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Social Security Experience Panels: Annual Report 2020



EQUALITY, POVERTY AND SOCIAL SECURITY



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Foreword

I am delighted to publish the Scottish Government's third annual report on the work of the Social Security Experience Panels.

This year has been a difficult year for everyone. We have had to change the way we work with Experience Panels members in order to make sure that participants and staff are not exposed to the risk of Coronavirus (COVID-19). Meanwhile, working with panel members, hearing their views and experiences, continues to play a critical role in the design of the new social security system in Scotland.

But this report also comes at an exciting point, with the views and experiences of panel members shaping how new benefits are being delivered in practice. In late October we announced some of the changes that will be made to disability benefits when they are delivered by Social Security Scotland. These changes are the direct result of input from people who have experience of the current system.¹

We are also now increasingly able to ask Experience Panels members to go beyond helping us think about what systems and process should look like. We are able to ask panel members to actually help us test and refine these to be as simple and easy to use as possible for the people who will need them.

The Social Security Experience Panels will continue to be a crucial part of our work as we begin delivery of the disability benefits. The dedication and openness of our panel members in sharing their experiences and views is fundamental to building a better system for the people of Scotland. We look forward to continuing to work with them over the coming year.

Shirley-Anne Somerville, Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People

¹ Statement by Shirley-Anne Somerville, Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People on the changes that will be made to disability benefits, 17 November 2020:

<https://news.gov.scot/speeches-and-briefings/update-on-scotlands-social-security-benefits>

Experience Panels 2020 in Numbers

2,231
Active
Panel
Members



12
surveys so
far

with **2,354** responses

46
group
session



with **134** people



182 one to
one sessions
so far online or
on the phone



25
Reports
and visual

summaries



4
panel
member

newsletters



23
information
sessions



1 online
engagement
event

Introduction

The Scottish Government is becoming responsible for some of the benefits previously delivered by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). As part of the work to prepare for this change, in the Summer 2017 the Scottish Government set up the Social Security Experience Panels.

The Experience Panels are made up of people who have experience of at least one of the benefits that are coming to Scotland. The Scottish Government works with panel members to inform key decisions in the design of social security in Scotland. This is the third annual report for the Experience Panels programme of research. It aims to feed back to panel members and others interested in the work about what has been achieved this year and what is planned for 2021.

2020 has been our third full year of running research with panel members. Research activities were briefly paused at the start of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic to be sensitive to additional stress and complications panel members were (and continue to be) dealing with. On the advice of panel members, research activities were restarted in July, but without the ability to offer any face-to-face meetings. We have used surveys, and online and phone interviews to hear from panel members since then. This is to keep both participants and our staff safe. We would like to thank all panel members for their understanding and flexibility during this time.

This year, we have published a large number of reports. We have also undertaken increasingly detailed research with panel members. This is informing a wide range of decisions about how Social Security Scotland will work. Panel members are also helping to test and improve new systems and materials like application forms and benefit information. This helps to ensure the service is easy to use and accessible to all.

Finally, we have thought more about how the Experience Panels research links to doing research with Social Security Scotland's

own clients. We have also spent more time sharing our findings and approach with others in the Scottish Government and beyond.

This report will give more detail on all of these points.

2020: The Research

Our research programme with panel members this year has covered a wide range of topics. This chapter will outline what we have covered. It will also give some examples of our findings and how they are being used to make decisions.

We report on our findings through full research reports and shorter, visual summaries which are designed to be as accessible as possible. These are sent to panel members as soon as they are published so they can see what they have said and how we have used the findings.

Our Reports

In 2020 we have published 25 reports and visual summaries, including on:

- The design of specific **low income benefits** including on Cold Spell and Winter Heating Assistance
- The design of **disability and carer benefits** including Short-term assistance; Personal Independence Payment health assessments; decision making and reviewing a reward; and gathering supporting information.
- A range of different Social Security Scotland **processes and policies** such as inclusive communications; fraud investigations; paying into different bank accounts; others speaking to Social Security Scotland for clients; appointees; change of circumstances and debt repayment

All reports can be found on our website at <https://www.gov.scot/publications/social-security-experience-panels-index-of-publications/>.

