



Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba
gov.scot

Social Security Experience Panels: Agency Opening Hours



EQUALITY, POVERTY AND SOCIAL SECURITY



Contents

Introduction	3
Summary	3
About the research	4
Demographics.....	4
Opening Hours	5
When would clients need to contact Social Security Scotland?	5
Participant Views	7
Impact of not being able to contact the agency	8
Other Insights	9
Participant Preferences for Contacting the Agency	10
Survey Data	10
Participant views on modes of contact	11
Choice of communication method	12
Other Insights	12
Next Steps	13

Introduction

The Scottish Government will become responsible for 11 of the benefits currently delivered by the Department for Work and Pensions. As part of the work to prepare for this change, the Scottish Government have set up the Social Security Experience Panels. The Experience Panels are made up of over 2,400 people across Scotland who have recent experience of claiming at least one of the benefits that will be devolved to Scotland.

The Scottish Government is working with Experience Panel members to design a new social security system that works for the people of Scotland.

To deliver the benefits devolved to Scotland, the Scottish Government have established Social Security Scotland (the agency) – a new agency responsible for administering Scotland's new social security system. As part of the creation of this new agency, we will be working with Experience Panel members to ensure the agency understands their needs.

To inform our decisions on agency opening hours and contact methods, we have worked with Experience Panel members to learn what their expectations are for opening hours, when and how they contact the agency and the reasons behind their views.

Summary

Many of the Experience Panel members who responded to this survey expressed a preference to be able to contact the agency outside of usual working hours. Half of respondents said that they would want to be able to contact the agency 'sometimes', 'most of the time' or 'all of the time' between 8am and 9am. And overall, around two thirds (67 per cent) would want to be able to contact the agency after 5pm. Fewer felt they would need to contact the agency after 8pm, but this, but this still accounted for almost one in five participants (19 per cent).

Participants suggested that being able to unable to contact DWP caused a large amount of stress and anxiety. Being able to contact the new agency when they needed to resolve issues or get advice would go some way to reducing the stress currently experienced by participants.

Participants showed a strong desire for digital methods of contact such as email and web-chat. This was for a range of reasons, including having a written record and because it was less taxing on their health. There was also strong demand for more traditional contact methods such as telephone, post and in person, with many participants commenting on the need to maintain accessibility for those who are not comfortable using a computer.

Finally, participants suggested the method of contact should be suitable and appropriate for the reason they were contacting the agency. They reported expecting clear guidance on what you can and cannot do through different communication methods.

About the research

This report details the results of the Agency Opening Hours survey which took place between 1 – 15 June 2018. The research was carried out through an online survey. The survey was also available in a paper format for participants who had expressed a preference for this method, or could be completed over the phone. The majority of participants chose to complete the survey online.

Demographics

Participants were recruited from the Scottish Government Experience Panels (2,456 people). All Panel members were invited to take part in the Agency Opening Hours survey, and 436 panel members took part. This was an 18 per cent response rate.

This information from the Agency Opening Hours survey was added to previous Experience Panel information from ‘About Your Benefits and You’ (Scottish Government, 2007) as part of the longitudinal dataset for this project. This let us find out about the age and gender of people who took part in the survey.

Participants were not required to provide contact details in the Agency Opening Hours survey. As such, it was possible to provide information on gender for 78 per cent of the 436 participants. The figure in tables 1-3 include demographic data of only those participants whose records could be matched.

Table 1: Age and gender of participants¹ (n=341)

	Man or Boy	Women or Girl
16 – 24	<1%	0%
25 – 44	4%	13%
45 – 59	19%	33%
60 – 79	11%	17%
80 or over	0%	<1%

¹ Values are rounded so may not sum to 100. Values do not include people who identified in another way or who preferred not to say, as these are low figures and therefore could be disclosive.

Most participants who completed the survey had a long term health condition or a disability:

Table 2: Participants with a disability (n=344)

	%
Disabled	87%
Not Disabled	13%

A high number of participants were also carers for an adult or child friend, relative or partner:

Table 3: Participants who care for someone else (n=335)

	%
Carer	53%
Not Carer	47%

More detailed demographic information on the Experience Panels as a whole can be found online^{2,3}.

