



**Social Security
Experience
Panels**

NEWS

Spring 2020

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FREEPOST Social Security Experience Panels



Welcome from the research team

We hope this newsletter finds you well. In this edition, we have information about how COVID 19 (coronavirus) is affecting the Experience Panels work and the work of Social Security Scotland.

In addition to this, we have findings of recent testing sessions with Experience Panel members. We have an interview with Nikola Plunkett, the Head of Disability and Carer Benefits Policy. And finally, we also have further information about where to find out about social security policy decisions.

COVID-19 (coronavirus) update

COVID -19 is affecting all of us in different ways. Our team, including the helpline, started working from home in the middle of March. That was also when we decided to stop planning new face to face events. We managed to send a last letter out to postal panel members just before the building our post goes from was shut down. We cannot send out post at the moment. We can still be reached by email, and by text message if email is not possible for you. From next week our phone line will be reopened and available to take your calls.

A couple of weeks ago, we sent you information on how COVID-19 is affecting social security in Scotland (the full statement from Cabinet Secretary Shirley-Anne Somerville can be found [here](#)).

We are working with colleagues to decide what research is needed at this time. It is possible that we may be quieter than usual for a while. Or there may still be online surveys and invitations to telephone interviews. As always it is up to you how much or how little you take part.

We are really aware that this is a difficult time for everyone. We are trying to judge when is the right time to start sending panel members invitations to new research. To help us with this, we would be grateful if you could complete our poll on when you think the time will be right. The link is in the cover email to this newsletter.

In the meantime, we'll keep analysing and reporting as usual. We will continue to make sure that where possible, decisions are being informed by your views, needs and experiences. We will make sure that our findings are getting to the right people.

The most up to date and correct information on COVID-19 can be found at:

<https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/infections-and-poisoning/coronavirus-covid-19>

or by ringing the general (non-emergency) NHS information line: 0800 028 2816.



User Researcher testing with panel members

User Researchers have been running sessions with Experience Panel members to test parts of the new Scottish social security processes. Below are three pieces about the testing they have done.



Child Disability Payment

Social Security Scotland were considering using the Post Office website as a way for Child Disability Payment applicants to verify their identity online. We tested this process with six Experience Panel members. This research session also looked at the process of reviewing and submitting an online Child Disability Payment application.

We found that there were many issues when trying to set up an account and with verifying identity when using the Post Office system. There was confusion about why participants were directed to the Post Office website.

There was also confusion when creating an ‘account’ that was not a Post Office savings account.

When looking at the process of reviewing an application, we found that participants liked to have the opportunity to print a final PDF copy of their application for their records. They also needed a way of easily making changes before submitting the form.

Thanks to the valuable insights from Experience Panel members, we have decided to abandon the Post Office as a platform to set up an account and to verify identity. We are now testing alternative ways to achieve this. We are also looking at ways to make it easier to review and edit applications before they are submitted. And based on participant feedback we have included clearer instructions for applicants.



Unacceptable Actions policy

Another testing session was about the Unacceptable Actions policy. This session followed up on what panel members told us in last year’s [‘keeping staff and clients safe’](#) survey. This policy is about how both agency staff and clients should interact in a safe and respectful way. We asked Experience Panel members to have a look at the letter someone might receive if it was felt that they had acted in unacceptable way.

Experience Panel members helped us identify how we could phrase the letter and policy in a more compassionate way. They also helped us to recognise that we should treat each step in the process as an opportunity to mend relationships between the agency and the client.

We will be revising the Unacceptable Actions policy and letter in response to the feedback we received and plan to do further research on this in the future.



Communicating with people

We carried out three Experience Panel sessions in Aberdeen, Dundee and Stirling in October and November 2019. We wanted to learn how transparent Social Security Scotland should be when communicating with people throughout the

application process for disability benefits. This followed on from what panel members told us in last year's [‘applications and access to support’](#) surveys and focus groups. We were keen to understand more about how and when Social Security Scotland should get in touch with people in a way that suits them. We also used the sessions to test two draft letters. One letter asked an applicant to send in further information. The other letter detailed the decision made by Social Security Scotland.

The key things we learned from the sessions were:

- If Social Security Scotland wanted to ask a third party for supporting information, some people want to be told who we might contact in advance, so that they have the chance to collect the information themselves if they want to.
- When we tested the decision letter, most people wanted the decision to be near the top of the first page, so that they didn't have to look far to find this important information.
- Most people wanted to know how Social Security Scotland made a decision about their application, so that they could see how their application was interpreted, and what supporting information was used from third parties.
- Most people wanted all letters to be signed by the person or team dealing with their application, so that they could phone and speak to someone that understands their situation if they have any questions.

We used the feedback from the sessions to update the draft letters. The draft letters will go through further testing with the changes made. Everything we learned in the sessions will inform the design of the communications and notifications process.



An interview with Nikola Plunkett

Nikola Plunkett is a Policy Officer. She is the Head of Disability and Carer Benefits.

Can you tell us a little about your background?

I have worked in the Scottish Government since just after devolution and the Scottish Parliament was created, in a variety of mainly policy focused roles. Before that, I worked in the 'old' UK Department for Social Security

(now Department for Work and Pensions), and with children and young people with additional support needs.

What do you enjoy most about your role?

I think we can make disabled people's lives better by providing a benefits system that treats them humanely and supports them to get the benefits they're entitled to. Being part of a programme to deliver this gives me a great deal of job satisfaction. I work with other people who feel this too, which makes my day-to-day work very enjoyable.

Could you tell us a bit more about your role?

I support Scottish Ministers to make decisions on what they want the rules for disability benefits to be, and how this will be implemented. This involves producing written advice, detailed discussions and progressing legislation through Parliament. It is strengthened by gathering and understanding the views of disabled people and explaining our approach.

What are the challenges in your role?

Very often time is a key challenge. The delivery of a new system of benefits is very complex with long lead-in times in order to provide a great service. This means that policy preparations and decisions have to be made earlier than is sometimes imagined!



Social Security Policy Decisions

Our policy colleagues regularly publish Position Papers to announce the detail of policy decisions. You can find them at:

<https://www.gov.scot/collections/social-security-policy-position-papers/>

Recent policy Position Papers have covered these topics:

- Disability Assistance for Older People
- Child Disability Payment
- Scottish Child Payment

These papers were written before Coronavirus, so may be out of date. We will cover future major announcements in these newsletters.



Meeting your needs

If you have any feedback on this newsletter or ideas for what you would like to hear about in future newsletters, please let us know.

You can contact us by:

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