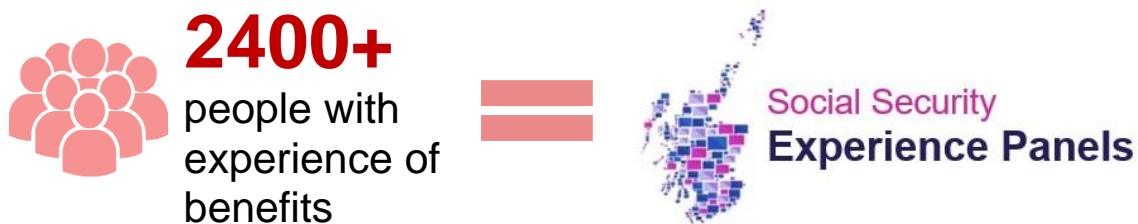# Social Security Experience Panels: Communicating with the agency by phone

Background

The Scottish Government are becoming responsible for some of the benefits currently delivered by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

DWP

⬇

Social Security Scotland

To prepare for this change, the Scottish Government set up the **Social Security Experience Panels.**

2400+ people with experience of benefits = Social Security **Experience Panels**

Experience Panel members all have experience of **claiming at least one of the benefits being devolved to Scotland**.
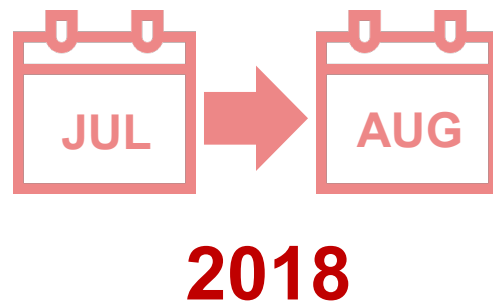
The Scottish Government is working with Experience Panel members to design Scotland's new social security system.

About the research

This report gives the findings of the 'Communicating with Social Security Scotland by phone and paper' research.

2,456 invites

161 survey responses

The research took place in

JUL → AUG

2018

The research explored:

When and why people wanted to contact Social Security Scotland by phone

How long people would wait on hold and how long calls should take

How long people could speak on the phone for

Respondents were between

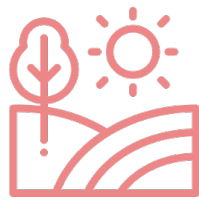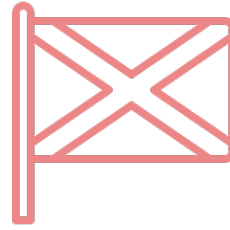**25 – 79** years old

39% Man or boy

62% Woman or girl

66%
lived in an urban location

23%
lived in an rural location

Respondents took part in
30
out of
32
local authority areas

Most survey respondents had a **disability** or **long term health condition**, including:
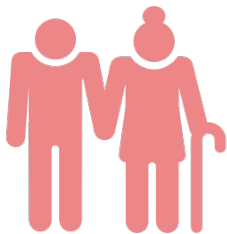
chronic pain

severe hearing impairments

severe visual impairments

other kinds of long term health condition

More than half of survey respondents were

a carer due to **old age,**

a carer to a **child**, or

a carer to an **adult.**

Calling Social Security Scotland

Respondents were asked **why they would want to contact Social Security Scotland by phone**.

Most respondents told us they would like the option to call Social Security Scotland to discuss things at least occasionally.

The **most common reason** to want to call was to **check the status of an application** (just one in ten would never call).

The **least common reason** to call was to **get information about support services** (just over a quarter would never call).

Some reasons for calling the agency were more popular than others.

For example, **half of respondents** said they would want to call the agency to check the status of an application **all or most of the time.**

Respondents had **varied reasons for wanting to do these tasks by phone.**

'I'm happier talking to a person rather than working online'.

'I have complex allergies and other medical conditions that making going into an office to ask for anything out of the question…'

'If I require advice immediately, it's the fastest option…'

'I'm not confident doing things online.'

How can we make it easy to call the agency

We asked respondents how we could make it easy for them to contact Social Security Scotland.

Some respondents told us that **making the call faster** would be most useful:

'Do not have endless menus that lead to a dead end. I want to talk to a person quickly.

'Answer the phone quickly. When a telephone system puts you on hold for an hour and tells you the call is important to them every 30 seconds, it clearly isn't!'

'No long phone queues. Tell me what number I am in the queue and the expected wait time.'

Others felt that having a **polite, well trained and knowledgeable agents** was important.

'Make sure operators are friendly and pleasant.'

'More informed operators as not everyone has the same needs.'

Respondents also felt that the **agency's phone number should be easy to find**.

‘The contact numbers need to be clearly detailed on the website / any correspondence.’

Having **direct numbers to specific departments** within the agency was suggested in order to minimise call time and get through to the right person faster.