The Social Security Experience Panels are not a representative sample of the population. As such, we cannot make assumptions as to the wider applicability of these findings and they may not reflect the views of social security clients in general. The findings of this survey should be taken as reflective only of the group surveyed.

Opening Hours

When would clients need to contact Social Security Scotland?

Participants were asked when they would need to contact Social Security Scotland outside of normal working hours (9am – 5pm).

Half of respondents said that they would want to be able to contact the agency ‘sometimes’, ‘most of the time’ or ‘all of the time’ between 8am and 9am.

² Scottish Government (2017). *Social Security Experience Panels: About Your Benefits and You – Quantitative Research Findings*. [online] Available at: www.gov.scot/Publications/2017/11/7769/0

³ Scottish Government (2018). *Social Security Experience Panels: Who is in the panels and their experiences so far*. [online] Available at: www.gov.scot/Publications/2018/10/3083

Overall, around two thirds (67 per cent) would want to be able to contact the agency after 5pm.

Fewer participants felt that they would want to contact the agency after 8pm, but this still accounted for almost one in five participants (19 per cent).

Table 4 shows participant preferences for contact outside working hours:

Table 4: Need for contact outside core hours⁴ (n=390-408)

Time	All of the time or most of the time (%)	Sometimes (%)	Rarely or Never (%)	Total who would use this service, some, most or all of the time
8am-9am	20%	30%	50%	50%
5pm-6pm	18%	41%	41%	59%
6pm-7pm	15%	32%	53%	47%
7pm-8pm	13%	26%	62%	38%
After 8pm	6%	13%	81%	19%

Those who were under the age of 60 were more likely to want to be able to contact the agency after 5pm than those who were aged over 60 (72 per cent compared to 52 per cent). After 8pm, almost one in four (23 per cent) of those aged under 60 wanted to be able to contact the agency, compared with less than one in ten (9 per cent) of those over the age of 60. Table 5 illustrates this in more detail.

Table 5: Participants who would be likely to contact outside core hours by age some, most or all of the time⁴

Time	Aged under 60	Aged over 60
8am-9am	53%	42%
5pm-6pm	63%	46%
6pm-7pm	51%	32%
7pm-8pm	43%	22%
After 8pm	23%	9%

Carers were slightly more likely to want to be able to contact Social Security Scotland between 8am and 9am (55 per cent compared to 43 per cent of people who do not have caring responsibilities). This was also the case for respondents who were not disabled or living with a long term health condition, compared to those who were (65 per cent compared to 47 per cent). These differences were not as notable after 5pm.

⁴ Values are rounded so may not sum to 100. The number of blank responses for each time slot varied. The percentages for each are calculated based on the number of complete responses, including blanks which ranges from 390 to 408).

We also asked participants if they would need to contact Social Security Scotland on weekends and public holidays (Table 5). More than half (56 per cent) would want to be able to contact Social Security Scotland on a Saturday. Four in ten (41 per cent) would want to be to contact the agency on public holidays and just over one in three (31 per cent) on a Sunday.

Those aged under 60 were more likely to want to be able to contact the agency on a Saturday (59 per cent compared to 43 per cent of those aged over 60), but there was not a notable difference for Sundays or bank holidays for these groups.

Many of the responses from those who would want to be able to contact the agencies on these days fell into the category of ‘sometimes’, rather than ‘all of the time’ or ‘most of the time’, suggesting that this may be a more occasional demand.

Table 5: Need for contact on weekends and public holidays⁵ (n=318-327)

Time	All of the time or most of the time (%)	Sometimes (%)	Rarely or Never (%)	Total who would use this service, some, most or all of the time
Saturdays	15%	41%	44%	56%
Sundays	9%	22%	68%	32%
Public Holidays	11%	30%	58%	41%

Participant Views

Participants were given the option of explaining their choices.

