

Client experiences of re-determinations, appeals and complaints 2024

Summary report

Dignity,
fairness,
respect.

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Background

- This report presents findings from surveys on clients' experience of challenging a decision on their benefits (including both the re-determinations and the appeals processes), Short-term Assistance and the complaint process.
- The separate surveys explored experiences of these processes, including what was working well and what could be improved. The research provides evidence to keep improving Social Security Scotland's service and processes.
- The data covered is mostly from clients who had experience of these processes in 2024 and this report is the first time data from these surveys has been published. These surveys will continue on a rolling basis.
- The results only represent the views of clients who took part in the survey. Results shouldn't be interpreted as being representative of all Social Security Scotland clients.

About the survey respondents

- Surveys on clients' experiences of the re-determinations, appeals and complaints processes were sent to all clients who had experienced these processes in 2024 (and some of 2023).



A total of

1,303

clients who had had a re-determination responded



27

clients who had had an appeal responded



50

clients who had made a complaint responded

- For the surveys on re-determinations and appeals:
 - Over a third (35%) of respondents were aged 55-64, 24% were aged 45-54 and 21% were aged 35-44
 - More than nine in ten respondents (94%) were white
 - More than six in ten (63%) were women and over a third (34%) were men
 - 1% of respondents identified as trans, whereas 96% did not
 - Nearly nine in ten respondents (87%) said they had a lasting physical or mental health condition
 - Nearly nine in ten (87%) said they were heterosexual/straight
 - The vast majority of respondents (88%) had requested a re-determination for Adult Disability Payment. Similarly, most who requested an appeal as well also did so for their Adult Disability Payment
- For the survey on complaints, demographic characteristics of respondents were similar to those of respondents to the surveys on re-determinations and appeals. However, the proportions of women and men who responded were more similar and respondents were most likely to be aged 45-54. Nearly two thirds of respondents who submitted a complaint did so about their Adult Disability Payment.

Re-determinations

Requesting a re-determination

- Almost three quarters of respondents (73%) agreed that it was clear how to ask for a re-determination.
- Nearly three quarters (72%) agreed that they had enough time to do this, but over a quarter (28%) did not feel Social Security Scotland were timely in giving them a decision.
- Almost six in ten (57%) were clear on what the re-determination process would involve.
- Those who found the process unclear spoke about a lack of clear guidance or information – particularly around timescales and supporting information.

Everything was clearly explained to me over the phone. The agents you have are empathetic and patient. They deserve accolades as they reduced my anxiety and educated me at the same time.

Communication and information

- Respondents mostly agreed that the initial letter they received after requesting a re-determination was clear (65%) and that the letter they received explaining the outcome of the re-determination was clear (61%).
- However, nearly a third (32%) did not feel that they were given enough information about what was happening during the process.



I was constantly left hanging with no updates. From sending in the initial application right through to the final decision after re-determination no one ever phoned me to update me or at least let me know what was happening, it was over the space of a year which is a very long time when you're waiting for something so vital. I do think perhaps a check in now and again every other month or so just to update the person would allay a lot of anxiety.

Challenges and barriers

- Over a quarter of respondents (28%) said they faced challenges or barriers when asking Social Security Scotland for a re-determination.

It was generally stressful, and therefore caused a flare up of my condition. There is a lot of fear put around losing current benefit when asking for a re-determination. Also, just the energy required to complete the re-determination and post it was a lot, it would be useful to be able to complete it online as I am physically restricted.

I have mental health issues. The barriers have been communication. You can never talk to anyone and it is very poorly worded for those with a mental illness.

Staff and treatment by Social Security Scotland

Respondents often agreed that...



74% ...they were treated with kindness



67% ...they were were listened to



62% ...staff were knowledgeable

- Just under half (46%) agreed that Social Security Scotland staff supported them throughout their re-determination and/or appeal.
- When asked if Social Security Scotland treated them with dignity and respect during the re-determination process and/or the appeal process, 59% agreed and 21% disagreed.
- When respondents were asked if Social Security Scotland treated them fairly during their re-determination and/or appeal, 50% agreed and 32% disagreed.

