objectives.

The qualitative research suggested that the BSG was viewed very positively by the respondents. The consensus was that the BSG application process was straightforward, the use of the grant led to positive outcomes for child and parent alike, it was not stigmatising to receive the payment and the BSG should be promoted in order that all eligible individuals apply for it.

Importantly, the BSG was perceived as easing financial strain on low income families at key transitional stages for their children, and prevented some families from going into debt. It increased their confidence as parents and carers. As a result of the very positive reception for the BSG, any proposed modifications were relatively minor. This suggests that the BSG is already operating smoothly and successfully across Scotland, and only relatively minor changes should be considered in the near future.

Annex A: Additional statistical information

1. Number of Issued Payments by Benefit Component and Month to 31 August 2020

ISSUED MONTH	BENEFIT COMPONENT			TOTAL NUMBER OF PAYMENTS
	Early Learning Payment	Pregnancy And Baby Payment	School Age Payment	
Dec-18	0	1,200	0	1,200
Jan-19	0	5,700	0	5,700
Feb-19	0	1,770	0	1,770
Mar-19	0	2,005	0	2,005
Apr-19	0	1,695	0	1,695
May-19	10,520	1,680	0	12,200
Jun-19	5,390	1,415	8,060	14,865
Jul-19	4,305	1,710	5,595	11,610
Aug-19	1,755	1,380	1,385	4,520
Sep-19	1,280	970	670	2,925
Oct-19	1,295	1,160	410	2,865
Nov-19	1,440	1,300	340	3,080
Dec-19	865	830	185	1,880
Jan-20	1,595	1,440	275	3,305
Feb-20	1,285	1,180	290	2,750
Mar-20	1,535	1,115	665	3,320
Apr-20	1,250	1,035	350	2,635
May-20	1,180	1,565	65	2,810
Jun-20	915	1,190	2,110	4,215
Jul-20	1,090	790	7,085	8,965
Aug-20	2,045	1,235	5,055	8,330
TOTAL	37,740	32,365	32,535	102,640

2. Occurrence of Child 'Relationship Types' linked to BSG Payments data – by Benefit Type to 31 August 2020¹

Occurrence of Child Relationship Types in Payments	BENEFIT COMPONENT			TOTAL NUMBER OF PAYMENTS
	Early Learning Payment	Pregnancy And Baby Payment	School Age Payment	
Child	37,480	29,190	32,325	99,000
Cared for by family member (Kinship caring)	560	540	395	1,495
Other	45	125	45	215
Unknown/missing info	1,210	2,560	825	4,595
TOTAL	39,295	32,415	33,590	105,300

3. Distribution of each 'Benefit type' by SIMD quintiles to 31 August 2020

SIMD 2020 v2 Quintile	BENEFIT COMPONENT			TOTAL NUMBER OF PAYMENTS
	Early Learning Payment	Pregnancy And Baby Payment	School Age Payment	
Unknown/missing	130	160	70	355
1	17,360	14,860	14,240	46,455
2	9,890	8,455	8,600	26,945
3	5,540	4,855	4,990	15,385
4	3,385	2,795	3,230	9,410
5	1,440	1,240	1,410	4,090
TOTAL	37,740	32,365	32,535	102,640

4. Breakdown for each "Benefit type" by Family Structure to 31 August 2020²

Family Type	BENEFIT COMPONENT			TOTAL NUMBER OF PAYMENTS
	Early Learning Payment	Pregnancy And Baby Payment	School Age Payment	
Partnership parents with First Child/Pregnancy	5,840	0	6,070	11,910
Partnership parents with Multiple Children	9,145	10,205	6,835	26,185
Partnership parents with Unknown Children	35	3,625	20	3,685
Single parent with First Child/Pregnancy	12,930	0	12,150	25,080
Single parent with Multiple Children	9,720	11,820	7,405	28,945
Single parent with Unknown Children	65	6,675	55	6,800
Unknown parents with Unknown Children	5	35	5	40
TOTAL	37,740	32,365	32,535	102,640

5. Breakdown for each “Benefit type” by parents’/applicants’ age group to 31 August 2020

Age Band	BENEFIT COMPONENT			TOTAL NUMBER OF PAYMENTS
	Early Learning Payment	Pregnancy And Baby Payment	School Age Payment	
Age Unknown ³	5	35	5	40
Under 18	15	620	0	635
18-24	7,390	9,225	3,015	19,630
25-29	11,435	9,865	8,985	30,285
30-34	10,000	7,605	9,705	27,305
35-39	6,085	3,850	6,570	16,505
40-44	2,160	955	3,105	6,225
45-49	425	140	845	1,410
50-54	125	40	165	325
55-59	65	15	85	165
60-64	30	5	45	80
65 and over	5	5	25	35
TOTAL	37,740	32,365	32,535	102,640

