



Social Security Scotland
Tèarainteachd Shòisealta Alba



Social Security Research: Child Disability Payment – Early experiences of applicants, staff and partners

Summary report

Dignity,
fairness,
respect.



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Background

Child Disability Payment was the first application-based disability benefit to be launched by Social Security Scotland. It was firstly introduced in three Pilot areas in July 2021 ahead of a nationwide launch in November 2021.¹ The Pilot approach provided the opportunity to start receiving and processing applications at a controlled volume. This aimed to ensure that staff working in a brand new service were able to embed their training by using the new processes and systems at a managed pace, before the volume of activity scaled up at the nationwide launch. The Pilot approach also provided an early opportunity to identify any issues affecting the applicant experience, so that they could be addressed while the number of applicants was still relatively low. This chance to learn lessons and refine processes is in line with the commitment to continuous improvement which underpins the delivery of the social security system in Scotland.

This report presents a summary of findings from research carried out during the Pilot and in the first months of Child Disability Payment's nationwide launch.² The research aimed to identify early insights into what was working well with the new benefit and any areas for improvement ahead of the national roll out and beyond. Alongside other feedback routes and operational information, the findings have been used to refine systems, learning and processes.

Social Security Scotland and Scottish Government researchers carried out:

- 21 interviews with Child Disability Payment applicants
- 19 interviews and six remote observation sessions with Social Security Scotland staff working on tasks relating to Child Disability Payment
- A survey completed by five respondents and four interviews with individuals from partner organisations who support applicants or work with Social Security Scotland.

It is important to note that the findings in this report represent the views of those who took part only.

Selected findings from Social Security Scotland's Client Survey have been included in this report to provide further insight alongside the feedback from applicant interviewees. Results relate to those who said they had applied for or received a decision about Child Disability Payment only. Findings draw on data collected in November-December 2021 and January-February 2022.

¹ From the 26 July 2021, applications were accepted for children living in the Pilot areas of Dundee City, Western Isles and Perth and Kinross. On 22 November 2021, Child Disability Payment launched nationwide to all new applicants living in Scotland.

² The research continued beyond the Pilot period to allow the inclusion of a larger number of Child Disability Payment applicants.

Research with applicants

Learning about Child Disability Payment

Applicant interviewees first heard about Child Disability Payment from a range of sources, including medical professionals, friends and family, and through social media.

Having learned about the benefit, around half of the applicant interviewees said they thought their child would be eligible. Others were not sure. Some were uncertain how their child's age or their wider financial status affected eligibility.

"When we thought about the things we need to do every week compared to other parents we felt fairly sure we'd be eligible."

Applicant interviewee

"No I didn't think I'd get it as thought it would be means-tested. Because I work and my partner works we didn't think we'd get it."

Applicant interviewee

Applying for Child Disability Payment

Most applicant interviewees said completing the application form was straightforward. Several expected it to be more difficult than it had been.

Some parents or carers were not used to considering or recognising how their child's daily life compares to other children of a similar age. This made completing the form an emotional process or difficult to do.

Applicant interviewees typically applied by themselves or with help from other household members only.

Child Disability Payment was the first disability benefit in the UK where applicants could apply online, as well as by phone, post or face-to-face. Most applicant interviewees applied online. Reasons for this included general preference, convenience and it being a familiar way to complete forms. Applying online was described as a positive change from dealing with paper forms.

"I thought it was really quite easy and I expected it to be harder."

Applicant interviewee

Client Survey results for Child Disability Payment applicants show:

84% said that their overall experience of filling in and submitting their application and any supporting information was very good or good.

85% strongly agreed or agreed that 'the application process was clear'.

"I work full time but it's easier for me to obviously pick it up and save it and do it over a couple of nights or a week. That was handy to do it online."

Applicant interviewee

"Now on the forms I'd had previously it was very limited to what you could put in. So for me, it was like a breath of fresh air because I can put down all the information that I need to and I'm not worrying about running out of space or missing out information. I can put it all on the online form."

Applicant interviewee

Applicant interviewees said that the questions in the form were appropriate and allowed them to describe their child's condition and circumstances. Having the opportunity to write more information about their child's circumstances alongside the tick-box questions was felt to be important.

However, some had negative feedback about the form including the questions being too focused on physical disabilities or not feeling relevant. Views varied on whether or not the form was repetitive.

Some applicant interviewees said that providing supporting information was straightforward. Others had to overcome technical challenges to provide this online.

A few described some issues with the processes and communication around getting supporting information from other organisations or Social Security Scotland collecting this on their behalf. This had an impact on the outcome of their application.

Applicant interviewees said they would have liked to have known more about the progress of their application while waiting on the decision.

"Although some of the questions were quite vague and I think disabilities are different, I think a lot of the questions wouldn't fit into a lot of disabilities...you needed those boxes to write about your experience."

Applicant interviewee

"But I felt it was more physical disabilities, rather than mental disabilities, which most of the application form is about which was confusing... I felt at the time that this was the wrong idea that we might be entitled to this, because there are no physical disabilities."

