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# **SOCIAL SECURITY EXPERIENCE PANELS - SELDOM HEARD PROGRAMME OF RESEARCH: MOBILE POPULATIONS**



**EQUALITY, POVERTY AND SOCIAL SECURITY**



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# Summary

## Introduction

The Scottish Government is becoming responsible for some of the benefits previously delivered by the Department for Work and Pensions. As part of the work to prepare for this change, in 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 will be devolved to Scotland. The Scottish Government undertakes research with panel members to inform key decisions in the design of social security in Scotland. As hard to reach and marginalised groups are less likely to be visible in the Experience Panels, we have set up a programme of research for 'Seldom Heard Voices' to ensure these voices are included in the design of social security services.

There are four groups identified as 'Seldom Heard' in this research programme. They are Mobile Populations, Vulnerable Groups, End of Life, and Carers and Care Experienced. For each group two waves of fieldwork were undertaken.

This is the report for the two waves of the Mobile Populations strand. The group is divided into the following sub-groups: Gypsy/Travellers, refugees and seasonal migrant workers. It will highlight key barriers and challenges in accessing benefits faced by Mobile Populations participants, as identified through analysis of qualitative interviews. The report also discusses enablers or potential improvements which may support increased benefit uptake among this group.

## Summary Findings

### General experiences of benefits

Research participants from the Mobile Populations strand had a strong reliance on council support workers, third sector organisations and/or informal

support networks to navigate various aspects of the benefit system. This support was mainly for access to information on benefits and support to complete varied applications processes. Participants mostly had experience of applying for and receiving Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payment.

## **Barriers**

Mobile Population participants experienced common barriers and challenges with the benefit system.

Research participants felt they could not find correct information on benefits and eligibility from official government channels such Department for Work and Pensions and Jobcentre Plus. Many perceived the benefit system as complex and difficult to understand.

The structure and the wording of applications forms were perceived as repetitive, prescriptive and long. Some participants mentioned that the questions did not allow to convey additional information to explain the nuances of their particular circumstances. Some felt that forms were purposefully designed to make it hard to get successful benefit claims.

A few highlighted barriers to access information and apply for benefits online because they did not have internet access or digital devices.

Many participants reported long waiting times during the benefit application processes, in particular when claiming Universal Credit and disability related benefits. The long waiting times caused them financial difficulties such rent arrears, the need to use foodbanks, borrowing money to get by, getting emergency loans and/or homelessness.

Participants who had experience of claiming Universal Credit commonly held negative views towards it. They highlighted challenges around complex online processes and negative views towards the amount of their Universal Credit payment, as they felt it did not cover a minimum standard of living.

Participants from the Mobile Populations group reported feeling stigmatised, misunderstood, judged and discriminated against by the DWP and Jobcentre Plus staff. Many indicated that there is stigma attached when applying for benefits. They also felt discriminated against by benefit staff as a result of their origin i.e. being a Gypsy/Traveller, a refugee or a European citizen.

## **Enablers**

Positive experiences (enablers) and views on how the benefit system can be improved were identified by the Mobile Populations group.

Participants stressed that the benefit system needs to be compassionate on their support of benefit applicants. Several participants emphasised the need for benefit staff to be suitably trained to understand the specific circumstances of different groups. Many highlighted the need for benefit staff to be aware of mental health conditions and experiences of trauma when interacting with clients. Some also mentioned the need for staff to be approachable, empathetic, patient and friendly when communicating information and supporting participants with application processes.

Third sector organisations which advocate and work on the specific needs of Mobile Population groups contributed to positive experiences with the benefit system. Many participants perceived these organisations as a trustworthy source for information and support. Some participants highlighted the key role of council support workers and Gypsy/Traveller liaison officers for information and support to navigate the benefit system.

Participants said that they would like communication on information and applications of benefits using various methods suited to their individual circumstances and preferences.

Many said that they preferred to access support face-to-face. They mentioned this support can be provided in a specific location, local libraries or at home. They felt that face-to-face communication will ensure they are given the

correct information and support to complete forms. Refugees and seasonal migrant worker participants highlighted the support they required from translators and interpreters during those face to face appointments so they can explain their particular circumstances clearer.

Some participants mentioned that benefit system needs to be designed with more flexibility. It should be able to consider their specific and complex situations and to be able to deal with sudden changes of circumstances of clients.

Some participants suggested that application processes need to be simplified. This included making application forms simpler. Some suggested shortening waiting times of application processes and payments so they could help clients to avoid financial difficulties.

# Introduction

The Social Security Experience Panels were established by researchers in the Scottish Government in 2017. Scottish Government researchers work with Panel members to bring the voices of those with lived experience into the design of the new social security system in Scotland. Social Security Scotland is an executive agency of the Scottish Government responsible for delivering benefits in Scotland. There are groups of people with lived experience that are less likely to be represented on the panels. The “Seldom Heard Voices” research programme was set up to address this gap. It ensures that groups who need to be treated with particular sensitivity and those who are marginalised or dispersed, also have a voice in designing Scotland’s social security services. There are four groups identified as ‘Seldom Heard’ in this research programme. They are Mobile Populations, Vulnerable Groups, End of Life; and Carers and Care Experienced. For each group two waves of fieldwork were undertaken.

This is the report for the two waves of the Mobile Populations strand. Mark Diffley Consultancy and Research (now Diffley Partnership) was commissioned by the Scottish Government to carry out the fieldwork which was undertaken between 2019 and 2022<sup>1</sup>. The analysis was carried out by Scottish Government researchers.