6. Distribution of each 'Benefit type' by local authority areas to 31 August 2020

Local Authority	BENEFIT COMPONENT			TOTAL NUMBER OF PAYMENTS
	Early Learning Payment	Pregnancy And Baby Payment	School Age Payment	
Aberdeen City	1,105	1,010	875	2,995
Aberdeenshire	890	755	740	2,385
Angus	715	640	695	2,055
Argyll & Bute	450	405	410	1,265
Clackmannanshire	435	335	415	1,185
Dumfries & Galloway	1,065	865	885	2,810
Dundee City	1,420	1,205	1,175	3,800
East Ayrshire	1,170	1,020	985	3,175
East Dunbartonshire	365	310	370	1,050
East Lothian	640	540	560	1,740
East Renfrewshire	330	295	315	945
Edinburgh, City of	2,290	1,885	1,940	6,115
Falkirk	1,095	960	920	2,975
Fife	2,935	2,500	2,470	7,905
Glasgow City	6,445	5,565	5,500	17,515
Highland	1,265	1,075	1,015	3,360
Inverclyde	660	555	575	1,790
Midlothian	740	570	595	1,905
Moray	525	465	465	1,455
Na h-Eileanan Siar	115	95	100	310
North Ayrshire	1,375	1,115	1,150	3,640
North Lanarkshire	2,965	2,640	2,685	8,290
Orkney Islands	75	75	85	230
Perth & Kinross	730	680	620	2,030
Renfrewshire	1,325	1,110	1,095	3,530
Scottish Borders	605	555	545	1,705
Shetland Islands	85	60	65	210
South Ayrshire	790	660	715	2,165
South Lanarkshire	2,285	2,005	1,995	6,285
Stirling	415	385	345	1,150
West Dunbartonshire	945	830	825	2,600
West Lothian	1,475	1,135	1,390	4,000
Unknown - Scottish address ⁴	5	40	5	55
Non-Scottish postcode	10	15	5	30
No address	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	37,740	32,365	32,535	102,640

7. Occurrence of Qualifying Benefit Types in applications linked to Payments data, by “Qualifying benefit” to 31 August 2020⁵

Qualifying Benefit	BENEFIT COMPONENT			TOTAL NUMBER OF PAYMENTS
	Early Learning Payment	Pregnancy And Baby Payment	School Age Payment	
Universal Credit	15,045	17,780	11,985	44,810
Income Support	8,280	3,290	6,460	18,030
Housing Benefit	660	1,240	275	2,175
Income-based Jobseeker’s Allowance	625	625	455	1,705
Income-related Employment and Support Allowance	2,560	2,270	2,075	6,905
Pension Credit	20	5	20	45
Working Tax Credit	9,140	5,365	9,060	23,560
Child Tax Credit	23,010	13,420	20,625	57,055
Other or missing ⁶	40	280	50	370
TOTAL	59,385	44,265	51,005	154,655

Notes

This supplementary analysis was carried out using the same data used in the production of the Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods official statistics publication.

All Tables: Payment figures have been allocated according to the month the payment was issued, rather than the month it was received by a client.

All Tables: Figures are rounded for disclosure control and may not sum due to rounding.

1. Data on 'Relationship type' is linked to payments through a separate data extract on children appearing in the Social Security benefits data. It is not possible to link a specific payment to an individual child or relationship type and so these figures reflect the occurrence of relationship types of any children linked to Application Reference Numbers occurring in the payments extract. The total figures in this table will therefore not match the total number of payments seen in other tables.

2. Family Type is a constructed variable. This was based on the presence/absence of a 'Partner Flag' in the core extract and the evidence of pre-existing dependent children, or multiple births occurring in the core extract and/or the child extract.

3. Under 18 includes some possible errors in date of birth.

4. Some applications cannot be matched to a Scottish local authority by postcode, because the postcode on the application is not on the lookup file used to match postcode to local authority. These may be applications from people living in properties that are too new to be on the lookup file. Payments have been assigned to Scotland based on postcode area. Payments with 'Unknown' local authorities also include a small number of payments which cannot be linked to the full applicant details.

5. Data on 'Qualifying benefit' is linked to payments through a separate data extract on Applications data. There are often multiple qualifying benefits linked to applications and so the total figures in this table will therefore not match the total number of payments seen in other tables.

6. "Other or missing" includes no or unknown qualifying benefit, and cases where Social Fund, Sure Start Maternity Grant and Child Benefit were the qualifying benefit.

How to access background or source data

The data collected for this social research publication:

- are available in more detail through Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics
- are available via an alternative route
- may be made available on request, subject to consideration of legal and ethical factors. Please contact social_research@gov.scot for further information.
- cannot be made available by Scottish Government for further analysis as Scottish Government is not the data controller.



© Crown copyright 2020

You may re-use this information (excluding logos and images) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence.

To view this licence, visit <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/> or e-mail: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

The views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and do not necessarily represent those of the Scottish Government or Scottish Ministers.

This document is also available from our website at www.gov.scot.

ISBN: 978-1-80004-428-9

The Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

Produced for
the Scottish Government
by APS Group Scotland
PPDAS805086 (12/20)
Published by
the Scottish Government,
December 2020



Social Research series
ISSN 2045-6964
ISBN 978-1-80004-428-9

Web Publication
www.gov.scot/socialresearch

PPDAS805086 (12/20)