



Social Security Scotland
Tèarainteachd Shòisealta Alba

Social Security Panels Research: Opening hours





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1. Executive Summary

From November to December 2021, Client Panel and Experience Panel members took part in a survey which included questions about opening hours. We asked respondents how often they might need to contact Social Security Scotland at different times outside the current hours of 8am to 6pm, Monday to Friday. We asked this about each of the three ways a client can get in touch with Social Security Scotland: telephone; web chat; and an appointment with a local adviser. A total of 525 panel members completed the survey. This report presents the results from the questions. Below is a summary of the key findings.

Overall, a clear majority of respondents said they would ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ need to contact Social Security Scotland outside of the current opening hours. For most slots outside the current times, 75% or more of respondents said they would ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ need to get in touch across each of the available contact methods. For example, around three-quarters of respondents would ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ need to make contact after 7pm by phone (77%) or web chat (76%). Just over four in five (82%) said the same about needing an appointment with an adviser in their local area.

A sizeable minority of respondents said they would ‘sometimes’ need to contact Social Security Scotland in each slot outside of the current opening times. This ranged from around 10% to 30% across all contact methods respondents might use to get in touch. Saturday was the slot that respondents most often said they would ‘sometimes’ need to get in touch. For example, around one in three respondents (31%) said they would ‘sometimes’ need to contact Social Security Scotland by phone on Saturdays. This figure was around a quarter for web chat (24%) and appointments with an adviser in the local area (23%).

Only between 2% and 8% of respondents said they would have a need to contact Social Security Scotland ‘all’ or ‘most of the time’ in any slot outside the current opening hours. For each of the ways to get in touch, the 6-7pm option was the most commonly needed. For phone, 8% of respondents said they needed this slot ‘all’ or

‘most of the time’. A similar proportion (7%) said they needed this slot when using web chat. Lastly, 5% said they would need an appointment with an adviser in their local area at this time.

The proportion needing each slot ‘all’ or ‘most of the time’ was generally similar across different groups of people. However, in a small number of cases there was a notable difference found between groups. These related to age and whether respondents lived in an urban or rural area. Younger respondents were more likely to say they would need to contact Social Security Scotland by web chat or by speaking with an adviser in their local area in the evening. Respondents living in a rural area were more likely to say they would need to contact Social Security Scotland on Sundays and public holidays ‘all’ or ‘most of the time’ when using web chat.

Respondents were asked if there was anything they wanted to tell us about when they need to get in touch with Social Security Scotland. Around 35 respondents left comments about why additional opening hours might be helpful for clients. The main themes were similar to those found by previous research with Experience Panels in 2018. These were:

- Additional hours in the evenings and at weekends could help clients who work or have caring responsibilities during current hours.
- A small number of respondents said it was important to be able to contact staff at all times or 24/7.
- A few respondents said that if they received a communication about their benefits on a Friday or Saturday, they might feel anxious if they had to wait until Monday morning to speak to staff.
- Lastly, some respondents said that an option to get in touch in emergency situations would be helpful.

Around 20 respondents left comments about telephone experiences. The most frequently mentioned topic was call waiting times. There were also suggestions about options for different ways to get in touch such as a call back service or an online portal.

What's Next?

Social Security Scotland and the Scottish Government will continue to work with the Client and Experience Panels to make sure the social security system works for the people of Scotland.

The results from this research have been shared with senior managers who deliver the telephony, web chat, and Local Delivery service to clients. Social Security Scotland will review the findings and decide whether any change in opening hours is needed at this stage. We will also consider repeating this research in the coming years to monitor whether opening hours are meeting clients' needs. The research team will keep panel members informed of any decisions or further research about opening hours through our regular newsletters.

2. Background and methodology

2.1. Background

Clients can get in touch with Social Security Scotland in different ways. Since the agency opened in 2018, clients have been able to get in touch via telephone Monday to Friday, 8am to 6pm. There were temporary disruptions to the telephony service due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. There was a gradual return from July 2020 with the full service returned by March 2021.

The web chat service was introduced in May 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Members of the public can chat with an adviser via the mygov.scot webpage. Operating hours are Monday to Friday from 8am to 6pm.