There are three sub-groups in this strand: Gypsy/Travellers and refugees and seasonal migrant workers.

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<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork for wave 1 was paused in February 2020. Fieldwork for wave 2 resumed in March 2022.



## Research Methods

The aim of the research was to engage with Mobile Populations participants to explore their previous and current experiences of the social security system. The research included a total of 29 interviews with 10 Gypsy/Travellers<sup>2</sup>, 10 seasonal migrant workers and 10 refugees. A mixture of participants was sought based on gender and age when possible.

Participants were recruited through several stakeholder organisations. This targeted recruitment mainly included engagement with advocacy and support organisations that work around the needs of these specific sub-groups. Hence, caution should be taken when interpreting the findings widely as participants from the Mobile Populations strand were mostly recruited through these third sector organisations. Gypsy/Travellers, seasonal migrant workers and refugees who do not access or are not linked to support organisations may have different experiences.

### Participant demographics

Twenty participants had a disability, long-term and/or mental health condition. Ten participants were from a minority ethnic group<sup>3</sup>. Seventeen participants were female. The majority were aged between 25 and 54.

Over a third of participants were located in Edinburgh and over a third did not reside in a permanent location.

### Interview method

The interviews were carried in two stages. For the first wave of fieldwork, interviews were carried out face to face between July 2019 and February 2020. Fieldwork was halted in March 2020 in line with restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. For the second wave of fieldwork, interviews

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<sup>2</sup> One interview was carried out with two Gypsy/Traveller participants (mother and daughter).

<sup>3</sup> Some research participants did not disclose their ethnicity information.

were carried out by telephone in March 2022<sup>4</sup>. They were conducted by an independent research company 'Mark Diffley Consultancy and Research', commissioned by the Scottish Government.

Interviews had an in-depth qualitative approach and they lasted up to 1 hour in length. They were carried out between a member of the research consultancy and the individual participant. A £20 gift voucher was offered as a thank you for taking part.

The interview data collected was compliant with Social Research Association Ethical Guidelines, the Data Protection Act 2018 and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). To ensure the research was ethically comprehensive, the following key mechanisms were applied: voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity. Personal data of participants was safeguarded and concealed. The data transferred to Scottish Government researchers for analysis was fully anonymised.

## **Research questions**

The research was designed to help shape the new social security system in Scotland, ensuring that it is built around people's needs. The interviews explored participants' experiences of and views on accessing services and benefits. Specifically, participants were asked questions on:

- Perceptions of, and experiences with, government services
- Experiences and views of the current benefit system
- Views on the future of social security system in Scotland

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<sup>4</sup> Many challenges in the recruitment of participants due to the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g. staff from stakeholder organisations working remotely and difficulties engaging with their service users) resulted on a reduced number of participants for the Seldom Heard Research Programme, as expected. Therefore, a total of 7 interviews with Gypsy/Traveller participants were carried during wave 2 for the Mobile Populations strand.

## Quotations

The Scottish Government research team received summaries of interviews from the research contractor rather than full verbatim transcripts. Throughout this report, excerpts of these interview notes are used to provide relevant case studies of participants experiences. Where quotation marks are used in excerpts (“...”), this indicates direct quotations from participants as below:

**Overall view is that the social security system is complicated; “all this universal credit, it’s not simple, there are even more delays and added workload”.**

**[Gypsy/Traveller]**

## General experiences of benefits

Most participants from the Mobile Populations strand have experienced adverse circumstances such as physical and mental health conditions, fleeing their countries of origin and/or unstable working conditions. Those experiences have diversely impacted and shaped their access to and experiences with benefits. However, few commonalities can be found in terms of general experiences with the benefit system.

### Benefits claimed

Participants claimed, or had previously claimed the benefits listed in below. The most frequent experience with benefits was with Universal Credit (UC), followed by Personal Independence Payment (PIP).

**Table 3: Type of benefit claimed**

Benefit	Participants
Universal Credit	13
Personal Independence Payment	10
Job Seekers Allowance	3
Employment Support Allowance	7
Housing Benefit	4
Child Benefits	5
Child Tax Credit	3
Incapacity Benefit	2
Carer's Allowance	1
Disability Living Allowance (DLA) for Children	1

## Support with navigating the benefit system

Participants from the Mobile Populations group reported a strong reliance on support workers from local authorities, third sector organisations and/or informal support networks to navigate various aspects of the benefit system. Some mentioned having more than one source of support to help them access information and complete benefit processes which commonly included online applications.

Third sector organisations, in particular, those which work on, and advocate for, the specific needs of the Mobile Population groups were highlighted as providing essential support for finding information, completing applications and signposting to further services. Organisations commonly mentioned were: MECOPP, Shelter, Govan Community Project, Saheliya and ELREC. Specific community organisations related with their country of origin were also mentioned as a source of support by some. A small number of participants also mentioned Citizen Advice Bureaux as a third sector organisation to obtain and signpost information of benefits and their entitlement.

Some highlighted that people and friends from their communities, particularly those with whom they share the same language, were key to providing information and support for benefit applications and processes. Participants mentioned that without their help, it would have not been possible for them to access various government services, including the benefit system.

**She described how the Support Worker [from MECOPP] “tells me everything I need to know” and helped communicate with authorities when required. So she has helped with providing information on benefits, advising what she is/isn’t eligible to apply for, sourcing forms and filling them out, including those done online.**

**[Gypsy/Traveller]**

**In terms of obtaining information about services, he learns about this through his friends and people that he knows as well as referrals through various support organisations. These are the best ways of signposting information about services to him.**

**[Refugee]**

**She learned about Universal Credit from her friends who are also from Eastern Europe and told her about this support that she could access.**

**[Seasonal migrant worker]**

## Key barriers with the benefit system<sup>5</sup>

Common barriers experienced by Mobile Populations participants in our research are presented below.