Re-determination outcome

- Half of respondents (50%) agreed with the new decision about their case and 41% did not.
- Of those who did not agree, 49% were clear on the next steps to challenge the new decision, whereas 41% were not.
- Respondents who disagreed with their re-determination decision but did not submit an appeal said they had not appealed the decision because they did not think their appeal would be successful (22%), that they did not know they could appeal (15%) or because they thought it would be too difficult (11%).

Whoever did my re-determination did not read any of my evidence, disregarded my illness and symptoms completely and made assumptions unrelated to what I had said. I felt completely dehumanised and broken down by this experience.

Overall experience

- When rating their overall experience of the re-determination process, 48% of respondents answered good or very good and 31% answered poor or very poor. Some themes in the written responses across the survey included:
 - Disagreeing or being dissatisfied with Social Security Scotland policies and decision making processes, especially in relation to assessing disability
 - Many felt they had not been listened to, able to express themselves or treated fairly
 - Lack of communication and updates and the anxiety this causes
 - Many found the process inherently stressful and anxiety provoking
 - Difficulties with supporting information, including gathering this or it not being handled or reviewed effectively
 - Errors made by Social Security Scotland
 - Positive comments tended to focus on interactions with staff where they were kind and helpful

I feel like it helped when the lady called me to ask questions about my child's condition because it felt personal and also that my child mattered. Thank you.

Appeals

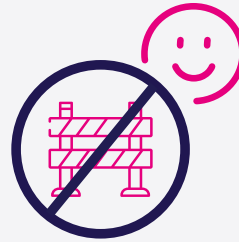
Requesting an appeal

- Over six in ten respondents agreed that it was clear how to ask for an appeal.
- Those who found the process unclear spoke of not being given enough information, being given conflicting information and being unclear on or unhappy about appeal policies and processes.
- Almost six in ten respondents got help with filling out the appeal form, most often from a welfare rights adviser, a charity or third sector organisation or a family member or friend.

Communication and information

- Just under half of respondents said that they had accessed information to help them understand the appeal process. This tended to be general online information or third sector and local authority advice services (such as Citizens Advice Bureau).
- Just over half of survey respondents found that the letter they received from Social Security Scotland explaining the impact of the appeal outcome on their benefit/s was clear.

Challenges and barriers



Nearly three quarters of survey respondents said that they did not face any challenges or barriers when asking for an appeal.



Those who did spoke of health conditions, long timescales, lack of communication, deadlines missed by Social Security Scotland and poor staff knowledge.

The advisor was clueless, the length of time it took and the fact my appeal was somehow done before my change of circumstances which had been sent in twice, both a year before the appeal was sent in.

Appeal outcome

Nearly six in ten survey respondents agreed with the Tribunal's decision once the appeal was complete and they were told of the outcome.



- Nearly half of respondents who did not agree said that they were not clear on what steps they could take to challenge the decision and just over a third said that they were clear on this.

Overall experience

- Respondents said that their overall experience was either good or very good or poor or very poor in equal proportions.
- When asked to make suggestions for improvement or further comments about their overall experience, respondents spoke about:
 - Being unhappy about the long timescales of the appeals process
 - Not being showed empathy or understanding throughout the process
 - A few spoke about staff manner, stating that Social Security Scotland staff could be rude
 - Some mentioned that the appeal process was stressful and anxiety provoking

Believe the person, not paperwork.

Have been waiting 18 months for the appeal process this has now been rescheduled for another 6 weeks, all information had been given to Social Security Scotland but at the last hearing the representative from Social Security Scotland stated they had not read the notes on the case so needed more information.

Short-term Assistance

Awareness and knowledge

- Awareness of Short-term Assistance payments amongst survey respondents appeared to be poor, with only 9% saying that they knew about the payments.
- Of those who had been aware of Short-term Assistance, 28% agreed that knowing about the payments had encouraged them to request a re-determination.
- Respondents were asked what they found unclear about Short-term Assistance. The vast majority said they were unaware that it existed. Others said information about Short-term Assistance was difficult to understand, particularly around eligibility criteria. Some mentioned that staff did not have good knowledge about this payment.