Since late November 2021, Social Security Scotland have also had specially trained advisers based within every local authority in Scotland. These advisers can help people to apply for benefits and answer queries. People can phone Social Security Scotland to book an appointment to meet with an adviser. The appointment could be at a venue within their local community, at their home, by video call or telephone. This is called Social Security Scotland's Local Delivery service.

2.2. Previous research

In 2018, ahead of Social Security Scotland opening, research was carried out with the Experience Panels to explore needs and views on getting in touch with Social Security Scotland.¹ The Experience Panels were established in 2017 to help design a social security system that works for the people of Scotland. Members have experience of at least one of the benefits delivered by the Department for Work and Pensions that have, or will, come to Scotland.

¹ Social Security Experience Panels: Agency opening hours (2018):
<https://www.gov.scot/publications/social-security-experience-panels-agency-opening-hours/>

The Experience Panels opening hours research asked respondents if they would need to contact Social Security Scotland outside standard working hours, 9am to 5pm. This research focused on the times respondents needed to make contact in general, rather than by particular methods. It separately asked respondents about the ways they would like to get in touch. Below is a summary of the key findings related to opening times.

The report shows when respondents said they would want to be able to contact Social Security Scotland 'sometimes', 'most of the time' or 'all of the time'. This was:

- Half (50%) of respondents for between 8am and 9am
- Two-thirds (67%) for after 5pm
- A fifth (19%) for after 8pm
- More than half of respondents (56%) on Saturdays, four in ten (41%) on public holidays and one in three (31%) on Sundays.

Respondents under the age of 60 were more likely to want to be able to contact Social Security Scotland after 5pm and on Saturdays.

Respondents with caring responsibilities and non-disabled respondents were slightly more likely to want to be able to contact Social Security Scotland between 8am and 9am.

The survey carried out in late 2021 was an updated version of this research designed to assess how far Social Security Scotland's current opening hours met the needs of current and future clients. The questions were updated to ask how often people need to get in touch outside the current opening hours using different contact methods.

2.3. Methodology

From November to December 2021, all Client Panel and Experience Panel members were invited to take part in a survey about the location and working times of Social Security Scotland staff. Established in 2020, the Client Panels are made up of

people who have applied for or received a payment from Social Security Scotland and opted into taking part in research. Researchers speak to panel members to find out what people's experience of Social Security Scotland has been like. This research was conducted with both panels to get the views of people with experience both of current (Client Panels) and future (Experience Panels) Social Security Scotland benefits.

Respondents were asked if and when they would need to contact Social Security Scotland via phone, web chat and the Local Delivery service outside the current opening hours. Results of questions about the working location of Social Security Scotland staff have been published in a separate report.²

A total of 525 panel members completed the survey. This represents a response rate of around 10%. Table 2.1 shows more Client Panel members (307) than Experience Panel members (218) took part.

Table 2.1: Survey responses

Panel	Total
Client Panels	307
Experience Panels	218
Total	525

2.4. Demographic characteristics of respondents

Where possible, information provided by respondents in the survey was matched to demographic information supplied previously. This allows us to present the information below to give context to the findings from the survey. Linking was not possible where there was missing or unclear information.

Around two-thirds of survey respondents identified as women (67%) and around a third identified as men (32%). Similar to the population of Scotland, most

² Social Security Panels Research: Working location of staff (2022):
<https://www.socialsecurity.gov.scot/reporting/publications/social-security-panels-research-working-location-of-staff-report>

respondents lived in an urban area (84%).³ Likewise, the vast majority of respondents were white (93%).⁴ Overall, two-fifths of respondents were aged between 45 and 59 (40%). Around a third were aged 44 and under (35%). People aged 60 and over accounted for a quarter of responses (25%). Around six in ten respondents (61%) had a disability or long-term health condition. More than half of respondents (60%) had caring responsibilities. Further demographic information about the respondents can be found in Annex A.

2.5. Analysis and understanding results

The results presented in this report only represent the views of the Experience Panel and Client Panel members who took part in the project. Results should not be interpreted as being representative of Social Security Scotland's current or future client base as a whole.