### Difficulty finding information from official channels

Research participants felt they could not find accurate information on benefits and eligibility from official channels such as Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) or Jobcentre Plus (JCP). When trying to get information from those channels, a few participants highlighted that staff provided confusing and inconsistent information. In some cases, they were still unaware of being eligible to some benefits at the time of the interview.

**He described how accessing information regarding benefits was really difficult: “I visited 8-9 places to find information”. This was compounded by his view regarding the “incompetent advisers” at the DWP who gave him conflicting information regarding the benefits system and what he was eligible for.**

**[Seasonal migrant worker]**

### A complex and prescriptive system

Many participants shared the perception that the benefit system is complex and difficult to understand. A few also perceived that the system is not only difficult to navigate, but also prescriptive in relation to eligibility criteria. Some participants perceived that the system was deliberately complex to discourage applications to benefits.

**He felt that government services can be bureaucratic and inflexible in that they have rigid eligibility requirements.**

**[Refugee]**

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<sup>5</sup> For barriers more frequently experienced on each sub-group of the Mobile Populations strand, please go to Annex A.

**He felt that the system was deliberately set-up to discourage application.**

**[Seasonal migrant worker]**

As a result, all participants relied on external support to navigate the system. Without that support, many mentioned it would have not been possible for them to access and apply for benefits. For some, a lack of English proficiency skills and/or poor literacy skills acted as an additional barrier to accessing benefits and it also resulted in a complete dependability of external support to deal with benefits processes.

**She mentioned that she has poor literacy skills and finds reading and writing difficult so finds that she needs support from someone external to support her with applying for benefits.**

**[Gypsy/Traveller]**

## **Challenges with benefit application processes**

Common difficulties concerning application processes, follow-up interviews and assessments were highlighted by participants.

Many perceived the structure and the wording of applications forms as repetitive, prescriptive and long. Some participants mentioned that the questions did not allow the opportunity to convey additional information to explain the nuances of their particular circumstances. A few reported that they found it difficult to understand what information was requested from them in the application forms. As a result, they were unsure how to complete the application forms without support.

**He felt it is hard to explain or interpret what type of information you need to provide within each cell within an application form. He felt that sometimes there are quite specific types of information that you need to provide, but this is not always clear at the outset.**

**[Refugee]**



Participants reported that they were required to provide a lot of information in the application forms, follow-up interviews and medical assessments. Some felt that the amount of questions they were asked were purposefully designed to make it hard to get successful benefit claims.

**He felt the application process to be onerous as they required a lot of information - “they want to know everything about you”.**

**[Seasonal migrant worker]**

**She described the application process as “complicated”. She described the volume of forms as being “like bibles, they had hundreds of pages”.**

**[Gypsy/Traveller]**

**He is claiming PIP and has had some difficulties with the interview process, he felt that the interviewer from the DWP was trying to catch him out by using trick questions which he didn’t know what the right answer was.**

**[Refugee]**

Some highlighted how benefit application processes made them feel anxious and stressed. A few highlighted that these benefit processes and interactions with DWP and JCP staff intensified their mental health problems.

**“I have so much trauma and upset from filling in forms. I have PTSD from the interview itself”.**

**[Gypsy/Traveller]**

**“The questions they ask are very complicated and personal; you get embarrassed by it. It is especially bad if you have mental health issues like I do.”**

**[Gypsy/Traveller]**

A few also mentioned that accessing information and applying for benefits online was a challenge because they did not have internet access or digital devices or did not know how to use digital technologies.

**She isn't able to use digital technologies and doesn't have many internet devices.**

**[Refugee]**

### **Long waiting times and financial hardship**

Many participants reported long waiting times within the benefit application process. This was particularly highlighted as being an issue in relation to Universal Credit and disability related benefits.

The waiting times for the first Universal Credit payment and the transition period when being transferred to Universal Credit from other benefits were reported as being too long. A few were unaware of being transferred from other benefits to Universal Credit.

**She also received housing benefit, and this stopped, and she was moved over to Universal Credit. She wasn't sure why she had to be moved over to the new system.**

**[Refugee]**

For disability related benefits, many participants perceived the waiting period for award decisions as very slow and lengthy. A few also mentioned that the communication with DWP was deficient when looking for information about progress of an application during waiting times.

**They [mother and daughter] described how they waited for ages for assessments to be made, during which time they heard very little from DWP about progress and strongly felt that they were left in limbo.**

**[Gypsy/Travellers]**

Many participants reported that these long waiting times for getting payments and decisions caused them financial difficulties such as rent arrears, a need to use

foodbanks, borrowing money to get by, getting emergency loans and/or homelessness.

**The family had to wait 5 weeks for the Universal Credit to be processed: “we had no money to cover the waiting period”. In these circumstances she went to a local support organisation and they advised that she applies for a Scottish Welfare Grant so that she would receive some money to be able to pay for basic items”.**

**[Refugee]**

**All applications “took a very long time” - with PIP she had to wait for 9 months before receiving any money, causing significant financial problems including having to take an emergency loan.**

**[Gypsy/Traveller]**

## **Difficulties with Universal Credit processes**

Participants who had experiences of claiming Universal Credit commonly held negative views towards it. There was a view that the UC benefit was complex and many highlighted various challenges as part of its application processes. A few participants mentioned that UC system added more workload to clients as they need to frequently provide evidence on job searches and job applications to remain eligible to the benefit.