No idea about it. When you open a letter in fear and get rejected you don't tend to read or want to read the rest, your fate is sealed.

Experience of receiving Short-term Assistance

- Only 4% of survey respondents applied for Short-term Assistance and 76% of these respondents went on to receive payments.
- Most respondents spoke positively of receiving payments, often describing the impact the payment had had on their lives or saying that the process of applying for and receiving the payment was straightforward. A few mentioned that they had issues with their payments – with these either being missed or being the wrong amount.

Over half agreed that they felt financially supported when receiving payments during the re-determination process.



Complaints

Submitting a complaint

- Reasons for complaints included long wait times for decisions on cases, treatment by staff, poor communication or Social Security Scotland policies and processes.
- Slightly more respondents agreed rather than disagreed that it was clear how to make a complaint and easy to do so.
- Respondents said the process was unclear because they were not updated on progress, because they had difficulties submitting a complaint or because information around the process was lacking or conflicting. Many felt their complaint was not taken seriously.

When submitting the complaint online, it was not at all clear whether or not my complaint had been submitted: there was no acknowledgment email and no reference number displayed.

I had no idea what stage the complaint was at and what the outcome would be.



Communication and information

- Nearly six in ten respondents disagreed that the letter acknowledging and detailing their complaint was clear and accurate and that the letter explaining the outcome of the complaint was clear.
- Nearly two thirds disagreed that they were given enough information by Social Security Scotland about what was happening during the complaints process.



6 in 10

For those who received a call about their complaint, over six in ten said they were treated with kindness, that the call was useful, that the staff member they spoke to was knowledgeable about the complaint process and that staff listened to them.

- Respondents were asked if there was anything that could have improved communication. Respondents most often wanted improvements to the level and quality of communication and updates – particularly given that it was difficult to contact Social Security Scotland. Some said the information they did receive was unclear or lacking in detail. A few spoke about wanting improvements in how staff treated them and in staff knowledge. Some felt they were not listened to or understood, whereas others felt staff could not cater to their accessibility needs.

Any and all communication from your side. You ring once and hang up. Don't leave any contact details. Don't have an email address. I have to try to convince people who are already overwhelmed to sit on hold for an hour just to start a conversation with you. Then, half the time the phone gets cut off and you don't phone back. So frustrating.

My views and facts were deliberately ignored as if I had not made any contact.

Challenges and barriers

- Over two thirds of respondents said they faced challenges or barriers when making a complaint due to communication issues.
- Many spoke of long wait times on the phone line or web chat, the available methods of communication not being accessible and a lack of quality information and updates.

Wait time for live chat was HOURS.
There was also no way to contact Social Security Scotland by email, meaning I had to type a letter, struggle to a friend's house to print it, struggle to a post box to post it.

Complaint outcome

Half of respondents disagreed that they were happy with the amount of time it took Social Security Scotland to get back to them with a resolution.



An equal amount of respondents said they were satisfied with how their complaint was resolved as those that said they were not.

Nearly three quarters of respondents who were not satisfied with the resolution said they were not clear on the next steps for taking their complaint further.



Overall experience

- When asked if Social Security Scotland treated them with dignity and respect and treated them fairly, half or slightly less of respondents disagreed.
- When asked to rate their overall experience of the complaint process, nearly six in ten respondents said it was poor or very poor.
- When asked to make suggestions for improvement or further comments about their overall experience, respondents spoke about:
 - ✓ Wanting improved communication and updates
 - ✓ Wanting shorter timescales for complaints
 - ✓ Being unhappy with general Social Security Scotland policies and processes as well as those involved in making a complaint
 - ✓ Being dissatisfied with how complaints were resolved

Regular updates on the stages of the complaint. An update on timescales of dealing with the complaint. Improvement in staff not trying to close the complaint down at the first point of contact. Perhaps this is to assist with metrics for reporting monitoring information to the government.

My complaint was upheld but I was told they wouldn't do anything about it which to me is not a resolution.





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