Some participants stressed the need to have a means of contacting the agency outside of normal work hours. This was usually for practical reasons, such as being at work during the day:

“At least some hours outside people’s normal working times”

“It should take account of the fact that people who claim benefits also work full time, or have appointees or carers who do”

Most participants believed that slightly extended hours on evenings and weekends would be suitable:

⁵ Values are rounded so may not sum to 100. The number of blank responses for each time slot varied. The percentages for each are calculated based on the number of complete responses, including blanks which ranges from 318 to 327.

“I understand you can’t be open 24/7. I think 9-5 or 9-6 Monday – Friday would be expectable... [sic]”

“I think later in the day/early evening would suit a lot of people...”

A small minority requested much longer opening hours:

“8am to 10pm Monday to Friday and Saturday/Sunday mornings please...”

A common theme was the need for participants to be able to contact the agency in an emergency situation. Participants gave examples of not receiving a payment on the day it was due, or receiving a letter from DWP on a weekend or public holiday. In these cases, participants felt there was an urgent need to contact the agency to resolve the issue. Some suggested a 24 hour crisis or emergency line would be suitable for these circumstances:

“Sensible hours would be fine – what would be helpful is some kind of crisis line immediately available i.e. 24/7. Phone or online skeleton service would definitely help with the impression of truly providing a welfare safety net.”

“SSS should be responsive to crisis – especially if it impacts upon children or vulnerable people...”

Other participants preferred having at least one contact option available out of hours, even if it was not a phone line:

“If it isn’t possible to have phones manned outwith office hours, a live webchat would be helpful”

On the whole, participants suggested they would be happy with extended Monday – Friday opening hours with some availability on Saturdays and public holidays.

Impact of not being able to contact the agency

A common theme raised by participants was the stress and anxiety caused by receiving communication from DWP by mail on a weekend or the day before a public holiday. Participants were then unable to contact DWP to respond to the letter.

“Getting a letter on Friday saying something must be provided, or your money is being stopped or some other thing when you can’t contact anyone to verify is very stressful”

“...letters sent out arrive on Saturday leaving you anxious all weekend to get issues sorted out...”

“Most of the communication I receive from [...] is either on a Friday and Sat and having to wait over a weekend to phone can be stressful and worrying at times.”

The extended closure over the Christmas period was particularly problematic:

“DWP are in the habit of making sure important decision letters arrive on a Saturday leaving you to worry all weekend, or especially over the xmas/new year periods...”

Participants expressed a strong desire to speak to the agency as soon as possible after receiving a letter in the post. It was suggested that being able to speak to someone at the agency after receiving mail would reduce anxiety and stress.

Other Insights

A number of other themes emerged around the quality and timeliness of responses to participants from DWP. Participants noted a number of cases when they had contacted the Department and upon being asked to leave a voicemail message, were not given a call back.

“If voicemail is used there should be no excuse for not following up on calls and requests as soon as someone is able to respond.”

Other participants commented that being able to solve an issue in a timely manner or avoiding a long wait to speak to someone was more important than being open long hours:

“Opening hours are less important than having someone with the expertise to respond to my query...”

“It is not so much about opening hours, it’s about making sure someone is able to answer the phone or online chat etc. Spent many an unhappy 30-40 mins waiting for phones to be answered”

Participant Preferences for Contacting the Agency

Survey Data

Participants were asked what their preferred method would be for contacting Social Security Scotland (Table 6):

Table 6: Inbound communication preferences⁶

Mode of contact	All of the time or most of the time (%)	Sometimes (%)	Rarely or Never (%)	Total who would use this service, some, most or all of the time
Email	57%	34%	9%	91%
Telephone	57%	29%	12%	87%
Online webchat	30%	34%	36%	64%
Post	24%	38%	38%	62%
In person	25%	37%	38%	62%
SMS / text message	20%	33%	47%	53%
Through social media	8%	17%	76%	24%

Most participants were happy to use a variety of means to contact the agency. Email and telephone were the most popular. Social media was the least popular, with 3 out of 4 participants saying they would rarely or never choose this method.