Many highlighted difficulties with the online application processes of the Universal Credit. Most participants mentioned that they needed support to complete the online application forms. Some also needed help to upload the required evidence of their job searches as part of the conditions to be eligible to Universal Credit.

**Now she is on universal credit and has to go online to upload information regarding her job search. Her support worker assists her with the process as she finds it difficult to fill out information online. In particular, she finds it difficult as her English is poor.**

**[Refugee]**

A small number of participants also mentioned that UC payments did not provide enough financial support to cover a minimum standard of living.

**She said that the money [from UC] barely covers the costs for her children: “it’s just for kids, there is no money left for women”.**

**[Refugee]**

**As part of his application, he was denied housing benefit which led him to have rent arrears. He mentioned that there is no affordable accommodation, particularly while you are looking for work. His universal credit benefit also lasted for 3 months only, this barely helped him to make ends meet. It suddenly stopped, he wasn’t sure why, but thinks this is because of changing policy towards European citizens. He was made homeless as a result of the benefits stopping all of a sudden as well as his rent arrears.**

**[Seasonal migrant worker]**

## **Stigma from the benefit staff**

Participants from the Mobile Populations group reported feeling stigmatised, misunderstood, judged and discriminated against by the DWP and Jobcentre staff and more broadly among other services.

Many participants indicated that there is stigma attached to applying for benefits. They felt judged when enquiring about benefit decisions. Participants also felt DWP and Jobcentre staff were unapproachable, unfriendly and indifferent to their specific circumstances.

A further barrier which exacerbated the ineffective communication with benefit staff was the lack of English proficiency by many refugees and seasonal migrant workers.

**The participant suggested that DWP staff can have a prejudicial attitude towards refugees and that they are not sympathetic to their circumstances: “they don’t like it that my English is not good”.**

**[Refugee]**

**The participant felt that Jobcentre staff can often deal with clients with prejudice especially when their English is poor, or they come from another country.**

**[Refugee]**

Participants also felt discriminated against by benefit staff as a result of their origin i.e. being a Gypsy/Traveller, a refugee or a European citizen. Some also felt staff did not understand the particular circumstances and challenges of belonging to those sub-groups.

**From her dealings with the staff at DWP, she found them to be rude and misunderstand the difficulties and trauma facing the refugee community.**

**[Refugee]**

**He was not clear on what the eligibility requirements would be and felt that as he is a migrant that the DWP would look down on him. He felt that there was a stigma towards European citizens regarding claiming benefits.**

**[Seasonal migrant worker]**

**She recalled how she was asked a series of embarrassing questions as part of her PIP application and that these were asked in front of MECOPP which made it worse. This included questions about sensitive health issues like incontinence. She is certain in her own mind that there were prejudicial attitudes behind this “I really think it’s because I am a Gypsy/Traveller”.**

**[Gypsy/Traveller]**

## Enablers and views on improvement of the benefit system

Positive experiences (enablers) around the benefit system were also identified through the interviews. Some participants shared their thoughts on how the system can be improved. Key enablers and views on improvement are outlined below.

### Multiple channels for communication and streamlined information

Participants said that they would like to be given more information about benefits that might be relevant to them, and application processes. The information should be available in a range of formats to suit different needs, circumstances and preferences. A few mentioned positive experiences of being able to use the benefit system online for some application processes. Others preferred to receive information by phone. Many preferred face to face communication. Some mentioned that it would be desirable to have various forms of communication for different aspects of accessing information and application processes.

**He mentioned that he is able to complete government forms, but often details about individuals are more complex so it would be useful to provide some initial information online or in an application form and then follow up with a phone call or face-to-face meeting to provide further information and documentation.**

**[Refugee]**

A small number of participants thought it would be useful to have a single place which provides consistent and comprehensive information and advice for applicants. A few suggested that a clear explanation of benefit decisions should be provided if a benefit claim has been rejected. They also mentioned that benefit staff should also provide information on what they can do if an applicant wants to challenge a benefit decision.

**A single place where you can access information on the benefits system.**

**[Seasonal migrant worker]**

**Providing explanations for decisions and how you can contest unfair decisions.**

**[Seasonal migrant worker]**

### **Specialist and empathetic staff**

Participants highlighted that the benefit system needs to be compassionate and mindful on their support of benefit applicants. Many participants emphasised the need for benefit staff to be suitably trained to understand the specific circumstances of different groups. As a result, staff will be able to develop greater awareness of particular issues and circumstances faced by Gypsy/Travellers, refugees and seasonal migrant workers. A few also highlighted the need for a more diverse staff to help widen the understanding of circumstances of specific groups.

**More training provided to staff; they could have a more diverse team which understands the circumstances of refugees.**

**[Refugee]**

**The government needs a Gypsy/Traveller liaison officer; someone who understand the needs of the community and can better engage with them, without prejudice.**

**[Gypsy/Traveller]**

Many participants also highlighted the need for benefit staff to be aware of mental health conditions and experiences of trauma when interacting with clients. Others mentioned the need for staff to be approachable, empathetic, patient and friendly when communicating information and supporting people with application processes. A few highlighted the need for benefit advisors with these characteristics because

some people may not be able to explain their circumstances clearly because their lack of English proficiency or being originally from other countries.

