



## Social Security Experience Panels External Peer Review: Mid Programme Review

Thank you for agreeing to undertake a peer review of this project, please ensure ALL sections are completed.

Your name: Ceri Davies  
Peer review for: Social Security Experience Panels Team

### 1. Are the data management processes for Experience Panels appropriate for the project?

YES - please describe       NO – please suggest improvements below

The Data Protection Impact Assessment document draws together the key information to guide data management processes. It outlines the rationale and methodology for data collection from panel participants and sets standards, ownership and guidance on the management of personal and research data. This thorough and thoughtful documentation should be commended.

The DPIA raised the following specific observations:

- It is not always clear what data is talked about at what points e.g. personal data in general (such as an email address) or specific designations of 'personal data' under GDPR definitions, which would add further clarity.
- The DPIA makes a commitment that personal data is always stored separately from the research data. There may be instances in which this is not accurate, e.g. if you are collecting contact details in surveys, this is by definition holding research and personal details together in the same place at least until the next stage of processing. It may not be necessary to keep this assurance named in the DPIA.

I have considered three aspects of data management to be appropriate as follows:

*Storage and use of Data:* Registration and personal data is held in a secure drive, in which there are three files with different permissions. The most restricted is available only to the core EP team where a master and backup file of registration data is held in an excel sheet. Each participant is assigned a unique ID number. The helpline team have access to a database they can use for verification of caller which contains basic information to make this possible. When needed, the helpline team only use the unique ID number to identify the participant to the core EP team. Finally, user researchers can access information on the profile of panellists but do not have prior access to personal information. Where user researchers are working with panellists (for example, running a focus group), the EP team share the attendance list of those recruited and their access requirements.

One observation for the team to consider is that it might be useful to document some meta data about the sample file and what variables you include and how you collect them. In doing so you could codify (or consider) any data checking and validation processes (e.g. that the phone numbers are actually all phone numbers) to support a system of quality assurance and checks.

#### *Collating and refreshing personal data*

Panellists personal information and additional data on protected characteristics is collected (and refreshed) annually through an 'about you' survey. This is optional for panellists to fill in; so how up to date these details are can vary. Panellists are sent the survey via email or by hard copy depending on their preference. Hard copy surveys are mailed back freepost to Scot Gov and the information is manually entered. Hard copies are stored in a safe. The EP team keep an action log of people coming on/off the panel annually through the about you survey and at any time when people call the telephone helpline to say they want to leave the panel.

#### *Surveying the Panel*

Scot Gov have a closed 'Questback' account. All survey links are sent out by email using Questback software which uses the secure database held by the team. Panellists receive a generic link for each survey and no unique IDs are assigned. All survey/qual research opportunities are voluntary. Therefore data can only be linked where respondents include identifying details/personal data as part of their survey response. These data can be further linked to protected characteristics which are gathered and maintained through the annual 'about you' survey.

## **2. Are the processes to engage with and communicate with participants (panel members), including accessibility appropriate for the project?**

YES - please describe       NO - please suggest improvements below

The EP team has a communication plan and set of working principles about communicating with participants, including in all recruitment and research material (e.g. recruitment letters), through to sharing findings and reporting.

Particular thought has been given to how the team can learn about panellists, so they can meet their needs and this informs how they engage and on issues of accessibility. This includes a regular 'about you' survey and information gathered through additional follow up work with Seldom Heard and through specialist stakeholders to diversify responses when needed. This additional work is important recognition that the panel is not representative and ensuring a diversity of views through these supplementary channels offers a wider level of insight on question of social security system design.

The team have a commitment to accessibility through offering different modes of response to surveys and a range of physical accessibility and support routes for panellists attending face to



face events. This extends to making provision in expenses for overnight stays and to be accompanied by carers.

The EP team also play a 'translation' role between internal team enquiries and the way opportunities are articulated and questions asked of participants (see also q3 below) which helps to further ensure that accessibility and clear communication are prioritised.

The team demonstrate a commitment to learning about different people's needs and are accruing a set of knowledge that facilitates the inclusion of a diverse range of individuals to respond to research opportunities. Much of the learning about accessibility and meeting needs could be usefully drawn together to make visible lots of tacit knowledge the team are building about e.g. venue specifications and suitability to support others to improve their accessibility.

### 3. Are the research processes (design, analysis, reporting) appropriate for the project?

YES - please describe       NO - please suggest improvements below

Across different stages of the research process, the EP team has an appropriate set of processes in place including:

- *Design:* The EP team have a clear sense of the role and purpose of the panel and therefore what is an appropriate topic and method for engaging with them. One important principle, consistent with user involvement in research is that all questions/topics should be things which are genuinely on the table for consideration. The EP team maintain a quality bar for the panel on how questions are asked and how data is captured (e.g. note taking requirements at focus groups) which helps to ensure that design choices are clear and translate into research which is clearly articulated and not overcomplicated. Whether these processes are clear from the point of panellists themselves was not in scope of this review.
- *Analysis:* Approaches to analysis are appropriate to the level and type of data. It is largely descriptive in all cases. The voluntary nature of this panel model relies on self-completion of ID by survey respondents which potentially limits data matching and may limit the usefulness of findings in some cases.
- *Reporting:* The EP team have produced a significant body of material in the form of research reports (which are made publicly available and in a mixture of formats including visual reporting). One further implication from the range and scale of research that the EP team has now completed may be to think of ways these findings can be compiled and searched so others can independently review findings before approaching the EP team for further research. This might also increase the usability of the data across a wider



number of people.