Results were examined for differences across a range of demographic characteristics, such as age and whether respondents have a long-term health condition. Notable differences in answers between groups are highlighted in the report. It isn't possible to test whether this reflects a difference between these groups beyond the survey respondents. This is because the survey was not completed by a representative sample of benefit recipients.

Results for each question shown in the report exclude any respondents who were either filtered out of the question or who left the response blank. Results in the report are rounded to the nearest whole number. This means tables may not add up to 100%.

Quotations are taken from comments left by respondents in open-text questions and have the label (Client Panel or Experience Panel respondent). Edits to spelling and grammar were made as appropriate.

³ National Records of Scotland's latest estimate is that around 17% of people in Scotland lived in rural areas in mid-2020: [Mid-2020 Small Area Population Estimates, Report \(nrscotland.gov.uk\)](https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/mid-2020-small-area-population-estimates-report)

⁴ The 2011 Census found that 96% of Scotland's population was white: [Ethnicity | Scotland's Census \(scotlandscensus.gov.uk\)](https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/ethnicity)

3. Getting in touch with Social Security Scotland

Respondents were asked to say how often, if ever, they would need to get in touch by phone, web chat or via an appointment with the Local Delivery service outside of current opening hours. Tables 3.1 to 3.3 show the results.

Table 3.1: Contact via phone (n=509-515)

	All of the time	Most of the time	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Before 8am	2%	1%	11%	32%	54%
6pm - 7pm	3%	5%	25%	35%	33%
After 7pm	2%	3%	18%	31%	46%
Saturdays	2%	4%	31%	28%	35%
Sundays	1%	2%	19%	25%	52%
Public Holidays	2%	2%	25%	33%	38%

Table 3.2: Contact via web chat (n=507-512)

	All of the time	Most of the time	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Before 8am	3%	2%	12%	27%	57%
6pm - 7pm	3%	3%	22%	30%	41%
After 7pm	3%	2%	19%	28%	49%
Saturdays	2%	2%	24%	27%	44%
Sundays	2%	1%	17%	23%	57%
Public Holidays	2%	2%	18%	27%	51%

Table 3.3: Contact via Local Delivery (n=502-509)

	All of the time	Most of the time	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Before 8am	1%	1%	9%	29%	59%
6pm - 7pm	2%	3%	20%	35%	41%
After 7pm	1%	3%	14%	31%	51%
Saturdays	1%	2%	23%	31%	43%
Sundays	1%	1%	15%	26%	58%
Public Holidays	1%	2%	18%	29%	51%

Overall, a clear majority of respondents said they would 'rarely' or 'never' need to contact Social Security Scotland outside of the current opening hours. This applied to all suggested times and days across each of the available contact methods. For most slots outside the current times, 75% or more of respondents said they would 'rarely' or 'never' need to get in touch by phone, web chat or through a local adviser.

For example, three-quarters of respondents would 'rarely' or 'never' need to make contact after 7pm by phone (77%) or web chat (76%). Just over four in five (82%) said the same about needing an appointment with an adviser in their local area.

The proportion 'rarely' or 'never' needing to make contact by phone was slightly lower in relation to the 6-7pm option (67%) and Saturdays (64%). However, it is still notable that two-thirds of people did not expect to need these options for getting in touch with Social Security Scotland.

A sizeable minority of respondents said they would 'sometimes' need to contact Social Security Scotland in each slot outside of the current opening times. This is in line with the findings from the previous research conducted with Experience Panels on this topic and applied to all three ways to get in touch. Saturday was the slot that respondents most often said they would 'sometimes' need to get in touch. For example, around one in three respondents (31%) said they would 'sometimes' need to contact Social Security Scotland by phone on Saturdays. This figure was around a quarter for web chat (24%) and appointments with an adviser in the local area (23%).

Only a small proportion of respondents said they would need to contact Social Security Scotland 'all' or 'most of the time' for any slot outside the current opening hours. The next chapter looks more closely at these findings.

4. Need for extended hours all or most of the time

This chapter looks more closely at the answers from the small group of respondents who said they had a more regular need for extended opening hours.

4.1. Overall need for extended hours

The proportions saying that they would need to get in contact at a particular time or on a certain day 'all' or 'most of the time' have been combined in the analysis below. This helps us understand whether the current opening hours represent a barrier for some people being able to contact Social Security Scotland when they need to.