**He also felt that government services should be aware that refugees are suffering from mental health issues given the things they may have seen so they should factor this in when dealing with refugee community.**

**[Refugee]**

**“Services being mindful the trauma refugee people have been through, and the psychological problems they face”.**

**[Refugee]**

### **Key role of third sector organisations and support workers**

Organisations which advocate and work on the specific needs of Mobile Population groups contributed to positive experiences with the benefit system. Many participants perceived these organisations as a trustworthy source for information and support. Similarly, some participants highlighted the key role of council support workers and Gypsy/Traveller liaison officers to help navigate the benefit system. Many mentioned their preferences to have benefit information and support through these organisations and support workers.

Commonly, these trusting relationships with support organisations and council/liaison workers were contrasted with the challenging nature of the relationship they experienced with DWP and JCP staff as part of getting information and applying to benefits.

**He learned about the benefits system through the Govan Community Project who helped him with his application for job seekers allowance, and housing support [...] He said that he trusts the community organisations the most - in particular through his Kurdish friends he has learned about Positive Action in Housing, Migrant Help and Govan Community Project, and he goes through these support organisations for help in the first instance.**

**[Refugee]**



**Comparing support organisations to dealing with the DWP, he felt that the former give people “hope” and a sense that they will fight for you to enable you to get the benefits/services that you are entitled to compared with government agencies which feel like they are set up to reject your claim.**

**[Refugee]**

## **Face-to-face communication and translation support**

Many participants highlighted their preferences for accessing face-to-face support at for example, a specific community location, local library or at home. They felt that face-to-face communication would ensure they are given the correct information and support to complete forms. A few also perceived that with face-to-face interactions they can provide more accurate information of their specific circumstances alongside the required documentation as part of their application process.

Refugees and seasonal migrant worker participants also highlighted the support they required from translators and interpreters during those face to face appointments so they can explain their particular circumstances clearer.

**She also mentioned that she struggles with online applications so discussing with someone face-to-face would be much simpler, having a translator present will also mean that she can get the key points across.**

**[Refugee]**

**She prefers meetings to be conducted face-to-face with a translator present.**

**[Seasonal migrant worker]**

## **Flexibility in the benefit system**

Some participants mentioned that the benefit system needs to be designed with more flexibility in mind to consider the specific situations and sudden change of circumstances of individual clients. Alongside these lines, a few mentioned that the system should be designed in a way that is clearer so it is easier to navigate.

**She felt that there wasn't enough flexibility in the system to accommodate the change circumstances of those who are working seasonally.**

**[Seasonal migrant worker]**

**Stop making the system so rigid allow people to add explanatory notes to explain your circumstances better.**

**[Seasonal migrant worker]**

## **Simplification of application processes**

Some participants suggested that the applications forms need to be simplified. They also recommended that forms need to set out clearly what information is required to complete them correctly. A few participants recommended that the information requested on applications processes should be less intrusive.

**[The Social Security system] should make the applications more straightforward and spell out exactly what type of information they are looking for instead of trying to trick people out of the benefits.**

**[Gypsy/Traveller]**

**Make the system less intrusive - avoiding the types of questions they [mother and daughter] found difficult in previous applications.**

**[Gypsy/Travellers]**

A small number of participants suggested that to simplify and streamline application processes, relevant information and/or medical evidence from the client could be stored. This would avoid requesting information which has been previously provided and it would help to progress benefit claims more efficiently.

**Having a process to access the medical file for individuals from abroad so that they don't have to start diagnosis from scratch.**

**[Refugee]**

**Have the ability to save information on the system as seasonal workers have a cyclical pattern so they will come and go, but as there is uncertainty around their employment, it may be that they need to access benefits.**

**[Seasonal migrant worker]**

Some suggested shortening waiting times of application processes and payments so they could help clients to avoid financial difficulties. Few recommended that the value of the benefit payment should cover a minimum standard of living.

**Reduce waiting times as this leads to destitution.**

**[Seasonal migrant worker]**

**She would like to see some improvements made over timings, speed [...] key improvement is time taken to process – “not acceptable” at the moment, resulted in financial problems and made her feel anxious and worried –**

**[Gypsy/Traveller]**

## What's next

The chart below summarises the barriers that Mobile Populations participants faced, the corresponding enablers and suggested improvements and sets out the action Scottish Government and Social Security Scotland will undertake (or has already undertaken) to address these barriers.

Barriers	Enablers	Action
<p>The benefit system is complex and difficult to understand</p>	<p>Flexibility in the benefit system</p>	<p>A general duty to promote the take-up of devolved benefits is enshrined in the <a href="#">Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018</a>. Social Security Scotland and the Scottish Government to date have published two <a href="#">benefit take-up strategies</a> that set out all the activity and engagement being undertaken to ensure awareness of benefits improves.</p> <p>Social Security Scotland will build on these findings by carrying out further research to identify and explore how best to communicate and raise awareness of benefits for seldom heard groups. The results of this research will be used to develop bespoke communication and engagement plans to support communication activity.</p> <p>The findings from this research will feed into a joined-up approach to improve access to information and support, and the importance of providing a range of communication options.</p>

	<p>Key role of third sector organisations and support workers (for information, advice and support)</p>	<p>The two <a href="#">benefit take-up strategies</a> include engaging with advocacy organisations to address barriers to benefit take-up. The findings from this research will inform a targeted approach with these specific groups for the implementation of interventions committed to in the Benefit take-up Strategy.</p> <p>The findings from this research is used to inform stakeholder engagement which communicates changes on Social Security Scotland benefits. Activities include workshops which bring together a wide range of organisations. These workshops involve various teams across Social Security Scotland working with third sector organisations. This engagement will help organisations to provide relevant and accurate information on benefits and their eligibility to their clients.</p> <p>Local Delivery staff raise awareness and understanding on Social Security Scotland benefits by engaging with clients and stakeholders in local communities such as mosques, refugee centres and Gypsy/Traveller support services.</p>
<p>Difficulty finding information from official</p>	<p>Consistent and comprehensive Information</p>	<p>Social Security Scotland has introduced inclusive communication approaches in all its work; working towards clear and accessible information, and a clear and transparent</p>