A further observation made on research processes, not uncommon in participatory or user involved researcher is how significant relationships are between researchers and participants and that these embed over time. The EP team should be commended for prioritising this aspect of their work and the value this is bringing to their ability to conduct focus groups in particular.

Finally, I talked to the EP team about the filing and organisation of their research materials and how from this mid-point it would be useful to consolidate and systematise this range of documents to ensure information is well organised and accessible, especially to new staff.

**4. Are the governance and stakeholder engagement processes appropriate for the project?**

YES - please describe       NO - please suggest improvements below

The evidence reviewed suggests these arrangements are appropriate for the scale and aims of the EP team. Stakeholder groups are clearly identified and structured mechanisms for engaging with different people are in place. An internal business plan also clearly sets out the work of the team and coverage of topics over a year.

The Working Group is the primary governance mechanism and feedback from members and other internal collaborators is positive. The group is seen as a place to be informed about the work of the EP team and how to take the opportunity of working together. There is some evidence from this group that colleagues would like to receive results from EP research more quickly where possible to maintain momentum on informing what they are working on. A further consideration for the EP team in relation to the working group is the size of its membership, particularly as the breadth and scale of EP grows as the programme moves through.

Internally, the EP team is seen as very collaborative with an emphasis on doing things face to face which helps decisions get taken.

External stakeholders are engaged through biannual events and ad hoc engagements on particular topics or queries. The EP team have clear sense of who these relevant stakeholder groups are.

Governance and stakeholder processes are underpinned by positive and transparent



relationships which the EP team have built over time. This suggests stability in the core EP staff team is particularly helpful and it maintains an institutional memory of the panel and its work aiding governance and collaboration.

**5. Is the research impacting on relevant decision making in the Social Security programme?**

YES - please describe       NO - please suggest improvements below

I primarily considered impact as it relates to how EP research informs individual design decisions for particular parts of the system under scrutiny

The process is designed to achieve impact in this way and at this mid-point there are some examples where this is the case such as research on Personal Independence Payments which has influenced the design of application forms, as well as key questions for consideration about how advisers can help people through the completion of forms. For participants, these impacts are also usefully articulated through a 'you said, we did' section in reporting.

One limiting factor for evidencing impact at this stage is that by definition we are at a mid-point, and tangible outcomes on certain sections of the system are not yet available. In addition, the accessing the views or opinions on impact with more senior stakeholders as decision makers was out of scope of this review, concentrating instead on evidence available in public reports.

What is also in evidence is that the research and work of the team is resulting in a series of unintended impacts which I consider to be relevant to understanding the value and significance of the programme. These include:

- User researcher, product/design teams and local delivery teams increasing their awareness of the lived experiences and perspectives of claimants through hearing and speaking to them first hand and increasing anecdotal awareness of issues and idea. These experiences as well as report findings can help shape thinking about how a problem, product or system can be addressed as well as where the research can help make a business case for certain design decisions even outside of formally commissioned EP research.
- Capacity building opportunities for staff to support the delivery of research and engage directly with participants.
- Findings which are very unlikely to have arisen in any other way, for example in research on case transfers, learning how important it is for claimants to know how payments will appear on their bank statement once the social security system comes into effect.

Less tangibly again but still important is that the presence and work of the EP team makes it less likely that work is done without stakeholder input.

## 6. Did you have all the information required to carry out this review?

YES - please describe       NO - please describe what was missing

I was provided with an appropriate range of documentary evidence and the chance to engage with the EP core team as well as a site visit to see in more detail data management processes and to hear from internal staff who liaise with or have commissioned research from the team. The core EP team were available to me to answer any questions.

This review could have been enhanced by some input from panellists themselves; to triangulate the value and clarity of the processes under scrutiny. Some of this is present in the 2018 annual report and this review fell before the 2019 report is available, which would have been one route to this.

## 7. Are there any other comments you wish to make about this work?

YES - please explain below       NO

The work of the EP team is interesting and innovative for its type and I have been impressed by the evidence I have reviewed and learning about the origin and operation of the EP team. It is clear that after an initial period of 'start up' the team and its work are in a phase of establishment and with it now have the opportunity to maximise the impact and profile of the work with decision makers and think about what aspects of the programme (and the learning it has done) can feed into an exit strategy and/or overlap with the client insights team.

There are also aspects of panel management and administration that would be worth revisiting if Scot Gov were to adopt a panel as an ongoing research mechanism. For example:

- Whether you want to work with longitudinal data and if so an awareness of how that could change what is disclosive
- Issuing surveys via multiple modes to each panellist as standard and issuing unique survey links to panellists to more likely secure matched data



- Methods and approaches designed to increase response rates

Finally, whilst I appreciate that one aspect of leading work of this type could be requests and from others on potential replication, as discussed with the team, this work is successful because of a particular constellation of context and opportunity which isn't necessarily the case in other places and on other issues. However, I do think it could be useful to focus on the learning the team have achieved that specifies principles and considerations for user involved research in public service design and this could be an area that would be a sensible use of time and investment in sharing the work of the team any wider.

## 7. Declaration

I declare that I have not been involved in the design of this study, am not part of the study team, have read and reviewed the issues and that I have no conflict of interest in acting as a peer reviewer

Signature:  Date: 30.10.19

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