The combined proportion needing each option for each of the three contact methods is shown in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Proportion of respondents who would need to contact Social Security Scotland all or most of the time outside current opening hours for different contact methods
Column percentages (n=502-515)

	Phone (n=509-515)	Web chat (n=507-512)	Local Delivery (n=502-509)
Before 8am	3%	4%	3%
6pm - 7pm	8%	7%	5%
After 7pm	5%	5%	4%
Saturdays	5%	5%	3%
Sundays	4%	3%	2%
Public Holidays	4%	4%	2%

For each of the ways to get in touch, the 6-7pm option was the most commonly needed. For phone, 8% of respondents said they needed this slot 'all' or 'most of the time'. A similar proportion (7%) said they needed this slot when using web chat. Lastly, 5% said would need an appointment with an adviser in their local area at this time. For the other options, the proportion of respondents who needed each timeslot or day 'all' or 'most of the time' was typically between 3% and 5%.

4.2. Differences between groups

Results from the survey were also examined to understand if the need for extended opening hours differed between demographic groups.

The proportion of respondents across groups, for example disabled and non-disabled respondents, who would need each of the options ‘all’ or ‘most of the time’ was generally similar. This suggests that the existing opening hours across each contact method are largely suitable for most respondents regardless of demographic characteristics. There were only a small number of cases where the proportion needing a particular option differed by five percentage points or more between groups. These related to age and whether respondents lived in an urban or rural area, as summarised below.

Younger respondents were more likely to say they would need to contact Social Security Scotland by web chat or by speaking with an adviser in their local area in the evening (Table 4.2).

Table 4.2: Proportion of respondents in different age groups who would need to contact Social Security Scotland outside current opening hours ‘all’ or ‘most of the time’ – selected results
Column percentages

Contact method and time slot	16-44 (n=155-157)	45-59 (n=179-181)	60+ (n=108-110)
By web chat: 6-7pm	11%	6%	3%
By web chat: After 7pm ⁵	6%	6%	2%
Through an appointment with a local adviser: 6-7pm	9%	5%	1%
Through an appointment with a local adviser: After 7pm	7%	3%	1%

⁵ Unrounded figures show the underlying difference between respondents aged 16-44 and those aged 60+ is 5 percentage points.

Just over a tenth (11%) of respondents aged 16-44 said they would need to use web chat between 6pm and 7pm 'all' or 'most of the time'. This compared to 6% of 45-49 year olds and 3% of those aged 60 and over.

Respondents living in a rural area were more likely to say they would need to contact Social Security Scotland on Sundays and public holidays 'all' or 'most of the time' when using web chat (Table 4.3).

Table 4.3: Proportion of respondents living in urban and rural areas who would need to contact Social Security Scotland outside current opening hours 'all' or 'most of the time' – selected results
Column percentages

Contact method and time slot	Urban (n=401-402)	Rural (n=79-80)
By web chat: Sundays	2%	8%
By web chat: Public holidays	3%	9%

Among respondents living in a rural area, 8% said they would need to make contact on Sundays, compared to 2% of those from an urban area. For public holidays, 9% of respondents living in a rural area would need to make contact, compared to 3% of those in urban areas.

4.3. Comparing need for extended hours to previous research

The results in this report focus on respondents who said they would need to make contact outside current opening hours 'all' or 'most of the time' only.

The report on the Experience Panels research in 2018 took a slightly different approach. The results took into account respondents who said they would 'sometimes' need to get in touch outside of standard working hours. This included when results were examined for differences between demographic groups. This research also focused on the times respondents needed to make contact in general rather than looking at times using different contact methods.

The difference in approach reflects that the previous project was designed to understand general demand to help inform the design of Social Security Scotland services. This time, the research looked at how far the existing service meets client's needs. This helps us understand where there may be regular unmet needs or barriers to people getting in contact with Social Security Scotland.

Taken together, the differences in the data collected and analytical approach mean that results from the latest survey cannot be directly compared to the findings shown in the 2018 Experience Panels report. A summary of the key points from the 2018 research and a link to the report is provided in Section 2.2.