<p>government channels</p> <p>Challenges with access to information and applications online</p>	<p>Various channels of communication and support</p> <p>Preferences to face-to-face support</p>	<p>explanation of the eligibility criteria for each application form.</p> <p>For the benefits that have been devolved and will be replaced with a Social Security Scotland benefit, there is a range of ways to apply for the benefits they deliver including online, telephone, paper-based or face-to-face. Further, applicants will be offered support when applying for Social Security Scotland benefits. This multi-channel approach will ensure that those who cannot or choose not to adopt digital methods will not become isolated through technology.</p> <p>The findings on the preference for face-to-face support were fed into the development of the Local Delivery service in local communities across Scotland. This service is person-centred by providing a local presence to meet people’s needs in key locations where clients currently attend and through home visits. Local delivery staff provides pre-application advice and support to encourage people to take up the payments they are entitled to. They also work with key stakeholders to offer coordinated support to refugees in local communities.</p> <p>Social Security Scotland offer an Independent Advocacy Service which enables clients to have their voice heard, express their views and feel understood. It is available to anyone who, because of their disability, needs support applying for our benefits. This service will make</p>
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	<p>Translation/ interpretation support</p>	<p>sure clients are fully involved in their application process.</p> <p>Social Security Scotland is committed to offer interpretation services in any preferred language in person, over the telephone or via a video call. Translations services is also offered in any preferred language. In addition to this, translating materials of benefit information is one of the key components to ensure information is accessible. We will continue to proactively produce marketing materials, such as factsheets, in 11 community languages with more than 100 languages being available for translation on request.</p>
<p>Stigma from DWP and Jobcentre Plus staff</p>	<p>Specialised training of benefit staff</p> <p>Approachable and empathetic staff</p> <p>Benefit staff to be aware on</p>	<p>Social Security Scotland and the Scottish Government have gone to great lengths to ensure that dignity, fairness and respect are embedded in the new system. <a href="#">Our Charter</a> was co-designed to ensure that what a good system looks like is set out in full. This system includes the need for staff to be knowledgeable and empathetic. The <a href="#">Charter Measurement Framework</a> (also co-designed) monitors and reports on a yearly basis the progress being made against the Charter.</p> <p>Decision Making Guidance for Social Security Scotland staff will be developed with input from</p>

	mental health conditions and experiences of trauma	stakeholders. They will fully capture the impact of living with mental health conditions, other fluctuating conditions, and learning disabilities.
Complexity of the application forms and application processes (prescriptive, repetitive and long).  Information requested on processes are intrusive	Simplification of application processes	<p>Social Security Scotland has introduced inclusive communication approaches in all its work including application processes, all systems and client/staff interactions.</p> <p>The design of forms and application processes are undertaken in collaboration with people with lived experience of the benefit being devolved.</p> <p>Social Security Scotland has provided telephone and online services to advise clients on each aspect of the application processes.</p> <p>The onus is on Social Security Scotland to collect supporting information to aid the decision making process of a benefit application. Clients will have the opportunity to provide information themselves or give contact details to the Agency to obtain it on their behalf. All supporting information will be considered on its own merits. Social Security Scotland will ensure that we are taking into account information from those who best understand the impact of the client's condition.</p>
Financial difficulties due to long	Provide information to challenge a	Social Security Scotland has implemented a short-term assistance payment to cover the income reduced or stopped during a





## **Annex A: Main challenges concerning specific sub-groups**

Challenges and barriers reported above were experienced by many participants across the sub-groups in the Mobile Populations strand: Gypsy/Travellers, refugees and seasonal migrant workers. Nevertheless, some challenges and barriers were experienced more frequently for each of the sub-groups.

### **Gypsy/Travellers**

#### **Mental health, cultural awareness and home visits**

Gypsy/Traveller participants had negative experiences with the benefit staff. They reported being anxious and stressed every time they had to communicate with the DWP and the Jobcentre.

All participants had mental health conditions. Dealing with benefit staff and with benefit processes exacerbated them. These processes included: complexity of the application forms, long waiting times for a benefit decision, medical assessments, errors such as overpayments, delays in payments and online processes.

**She has anxiety from dealing with the DWP regarding her benefits.**

**[Gypsy/Traveller]**

**She found the 9-month prognosis to be too long to wait to be sure that she would receive the benefit for sure. This is too long a period and fills people with anxiety.**

**[Gypsy/Traveller]**

Most participants felt that government services have a derogatory attitude towards the travelling community. Some did not trust staff from services as a result of

previous experiences in which they felt discriminated against. A few participants suggested that the social security system needs to provide a Gypsy/Traveller liaison officer who understands the circumstances and needs of their community. For them, more cultural awareness is needed to challenge prejudice towards gypsy/travellers.

**She thinks that the social security system and the wider public services make Gypsy/Travellers feel anxious - she wants public bodies, including the new Social Security Scotland to “give us a chance; we are not all the same”.**

**[Gypsy/Traveller]**

**Overall, she felt that more cultural awareness needs to be raised regarding the travelling community as many people are prejudiced towards them [...] The government needs a Gypsy/Traveller liaison officer; someone who understand the needs of the community and can better engage with them, without prejudice.**

**[Gypsy/Traveller]**

A small number of gypsy/travellers also indicated a preference to home-visits as they felt that provided a safe place to communicate with benefit staff.