Applicant interviewee

"Give a bit more information about how you go about getting support for it. Because my recollection was you just went on and filled it in yourself. I wasn't aware at the time that you needed the doctor, school or social work or someone else to complete it."

Applicant interviewee

Receiving a decision

Applicant interviewees who had received a Child Disability Payment award generally agreed with the decision they received.

Receiving a Child Disability Payment award was described as “overwhelming” and a relief.

The decision letter was commonly described as straightforward, clear and informative.

However, some who did not receive an award disagreed with the reasoning set out and said the information provided could have been improved. Others also said there could be more information on how the award rate and review point had been decided, and what the review process involves.

The time applicant interviewees waited for a decision varied. Some thought receiving a decision in four to eight weeks was quite quick as they were told it would take around eight weeks when applying. One applicant interviewee who waited several months said the decision “took way too long” and meant they could not buy some items that their child needed.

Client Survey results for Child Disability Payment applicants who had received a decision show:

89% strongly agreed or agreed that they understood the decision.

83% strongly agreed or agreed the decision ‘was explained clearly’.

“[The decision letter] was a lot easier to read and it’s not like a booklet. There was enough information in that letter to understand everything. Nothing missing. The letter wasn’t small but there wasn’t too much information, just enough to understand.”

Applicant interviewee

“It was quite upsetting...It was about two paragraphs long and basically [said] my son’s not disabled enough...I felt like the letter basically just said “your son needs no more care than a normal child his age” and I felt that was a slap in the face because everything I submitted would say that’s not correct.”

Applicant interviewee

Some applicant interviewees reported receiving their first payment days before the decision letter arrived. Most would have preferred to have received the letter first. The money arriving unexpectedly was distressing for some.

However, applicant interviewees mostly said that recurring payments had been arriving as expected.

Experiences of interacting with Social Security Scotland staff

Applicant interviewees described Social Security Scotland staff they had contact with as knowledgeable and helpful. Staff made them feel relaxed, listened to and comfortable.

Feedback about staff was also positive in some cases even where people were unhappy about elements of the process or decision they had received.

However, some said staff provided incorrect or inconsistent information.

"I can't tell you what it means to have someone call to ask if you need support. Everyone I spoke to was so nice. I would recommend people to apply for it."

Applicant interviewee

"So there's the care and mobility [components]. I was trying to figure out what it was for. So I would have liked to have known with the letter first and understand why we were getting the payment."

Applicant interviewee

"I had no problems with the staff whatsoever. It's not the staff that's the issue, it's the process."

Applicant interviewee

"When I have applied for disability benefits in the past the whole time I felt like I wasn't being believed and I was having to push to be believed. And the phone call felt like he wanted us to get the support and he was supporting us to provide any other information that might be helpful. And it felt like he was listening rather than I was trying to prove anything."

Applicant interviewee

Key themes from research with Social Security Scotland staff

The research with Social Security Scotland staff was carried out during the Pilot period. It had a strong focus on identifying areas for improvement which is reflected in the key themes emerging from the research.

Staff participants said their knowledge, confidence and efficiency in completing their tasks was growing as they got more practice at parts of their jobs.

Staff feedback on the training they received was mixed. Many commented that the training was useful. Some said they had to learn more 'on-the-job' with the support of managers and peers.

Participants thought it would have been helpful for guidance to have been finalised before training. Some felt more time to practice using systems would have been useful ahead of working on live cases.

Staff mentioned the importance of using guidance to support them in their role. However, they said the guidance is difficult to navigate and the content could be improved. Participants also suggested it would be useful if the systems and tools used as part of their job could be streamlined, reduced or more integrated.

Staff participants outlined how they had been supported by colleagues to carry out their role.

"Yeah absolutely [the training supported me to carry out my role], I couldn't have done it without the training we got."

Staff participant

"I think we needed more time on the systems in a test environment. I have never used [the case management system] and if I don't go into the systems to see how they function then it doesn't stick. It would be good if we had some proper cases where we could try it out."

Staff participant

"There's a lot of issues with it. I think to be quite honest what we've reported back is it's more of a hindrance than a help. I'm searching and searching, taking up to an hour and a half looking for guidance. Quite a lot is missing so it's a needle in a haystack."

Staff participant

Key points from research with partner organisations

The low number of partner organisation participants limits our ability to identify key themes from this strand of the research. Whilst headline points of feedback are included in this report, please note some were only made by one or two people.

All five respondents to the partner organisation survey got the information they needed or expected from Social Security Scotland about Child Disability Payment.

However, some partner organisation interview participants felt that the information available could be improved and more consistent.

Survey respondents who expected to support people to apply for Child Disability Payment said they would feel confident helping someone to do so.

Interviewees with experience of the Child Disability Payment application form had mixed views about it.

Where are we now?

Alongside wider operational information, this research has offered early insights into what was working well with Child Disability Payment shortly after its launch and helped to identify areas for improvement.

In response to the feedback gathered, a number of changes to the application form and information available to applicants have been introduced.

There have also been improvements to address points raised by Social Security Scotland staff, such as updates to guidance and feedback loops.



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