What we have covered

As more low-income benefits move to Social Security Scotland, and we move closer to the delivery of disability and carer benefits, the work we are doing with Experience Panels members is changing. In 2017 and 2018 we tended to ask general questions about people's experiences and desires for the new system. In 2019, our questions became more specific, as the detail of the processes began to be developed. This has continued during 2020 as we have increasingly asked panel members to become involved with testing and refining how some of the systems and processes work in practice.

In February we carried out a series of focus groups across Scotland which looked at a few different topics to support thinking around how Social Security Scotland should work in practice. This included asking about how the agency can make sure that staff are able to meet clients' needs, how issues around potential fraud should be dealt with, and how to encourage more people to apply for the benefits they are entitled to. We also asked people about how we should support people who wish another person or organisation to speak to Social Security Scotland on their behalf.

Once research restarted after the start of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, this has involved panel members speaking to our researchers either online or over the phone. Panel members have helped to develop materials like information pages or leaflets, application processes and forms, processes for case transfer, appeals and redeterminations, and communication materials. They have also spoken to our researchers about how some of Social Security Scotland's existing services are working

We have also asked panel members to fill in a number of surveys, including on:

- Renaming Attendance Allowance
- Assessments
- Meeting People's Needs
- Cold Weather and Winter Fuel Payments
- Paying benefits into different bank accounts
- Others speaking to Social Security Scotland for you
- Appointees
- Carer's Allowance Supplement
- Fair Start Scotland

Social Security Scotland are now delivering a range of benefits², and panel members and other citizens have been involved in shaping each of these:

- Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods
- Funeral Support Payment
- Young Carer Grant
- Carer's Allowance Supplement
- Job Start Payment
- Child Winter Heating Assistance

Additionally, applications are now open for Scottish Child Payment. The first payments will be made after 22 February 2021.

Our work on disability benefits has increased this year as their design gathers pace. This work will continue into 2021 as we continue to prepare for disability benefits to move to Social Security Scotland. We will also continue to speak to panel members about what other systems and processes should look like to ensure that Social Security Scotland is delivering a service with fairness, dignity and respect.

² For more information and to apply see <https://www.mygov.scot/benefits/> or call 0800 182 2222

2020: How we worked

This section will give a project update on what we have been up to in 2020. It will cover:

- Understanding who's on the Experience Panels
- Feedback from panel members
- How Coronavirus (COVID-19) has impacted our work
- Reaching seldom heard groups
- Undertaking more user testing
- Working with Social Security Scotland clients
- Sharing what we have found

Understanding who's on the Experience Panels

Recruitment to the Experience Panels closed in 2017 when the initial recruitment finished. Since that time we lost touch with a number of existing panel members, and others have chosen to leave the panels. There were also some specific groups that we wanted to boost, namely young people, ethnic minorities and people in remote rural and island communities.

So between July 2019 and March 2020 we reopened recruitment to refresh panel membership. We publicised the recruitment with the help of current panel members, a large number of partner third sector organisations and colleagues working in local areas for Social Security Scotland. We also circulated information about joining on social media. We tailored our approach to different groups, for example running a series of events with ethnic minorities. As a result, we have welcomed 572 new panel members.

We asked new and existing panel members to tell us a bit more about themselves. We also asked existing panel members to give feedback on their experience of being part of the Experience Panels so far.

Spotlight On: Who's in the Experience Panels – 2020 Update

It's incredibly useful for us to understand more about who is on the Experience Panels. This information helps us to understand whether there are certain groups of people who are not well represented, and where we should do further work to make sure their voices are heard.

A good example is that 2 per cent of panel members who have responded to these surveys told us that they are part of an ethnic minority group, compared to 4 per cent of the population in Scotland. Because of this, we have carried out some additional work with ethnic minority groups and those who have English as a second language to make sure we have a good understanding of the barriers that exist for those groups in accessing social security, and how those barriers can be addressed.

Another valuable reason for having this information, is that sometimes it is important that our researchers hear from specific people when carrying out research on a given topic. For example, for research to inform the design of disability benefits, it is important we speak to people who have experience of the existing benefits.

We also know that some of this information can change over time. That's why we ask people to update the information we hold about them regularly. It also gives people who haven't previously filled in one of these surveys the chance to take part. The next survey asking people about this will be carried out early in 2021.

The findings from this research are available on our publications page at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/social-security-experience-panels-index-of-publications/>.