We also asked participants if they would need to contact the agency through an accessible communication method (Table 7):

Table 7: Inbound accessible communication preferences⁷

Mode of contact	All of the time or most of the time (%)	Sometimes (%)	Rarely or Never (%)
Interpreter	3.9	1.3	94.7
Typetalk	3.4	2.6	93.9
Using a BSL interpreter	4.0	1.1	94.9

⁶ Values are rounded so may not sum to 100.

⁷ Values are rounded so may not sum to 100.

In addition to these communicating needs, we gathered some information about technologies which enables deaf or hard of hearing people to make phone calls. We are re-contacting people who responded saying that they would use this service to clarify how they would use it and which technologies they would use - for example a speech to text device, a mobile phone app or text messaging. We will report on this at a later stage.

Participant views on modes of contact

Most participants were happy to contact the agency by telephone, however many expressed a desire to use online web-chat or email. This was typically for convenience, but there was also a strong theme of wanting communication to be by written means so as to create a record of what was said:

“Everything can be recorded [...] so if there is any issue the document can be easily referred to and looked up”

“Being able to contact Social Security Scotland through email would be most advantageous. It would also enable accurate records to be kept with ease.”

In some cases, the desire to be able to contact the agency digitally was related to accessibility, with a high number of participants commenting on an option to communicate by email or web-chat being more useful to them than face-to-face or telephone:

“Email would be my preference. I struggle to speak on the phone as it worsens my ME symptoms. Online chat would be a fantastic resource...”

“...telephone is quite stressful as my condition can mean finding the correct words is difficult...”

Participants also noted that the move to online communication could pose accessibility issues and that offline methods such as post or telephone should still be offered. Other participants noted that moving online would actually increase accessibility for them:

“Online web-chat would be my preferred option. [...] I do not cope well with going to the office and talking face to face.”

Choice of communication method

Most participants expressed some desire to choose how they contacted Social Security Scotland. The reasoning behind this was the method often had to be suited to their individual needs.

Key factors in choosing a method were the individual's medical condition, their level of comfort in using that particular method, whether they had easy access to that method and the reason they were contacting the agency.

"I think every way of communication should be available to meet the demands of the client base."

Social media was largely seen as being inappropriate for most occasions, and very few participants expressed any desire to contact the agency through this medium.

Other Insights

A number of additional themes were identified as part of the free text responses.

A small number of participants wanted all communication methods to be equal in terms of what you can do through them:

"...the ways should be equal so for example if you choose webchat but then they say oh you have to phone to do that. That is not good..."

Other participants wanted to highlight that written communication must be clear, consistent and avoid confusing the client. Receiving confusing or inaccurate communication from DWP was a cause of worry to some participants, especially if this was received over holiday periods when they were unable to contact the Department.

It was felt that ensuring that communication from the agency as a whole was clear and understandable would go some way to reducing the stress felt by clients. It may also reduce client demand to contact the agency after receiving a letter or email.

Next Steps

We are committed to using the feedback to inform further decision making on how Social Security Scotland provides its services.

That's why the findings from this research have been used to shape decisions about opening hours for the first benefits being delivered by the agency. For example, in line with the findings, Social Security Scotland operates a telephone helpline which is open between 08:00-18:00, Monday to Friday. And some of the preferred contact methods discussed are already available.

Over time, the agency will make as many methods of contact available as so that making contact is as straightforward as it can be. And we will continue to work with the Experience Panel to further inform the development of Scotland's social security agency.

How to access background or source data

The data collected for this social research publication:

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



© Crown copyright 2018

You may re-use this information (excluding logos and images) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/> or e-mail: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

The views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and do not necessarily represent those of the Scottish Government or Scottish Ministers.

This document is also available from our website at www.gov.scot.

ISBN: 978-1-78781-346-5

The Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

Produced for
the Scottish Government
by APS Group Scotland
PPDAS491546 (11/18)
Published by
the Scottish Government,
November 2018



Social Research series
ISSN 2045-6964
ISBN 978-1-78781-346-5

Web and Print Publication
www.gov.scot/socialresearch

PPDAS491546 (11/18)