



Case Studies of Equality Data Collection in the Scottish Public Sector: Social Security Scotland



Equality, Poverty and Social Security

A good practice case study of the collection and use of equality data: Social Security Scotland

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The Scottish Government is committed to addressing inequality in Scotland. [Scotland's Equality Evidence Strategy 2017–21](#) set out a vision for a more wide-ranging and robust equality evidence base, to enable policy makers to develop sound, inclusive policy.

There are many costs and challenges to collecting, analysing and reporting equality data and, despite improvements in recent years, significant gaps remain in Scotland's equality evidence base. To address this, the Scottish Government launched the [Equality Data Improvement Programme](#) in April 2021. This programme builds on [research](#) which explored the collection of equality and socio-economic disadvantage data by Scottish public sector bodies.¹ The 27 organisations who took part in this research faced various barriers and challenges in this area of work, but they also identified factors that helped support the collection and use of high-quality equality data.

This document presents one of a series of six case studies produced to complement this research. The case studies aim to support the sharing of good practice by showing how different organisations have approached collecting and using equality data to provide better services and better outcomes for their 'customers'. Each of the case studies illustrates different aspects of practice across the public sector in Scotland. They do not provide a comprehensive picture of the work undertaken by organisations; rather they illustrate some of their positive actions in collecting, using and improving equality data.

Social Security Scotland...

- From December 2019, incorporated an equality monitoring and feedback form into their online application process. This must be completed by applicants before an online application can be submitted. However, applicants are given the option to answer 'prefer not to say'.
- Routinely carries out and publishes analyses of benefits applications and awards by equality characteristics. The aim is to ensure that the organisation's processes do not discriminate against any equality group.
- Investigates the reasons for any variations in application rates and outcomes by equality group, develops targeted interventions to address these variations, and carries out ongoing monitoring of the effect of the interventions.
- Ensures that there are sufficient technical and analytical resources available within the organisation to support the collection and use of equality data.
- Works with key stakeholder groups to increase the impact of its equality data collections.

¹ Note: 'equality data' refers to 'equality and socio-economic disadvantage data' and covers the protected characteristics defined by the Equality Act 2010 (age, religion and belief, race, disability, sex, sexual orientation, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership, and gender reassignment) and (any) indicators of socio-economic disadvantage.

About Social Security Scotland

Social Security Scotland is an Executive Agency that administers devolved social security benefits to people in Scotland. The organisation has a [Charter](#) which sets out what people can expect from the social security system in Scotland. It was established in September 2018 and, once fully operational, Social Security Scotland will manage 17 benefits supporting 1.8 million children and adults.

From its inception, Social Security Scotland has focussed on collecting equality data from its clients. The organisation's [Equality Strategy 2021–2022](#) has a specific commitment to use the equality data it collects to support its actions and measure progress. One of the strategy's three equality outcomes has a specific focus on using data and other types of evidence to inform service delivery and service improvement. In particular, Social Security Scotland wants to 'increase awareness and uptake of benefits from people from ethnic minority communities, people who communicate in different ways, and people with care experience' (see Outcome Three).

The data collections

Social Security Scotland's main administrative data collection is its client applications. All individuals who wish to apply for benefits must complete an application form. This is most often done online through a secure web interface, although applicants may also apply by phone or post. In addition, a further option is currently being introduced to offer in-person or video support to those applying for benefits. As part of the application process, applicants are asked to complete a separate (anonymous) equality monitoring and feedback form. As of December 2019, this form must be completed by online applicants before their application can be submitted.

Data is collected about age, religion and belief, race, disability, sex, sexual orientation, and gender reassignment. Data on pregnancy / maternity are not collected through the equality monitoring and feedback form; however, pregnancy / maternity is one of the eligibility criteria for the Best Start Grants / Best Start Foods benefits and therefore this information is collected as part of the application process for those benefits. Information about socio-economic disadvantage is collected through postcode (which is linked to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation), and applicants for certain benefits are also asked to provide details of other benefits that they are on, which are only available to those on an income below a certain threshold.