Feedback from Experience Panel members

We also asked existing Experience Panels members to give us feedback about their experience of being on the panels so far. There were many positives, with panel members saying that they feel listened to and that they were pleased that their experiences and views were helping to shape decision making. Some also talked about finding it valuable to meet other panel members who may have had similar experiences, or who they could learn from.

Many panel members said that they had found the research easy to take part in, and had found that communication with the Experience Panels Team had worked well. Panel members valued the range of topics that they were invited to contribute to.

There were also a number of areas that respondents highlighted where things could improve, or challenges that they faced in participating. One of the issues mentioned was that some people found it difficult to attend face-to-face events, either due to limited travel options, caring responsibilities, work commitments, or their health condition. The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has forced our team to work differently over the last few months, and we are keen to make sure we learn from this. With this feedback and learning in mind, once it is safe to offer face-to-face event we will continue to offer a range of ways that people can get involved remotely to make sure panel members can get involved in a way that suits them.

Spotlight On: How Coronavirus (COVID-19) has impacted our research

Like everyone, the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has had a significant impact on the way that we work as a team and how we carry out research. Throughout, it has continued to be as important to us as ever to ensure that the voices of those with experience of the current benefits system are embedded in the design of the new social security system in Scotland.

We had to change how we interacted with all of our panel members. We could no longer deliver face to face events including the focus group series around Scotland which normally would take place in the Summer and the Winter. We therefore moved all our research to be delivered either online or over the phone. This included running surveys and doing interviews with people using WebEx. We are grateful to all panel members who have been so flexible and understanding during this time.

In line with national advice, our research team has been working from home since the start of the pandemic. This has meant that postal mail-outs had to be paused as the team were no longer in the office to manage this process. We contacted members asking for an alternative preferred method of contact to receive news and updates. By December we hope to offer a limited post service for panel members who have this as their preferred contact method.

Over the Winter we will also be doing research to understand whether, and how, people's experiences during the pandemic may have changed how they would want to interact with Social Security Scotland. A survey will be launched in December 2020 with interviews to follow in early 2021.

Research with Seldom Heard Groups

In the 2019 Annual Report we highlighted the programme of work to engage with seldom heard groups. This covers topics and groups that are sensitive, marginalised or dispersed, who are less likely to be visible in a project like the Experience Panels. We know many of these groups have particular experiences or characteristics that mean they may face barriers when engaging with public services and we want to make sure Social Security Scotland is designed with these on mind.

Our programme of seldom heard research, has five strands:

- **Mobile populations:** Gypsy/ Traveller populations, temporary EU migrants, refugees.
- **Care Experienced and Carers:** Care experienced people, foster and kinship carers, young parents, single parents.
- **Vulnerable groups:** people who have offended, people with experience of homelessness, veterans.
- **End of life:** people with terminal illnesses, bereaved families
- **Survivors:** survivors of domestic abuse and of childhood abuse.

We have commissioned external experts to conduct two waves of fieldwork with each of these groups. Some of this work had to be paused during 2020 due to Coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions. Work in this area has resumed remotely where possible. We will share the first findings from this work early in 2021.

User testing work

As we work towards more benefits moving to Social Security Scotland, our research is become more specific. At the start of the Experience Panels programme, we focused largely on understanding people's previous experiences and what they would want a new system to look like. We are now able to involve panel members in helping to shape the precise design of these benefits. This includes, for example, helping us to get the wording of information materials right, or feeding in on what an application form

should be like. This year there have been increasing opportunities for panel members to get involved in this type of user testing work. This is different from our usual surveys, focus groups and interviews. It involves asking panel members to look at draft parts of a process, for example a piece of an application form, and see how easy to use it is.

In the past, this kind of research would usually be done face to face because of the hands on nature of the process. This year our researchers have adapted how they work to support panel members to take part in these sessions remotely. By November, 182 people had taken part in user testing interviews, with more scheduled to take place over the winter. We are very grateful to everyone who has been flexible to these changes in how we work and helped us get these processes right.

User testing like this feeds directly into design, and doesn't have a research report like our other work. We do, however, include articles in our newsletters on how such testing has shaped processes.

Research with Social Security Scotland Clients

Social Security Scotland have established a new programme of research called **Client Panels**. The Client Panels are made up of clients who have volunteered to take part in research projects which will help improve the social security system in Scotland.