**Having more in-home support for people within the Gypsy/Traveller community who do not get out much. This is a safe place, instead of having to go somewhere else to attend a meeting.**

**[Gypsy/Traveller]**

### **Essential need for external support to navigate the complex system**

Gypsy/Travellers perceived the benefit system complex and difficult to navigate. They reported that the questions in application forms and assessments were designed to stop people to making successful benefit applications. They also felt the questions asked as part of these application processes were intrusive and unnecessary.

**She felt the interviews were really stressful as the same questions were asked in different ways in order to catch individuals out. She mentioned that at times they might ask “You get around don’t you, [you] can fix up you[r] tea, can’t you?” She felt that these questions were asked deliberately to catch her out and show that she is not incapacitated and therefore eligible for benefits.**

**[Gypsy/Traveller]**

**She described the assessment as ‘stressful’ and intrusive. ‘They wanted to know everything; how I live my daily life, how I eat, how I go to the toilet. It was too much and it made feel anxious.**

**[Gypsy/Traveller]**

As a result, all participants indicated the need for specialised support to navigate different aspects of the benefit system. These included support with completing application forms, various assessment processes and disputes. Many mentioned that their need for this support was intensified by their lack of literacy skills.

Although participants highlighted that they felt that this support is better provided by gypsy/traveller liaison officers, specifically from MECOPP, a small number also reported the lack of access of this specialised staff.

**She needs quite a lot of support but organisations such as Shelter and MECOPP which support the gypsy/traveller community have significantly reduced this function. She said that in MECOPP there is one liaison officer who deals with all 6 sites in which they work. Therefore, it is really hard to get a hold of the contact there who she trusts.**

**[Gypsy/Traveller]**

**She is unable to read or write. This “makes life difficult” and she relies heavily on assistance from MECOPP staff, including in helping deal with issues around welfare benefits and communicating with DWP.**

**[Gypsy/Traveller]**

## **Lack of awareness of benefits being devolved to Scotland**

Gypsy/traveller participants from wave 2 were asked about their views on some benefits being administered to Social Security Scotland. Most participants were not aware of the changes. Varied views were expressed when being told about the changes. Some mentioned that they did not think it will impact significantly on their experiences with benefits. Some were concerned and felt anxious about the changes and on how they will impact on their benefit payments. A small number of participants thought this change will impact positively as they will have more support when accessing benefits.

**Respondent had not been aware that powers were shifting to Scotland. She thinks it is 'a good thing' that this is happening. This is because she thinks it will be easier to keep people updated on benefits, should mean that people who can't read and write get help filling in forms and because she thinks that it will mean that more advice will be available to claimants in Scotland.**

**[Gypsy/Traveller]**

**She has no knowledge of any change in how her benefits will be administered "I don't know much about all that". She hopes that everything stays as it is and [it] is quite anxious about the thought of things changing particularly as she struggles financially at the moment "if they cut my money down or off I would be destitute". She stresses that she hopes it won't make her life any more difficult than it already is.**

**[Gypsy/Traveller]**

## **Refugees**

### **The key role of support workers from local authorities**

Refugees have fled their countries and had no previous experience of UK benefit systems. Support workers from local authorities played a key role in helping many participants to navigate and access various services which included the benefit system. Refugees reported that council support workers helped them to access information, identify their eligibility of benefits and complete application forms to get

successful benefit applications. A few also mentioned that without the help of support workers with benefit processes, they would have not been able to access benefits.

**Her support worker assisted her with the application process, this involved a form, a telephone call and then attending an appointment at the Jobcentre.**

**[refugee]**

**She has a support worker tied to the local council who does everything for her, she doesn't understand the various government services herself [...] The main person to inform her of changes to the administration of benefits will be the support worker.**

**[Refugee]**

**He has a support worker at the local council within the integration team who has helped him with everything including his application for benefits [...] The support worker is the key personnel that he is dealing with and trusts them so he would like to learn about the new benefits system through them.**

**[Refugee]**

Some participants also reported the support they received from third sector organisations. Advocacy organisations that promote diversity and equality were particularly highlighted. These organisations were mentioned as places they trust for help with signposting information of benefits and services alongside with support to complete applications.

**[Participant] navigates a range of different support organisations in the community. [He] trusts support organisations the most and feels that these organisations are multicultural and can better understand different communities and cultural sensitivities.**

**[Refugee]**

## Conditionality<sup>6</sup> and mental health conditions

Refugees reported how benefit staff constantly emphasised to them the need to search for and secure paid employment. They mentioned how the appointments in the Jobcentre focussed on searching for jobs without considering their particular circumstances as refugees. As a result, some perceived the mandatory job search activities they have to carry out to access benefits as inflexible conditions for eligibility.

Many participants suffered from mental health conditions which were linked with their traumatic lived experiences and fleeing their countries. A few refugees mentioned that benefit advisers have been dismissive of their mental health issues and experiences of trauma.

**He feels that the DWP would rather have people in work; especially as he felt that the agency adviser was dismissive of his mental health history and feel that keeping the mind busy in work would help with mental health problems. He felt that this grossly misses the point regarding the trauma he has experienced.**

**[Refugee]**

**She has to attend an appointment at the Jobcentre every two weeks [...] work is the main point of discussion with the adviser. This can be frustrating for her as she feels that she is just finding her feet and adjusting to a new life in Scotland.**

**[Refugee]**

## English as a barrier

Refugees highlighted their need to learn more English to access services and interact effectively with benefit staff. A few of them perceived that benefit advisors were not sympathetic towards their limited English proficiency.