Good practice in the collection and use of equality data

Social Security Scotland has developed complex data storage and linkage arrangements to enable anonymised monitoring of client application outcomes (i.e. whether or not an award of benefits is made) by equality characteristics. Equality monitoring data are collected anonymously and are held in a separate database from the main client database, which contains pseudonymised client application and outcome data (the clients' names, addresses and National Insurance numbers are removed). Application reference numbers are used to link the equality data from online applications to the client's application and outcome data in the main client

database. Postcode and date of birth information are used to link the data for paper and telephone applications.

Equality data are used by Social Security Scotland to understand how the organisation's processes are working for different groups of people. Social Security Scotland closely monitors the number of applications received from different groups. In addition, application outcomes are analysed by each protected characteristic to see if there is any variation between groups in the proportion of awards made. This analysis is currently published twice a year as an official statistics publication (both [report and tables](#)). The aim is to monitor take-up, and to ensure that the decisions made about benefits applications are fair. This information is then used to determine what, if any, further investigations are required to ensure that Social Security Scotland's processes do not discriminate against any group. This type of in-depth analysis is possible because Social Security Scotland has invested substantial resources in developing its technical and analytical capacity.

Social Security Scotland has adopted a culture of continuous improvement in relation to its collection and use of equality data. For example, prior to December 2019, completion of the equality monitoring and feedback form was voluntary, and only around 5% of applicants completed it. As a result, it was difficult to use the data to determine whether awards were being made fairly. In December 2019, the organisation incorporated the equality monitoring and feedback form into its online application process, and the form must now be completed before an application can be submitted. At the same time, applicants are given a 'prefer not to say' option for all the equality questions. [The client diversity and equality statistics](#), covering the period from 1 June to 30 November 2020, show that only a small proportion of applicants tick the 'prefer not to say' option for any of the equality questions. The two questions with the highest proportion of 'prefer not to say' responses were sexual orientation and physical or mental health condition or illness, both at 6%.

Most Social Security Scotland clients apply for their benefits online. However, completion rates for the equality monitoring and feedback form have continued to be lower among telephone and postal applicants. An investigation into the reasons for this in relation to telephone applications found that the process for completing the form by telephone was cumbersome – requiring client advisors to enter data into two separate databases (one of which holds the client application data and another which holds the anonymous equality data). As a result, clients would sometimes hang up after providing the information required for their benefit application without waiting to give the information required by the equality monitoring and feedback form. Work is now underway within Social Security Scotland to develop a more streamlined process for collecting equality data for telephone applications.

Impacts of equality data collection

The analysis of equality data collected by Social Security Scotland has shown some differences in approval rates for applications from some groups, including certain minority ethnic and religious groups. Further investigations found that some of these differences are the result of applications being made by individuals living outside of Scotland (applicants must have a Scottish postcode to be eligible for benefits administered by Social Security Scotland). However, even after removing these applications, differences still remain. This has led to a number of actions being taken

within the organisation to provide better, more accessible information to these groups, as described in the box below.

Spotlight: Using data to inform service improvement

Social Security Scotland has developed information about their services tailored to specific minority ethnic communities and religious groups. The organisation has also engaged directly with organisations working with these groups. Examples include:

(1) Social Security Scotland's Local Delivery Service has been undertaking direct engagement with Hindu Groups in Glasgow (which has the highest percentage Hindu population in Scotland). Translated materials which could be used to promote Social Security Scotland services were delivered to these groups in early 2021, and then cascaded throughout Scotland. Specific contacts have also been made with Sikh communities, the Glasgow Ghanaian welfare group, and Pachedu (a service for asylum seekers based in Paisley), with further information shared and relationships developed.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Social Security Scotland also had contact with local imams and visited all mosques in Midlothian and West Lothian. As COVID-19 restrictions decrease it is intended that Social Security Scotland will attend Friday prayers in the West Lothian mosques to provide additional information.