In summer 2020, the Social Security Scotland Client Satisfaction Survey was issued to every Social Security Scotland client who had applied for or received a payment up to July 2020. The survey included the option to join the Client Panels and over 1,000 volunteers have signed up to become members. Over time, we expect membership to grow and to represent the full range of benefits delivered by Social Security Scotland. There is more information about this on the next page.

Spotlight On: Social Security Scotland Client Panels

The Client Panels team have made use of experience and learning from colleagues working with the Experience Panels.

- Like Experience Panels, a key aim of Client Panels research is to involve users and those with lived experience in service design and delivery.
- Like Experience Panels, Client Panels will carry out research activities such as surveys, interviews and focus groups on a range of topics.
- For some projects, the Client Panels and Experience Panels teams will work closely together to carry out research with both groups.

There are also some unique things about Client Panels:

- Client Panels are made up of Social Security Scotland clients. People who make an application to, or receive a payment from, Social Security Scotland will have the opportunity to become a Client Panels member.
- Research with Client Panels will focus on helping Social Security Scotland understand how to improve our service. Client Panel members will be able to share feedback about their experience and their ideas for improvements.
- Client Panels will also help Social Security Scotland understand how we are delivering against the commitments set out in **Our Charter** and the **Charter Measurement Framework**.

The first Client Panels research project will explore how the Covid-19 pandemic may have changed how clients want to interact with Social Security Scotland. The project is being undertaken jointly with the Experience Panels team.

Sharing what we have found

We continue to consider carefully how we communicate with Experience Panels members about the findings of our research and decisions that have been made about Social Security Scotland.

Coronavirus (COVID-19) has meant that face-to-face information events had to be stopped from March onwards. We have also had to stop postal communications until a solution was found to manage this system without putting staff at any risk.

We have continued to produce a newsletter for panel members, alongside ad-hoc updates about decisions that have been made. In November we also ran an online engagement event for 150 panel members with presentations from the Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People, Shirley-Anne Somerville, and key policy makers in Scottish Government. A video of the event with follow up information was shared with all panel members after the event.

Once Coronavirus (COVID-19) is no longer a major risk to public health we will plan how to safely resume face-to-face research and information sharing events. We will continue to provide an online or phone option for those who have found they prefer to get involved in that way.

Looking forward to 2021

This section will look at our plans for next year, and longer term the plan for transferring social security research to Social Security Scotland.

In 2021 we will continue our programme of work with panel members. We will continue work on specific benefits, with a new focus on the larger, recurring benefits still to come. This will include work on disability benefits and Carers Allowance

We will also continue to cover a range of topics to do with how social security works across all benefits. As mentioned above, at the start of 2021 we will be asking all panel members to tell us about how the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has impacted on their preferences for how they would want to interact with Social Security Scotland. This will be through a survey and interviews held remotely either over the phone or online.

This year we have reported the latest information about “Who’s in the Experience Panels” and their feedback on taking part. In 2021 we will give people another opportunity to update the information we hold about them and provide more feedback to help us keep improving how we work.

We will continue to share our findings and be open about our approach with panel members, social security colleagues, external stakeholders and advisory groups, and colleagues across government and the wider public sector.

We will continue to work with our partner researchers in Social Security Scotland to make sure that they build on the work of the Experience Panels, and to make sure our research programmes complement each other well. Together we will continue to ensure that user voice is at the heart of social security in Scotland.

Conclusion

2020 has been another busy year for the Experience Panels. We would like to thank all panel members for their work this year and for being so flexible and understanding about the changes we have had to make to how we work. With panel member’s help, we have managed to continue to ensure that people who have experience of the current benefits system are helping to shape and design the new system for Scotland. We look forward to continuing to work with Experience Panels members throughout 2021 to build a social security system for Scotland that is built on fairness, dignity and respect.

How to access background or source data

The data collected for this <statistical bulletin / social research publication>:

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



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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: 978-1-80004-446-3

The Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Edinburgh
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Produced for
the Scottish Government
by APS Group Scotland
PPDAS806406 (12/20)
Published by
the Scottish Government,
December 2020



Social Research series
ISSN 2045-6964
ISBN 978-1-80004-446-3

Web Publication
www.gov.scot/socialresearch

PPDAS806406 (12/20)