‘…allow direct calls to various sections, i.e. decision making, payments, etc. rather than through a general call centre…’
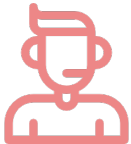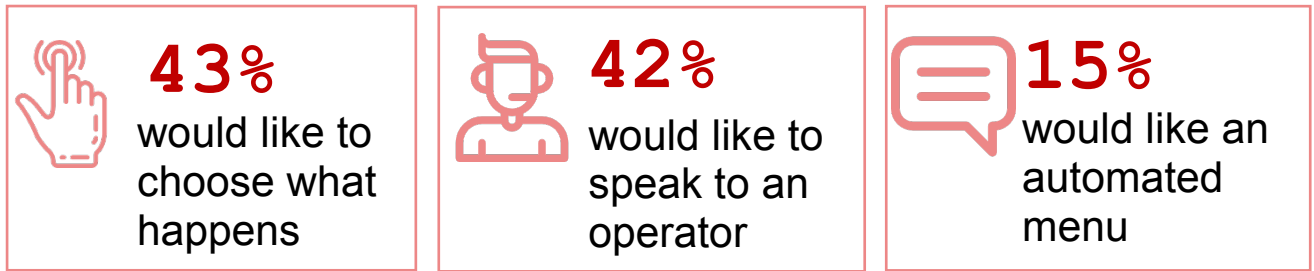
Some respondents felt **being able to speak to the same person about a claim** would be useful.

‘…would be a help if we could always speak to the same person…’

Finally, many respondents said that the **having low cost or free numbers was important in making sure the call was affordable for them.**

We asked respondents what they would want to happen when they called Social Security Scotland*.

| 43% would like to choose what happens | 42% would like to speak to an operator | 15% would like an automated menu |

When clients call the agency, they may be played an automated message telling them essential information that all clients need to know. We asked respondents **how long this message should take** and what they thought about it*.

Around half thought **less than 30 seconds**

Around a quarter thought **less than a minute**

If clients call at a particularly busy time, there may not be any agents available to take their call. We asked respondents **what options they wanted if phone lines were busy*.**

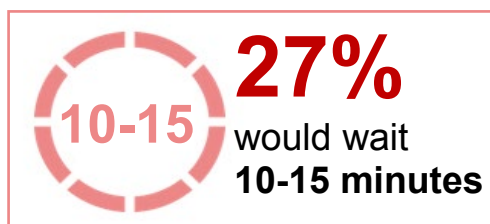| **Four out of five** would like to be able to request a call back | **A quarter** would like to be able to leave a voicemail | **A quarter** would like to be told other ways of contact |

* Respondents were able to select an pre-determined option or to type a free-text entry. Where a participant's free text entry matched an option already listed, these were counted with that option.

Callers to the agency may also decide to wait on hold until an agent is available. We asked respondents **how long they would be willing to wait on hold when calling the agency.**

15%
1 - 2
would wait
1-2 minutes

46%
3 - 5
would wait
3-5 minutes

27%
5 - 10
would wait
5-10 minutes

27%
10-15
would wait
10-15 minutes

'I think a call-back system is better.'

'It would be useful if a voice could tell you where you were in the queue so that we could decide whether to hold or not.'

'…this varies and depends on how urgent your query was. For instance if it was very urgent then you wait as long as need be.'

Just **one in twenty respondents** would wait longer than fifteen minutes.

Some respondents suggested improvements that could be made whilst waiting on hold.

'Please, please have some easy listening music if queued on phone! Music on DWP is so loud with trumpets blasting – I cannot have the phone held to my ear!'

How long should calls take?

We asked respondents **how long they would feel able to talk to Social Security Scotland on the phone on an average day**.

Less than one in ten of respondents said they could talk for **less than 5 minutes**.

Almost three quarters of respondents told us they were able to talk for **longer than 10 minutes.**

Around one fifth of respondents said they would be able to talk for **longer than 30 minutes**.

We also asked respondents **what should happen if a phone call to Social Security Scotland was likely to take longer than they felt able to speak on the phone for**.

16% wanted to call back when they felt able

57% wanted the agency to call them back at an agreed time

11% wanted to finish the conversation as quickly as possible

Other respondents said:

'Don't want to spend a lot of my day phoning people. [I] can speak for as long as necessary but prefer things dealt with quickly.'

'Perhaps follow up with online help, emails, etc. – something you can do at your own pace.'

What's Next

The Scottish Government will continue to work with the Social Security Experience Panels to design and implement Scotland's new social security system.

The findings from this paper will be used to supplement Social Security Scotland's ongoing research into telephony and the client contact experience.

In particular, it will help us consider the way clients first contact the agency. More research will be carried out in future to consider the design and operation of the agencies telephony systems.