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<sup>6</sup> Conditionality in this context refers to the link of accessing benefits/welfare rights/services and meet particular obligations (e.g. engage in job search activities). These conditional arrangements combine elements of sanction and support to have access/be eligible to certain benefits.

As a result, they have a strong reliance on translators and interpreting services to communicate with benefit staff. A few reported that having a good translator/interpreter alongside their support worker is key for them to communicate their individual circumstances effectively. A small number of participants also mentioned the need to have advocacy workers alongside translators so they can be supported when they require translation and also when they need someone to provide further information to advocate on their behalf.

**The interpreter was there in the capacity of translating and could not advocate on his behalf. He felt there was no one with him in a supporting or advocating role; and no one from the support organisation was able to accompany him. He also did not find that the [DWP] staff were friendly...**

**[Refugee]**

**He feels that he needs to improve his English language skills as currently he relies on an Arabic translator to be present when he is engaging with different services. He mentioned that the DWP staff force him to speak English with them so that he can improve his language skills.**

**[Refugee]**

## **Seasonal migrant workers**

### **Unstable working conditions, benefit experiences and financial hardship**

Seasonal migrant workers are involved in an employment system characterised by precarious and unstable working conditions. These conditions include not having formal contracts, being dismissed from their jobs at any time and/or not being provided with payslips. Hence, their context of paid employment shaped their experiences with the benefit system.



**As her work is seasonal and low-paid, and the hours fluctuate depending on the fish that has been caught, she decided to apply for Universal Credit, to help support her stay in Scotland. This supplements her income when she is out of work [...] She mentioned that her circumstances can change quite quickly between finding temporary work for 16 hrs or so, to having nothing.**

**[Seasonal migrant worker]**

**As the work is never guaranteed and precarious, he can often not have any employment opportunities so has had to claim various benefits since 2012 including Job Seekers Allowance, Employment Support Allowance and more recently Universal Credit.**

**[Seasonal migrant worker]**

Most participants needed to access the benefit system as a result of fluctuating and unstable paid employment conditions. Some were not able to provide evidence regarding paid work to be eligible for some benefits<sup>7</sup>. Few suggested that the benefit system could help by requesting evidence on their paid employment to their employees directly.

**Support migrant workers with contacting their employer and providing the evidence they need to progress the claim.**

**[Seasonal migrant worker]**

A small number of participants also reported being subjected to benefit sanctions. Many experienced long waiting times to access benefits and changes on eligibility. These experiences led to them going through financial difficulties such as rent arrears, homelessness and the need to use foodbanks.

**He has had to access food banks because of the waiting time involved to set up his application for benefits.**

**[Seasonal migrant worker]**

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<sup>7</sup> It is likely that the lack of payslips and formal contracts did not provide seasonal workers with proof of previous employment and/or national insurance contributions.

**He has been sanctioned because of missing his signing date as he was ill, he phoned in advance to let the Jobcentre know but this did not prevent the sanction. He also felt that he had to continue searching for work while he was ill, he found this difficult [...] “The government just says no - there is no explanation”. This caused him significant hardship, including homelessness, he had to access support at Streetwork which provided him food and a shower to see him through this time.**

**[Seasonal migrant worker]**

### **Lack of information and effective communication from official channels**

Seasonal migrant workers held negative views on the support offered by benefit staff. They felt that benefit staff did not provide them with accurate information regarding benefit entitlement, careers advice or job opportunities.

Many participants highlighted their need for information about job opportunities and their frustration that they do not receive such information from Jobcentres. A few felt that the appointments at the Jobcentre were interrogations of job searching activities rather than meetings involving employability and employment support.

**She mentioned that the staff are not “too friendly” and she felt it was more of an interrogation rather than an opportunity to get some career advice.**

**[Seasonal migrant worker]**

**The career advice is not useful. He feels that they don’t actually provide any help for you to find a new job. He is frustrated as he needs a job to send money back home, right now he is just about making his own ends meet.**

**[Seasonal migrant worker]**

### **The key role of community and informal support networks**

Seasonal migrant workers commonly reported the significant support role of community organisations alongside help from friends of their country of origin. They helped them to navigate the benefit system and other services more widely. Some

of them mentioned that without that help, they either would have given up claiming benefits they were entitled to, they would have made several mistakes on applications and being denied a benefit claim, or they would have struggled to complete benefit applications.

**He knew other Polish people, so they provided him support and told him that he needs to set up a GP to access support through the NHS [...] His friends also took him to a Polish community organisation, where he got support from a solicitor to make a case against his employer at the construction site [...] Through the Polish community organisation, he was also supported to make a claim for PIP. He was supported to make the application, but had to physically attend an interview with a DWP adviser and provide them documentation from his doctor.**

**[Seasonal migrant worker]**

## **Annex B: List of abbreviations**

List of commonly used abbreviations in this report.

ESA: Employment and Support Allowance

DLA: Disability Living Allowance

DWP: Department for Work and Pensions

HB: Housing Benefit

JCP: Jobcentre Plus

JSA: Job Seekers Allowance

PIP: Personal Independence Payment

PTSD: Post traumatic stress disorder

UC: Universal Credit

### **How to access background or source data**

The data collected for this social research publication:

- Are available in more detail through Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics
- May be made available on request, subject to consideration of legal and ethical factors. Please contact [socialsecurityexperience@gov.scot](mailto: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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