(2) Application materials and benefit information have been translated into nine languages and produced in easy read format, and the Strategic Communications Team continually consider if and when new languages need to be added. Social Security Scotland initially found that these were not being accessed in the volumes anticipated; so, having spoken with stakeholders, Social Security Scotland now proactively provide translated materials to organisations who will be able to get the information to those who need it in different formats through the work of their Local Delivery Service and National Engagement Team. Social Security Scotland have also joined [Happy to Translate](#) to benefit from this brand's visibility with people who speak little or no English. Seeing this logo on materials gives people the confidence to know that they will be able to engage with services in their chosen language.

(3) Social Security Scotland's National Engagement Team are about to start a specific project focused on [Seldom Heard Groups](#). This will involve linking with national organisations representing minority ethnic and other disadvantaged communities to help raise awareness and ensure these communities understand Social Security Scotland's commitment to providing an inclusive service. This activity will also focus on relationship building with these groups. Social Security Scotland want to develop ways to work in partnership to raise awareness and tackle the stigma around social security, and to identify and remove any barriers there may be for people in accessing benefits.

The efforts put into improving Social Security Scotland's equality data collections have resulted in the creation of a valuable data library resource which can be used to complete and update Equality Impact Assessments that are routinely undertaken by the organisation.

Next steps

Social Security Scotland recognise that, as a new public body, they are still developing their evidence about and understanding of what they need to do to mainstream equality.

The organisation has an External Equality Network, with representatives from 17 equality groups including People First (Scotland), Engender and the Fife Centre for Equalities, and engages in ongoing discussions with this group about how to improve the collection of equality data and how to use this data to enhance the delivery of its services. This Network also helps Social Security Scotland to consider how to publish its data in a way that is both accessible and engaging. In the future this may lead to changes in the way data are presented. For example, at present, there is currently no breakdown of equality statistics by local authority or health board because of the small sample sizes associated with certain equality characteristics, but this may change over time as more data become available.

Another area which Social Security Scotland is currently exploring is the relationship between intersectionality (i.e. combinations of different protected characteristics) and application outcomes. A [first set of tables](#) was published for the period 1 June to 30 November 2020. In addition, although existing publications provide information about the proportion of clients who have been denied an award by equality characteristics, in the future Social Security Scotland will look to provide information on why applications are denied.

Finally, as discussed above, the process for collecting equality data during telephone applications is currently being improved. This work has been looking at ways of making completion of the equality monitoring and feedback form smoother and better for the clients.

Contact for further information

Queries and further information in relation to this case study should be directed to: MI@socialsecurity.gov.scot

The Scottish Government Equality Data Improvement Programme

The Scottish Government launched its [Equality Data Improvement Programme](#) in April 2021. The first phase of the programme, which will run from April 2021 to December 2022, aims to raise awareness across the public sector of why equality data are needed, and how these data can be used to improve policy-making and outcomes.

Do you have an example of good practice in collecting and using equality data at your organisation that you would like to share?

Contact the Scottish Government at: social-justice-analysis@gov.scot



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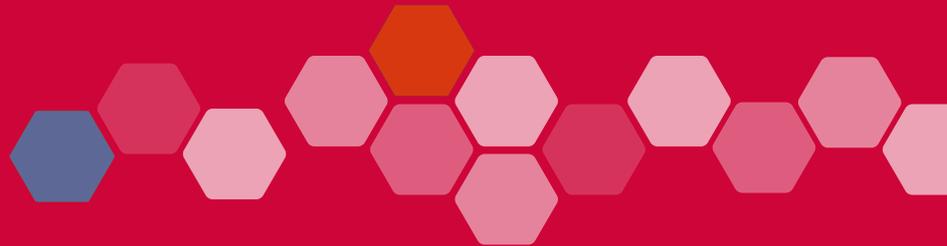
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