5. Respondents' comments

Respondents were asked if there was anything they wanted to tell us about when they need to get in touch with Social Security Scotland. Around one in six respondents left comments covering a range of themes about making contact. Most of those who left comments didn't indicate a need for any of the options for extended opening hours 'all' or 'most of the time'.

5.1. Comments about opening hours

Around two in five of the respondents who left comments gave reasons why additional opening hours might be helpful for clients. The main themes were similar to those found by the previous research with Experience Panels.

The most frequently mentioned theme related to additional hours in the evenings and at weekends. Respondents mentioned that being at work or having caring responsibilities could make it difficult to get in touch during current hours. A couple of respondents said that Saturday mornings might be a particularly helpful addition.

"Most people have kids that's why it may be easier for parents to talk after bedtime." **Client Panel respondent**

"Due to my personal circumstances (caring responsibilities) it is not always possible to make calls etc. during normal working hours, so having the option of speaking to someone in the evenings or at weekends would be helpful." **Client Panel respondent**

"Saturday 8am to 2pm might work for working clients." **Experience Panel respondent**

As in the previous research, a small number of respondents said it was important to be able to contact staff at all times or 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.



“It now needs to be available to fit current patterns, shifts, 9am to 5pm, weekends. We all live 24 hour patterns.” **Client Panel respondent**

“They should be open for full service 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. I work around the clock myself and my unpaid caring role is 24/7.” **Experience Panel respondent**

Some respondents said that if they received a communication about their benefits on a Friday or Saturday, they might feel anxious if they had to wait until Monday morning to speak to staff. The timing of communications was also raised by Experience Panel respondents in the previous research. They had also described the potential for stress or anxiety if they are unable to get in touch with the Department of Work and Pensions to resolve issues or respond to queries promptly.

“If mail or email arrives on Friday or Saturday and I need to find out information then I should be able to contact someone at the weekend or evening.” **Client Panel respondent**

“The only time I’d need to contact you outside of normal hours is if I receive a confusing/scary/intimidating letter late on a Friday or on a Saturday then I have to spend the weekend or public holiday feeling scared and anxious until you’re open again so I can contact you. If I get a letter on a Saturday, I need to have to option to contact you the same day. If this isn’t an option, then you need to be careful about when the letters you send will arrive.” **Experience Panel respondent**

“From experience often Department of Work and Pension letters arrived on a Saturday and a service of limited staff working 10am to 4pm would have been helpful as worrying all weekend then Monday mornings [were] always busy to resolve the benefit enquiry. Same applies to public holiday closures [where] a limited phone service would be helpful.” **Experience Panel respondent**

Lastly, respondents said that an option to get in touch in emergency situations would be helpful. These respondents said that it was important for clients to be able to get in touch with Social Security Scotland in urgent or extraordinary circumstances.

“I hope that I would never need to get in touch with Social Security Scotland urgently out of hours but it would be useful if there was an emergency option.”
Client Panel respondent

“There should always be someone available in situations such as bereavement or where someone is in desperate need of funds but otherwise current arrangements seem adequate to me.” **Client Panel respondent**

5.2. Other comments about getting in touch

Some respondents left comments about their experience of calling Social Security Scotland. The most frequently mentioned topic was call waiting times. Some said they had experienced long wait times whilst others merely emphasised the importance of keeping queues as short as possible for clients. There were a couple of suggestions for an estimated waiting time to be provided at the start of a call.

“More phone staff; can take a long time to speak to members of staff.” **Client Panel respondent**

“I think 8am to 6pm is a fair opening as long as the lines are adequately staffed.”
Experience Panel respondent

Other topics mentioned in relation to telephone communication were: requests for shorter or no recorded messages or automated menus and views on the type and volume of music while on hold.

There were also comments from respondents about options for additional ways to get in touch with Social Security Scotland. Suggestions included: an online portal; a call back service; a messaging service to allow clients to leave a message; and wider use of video calls.



“I would like an option to send an email (or leave a message) so that Social Security Scotland can contact me when they're available rather than me queueing in the web chat queue for ages.” **Experience Panel respondent**

“Having the facility of an email and answering machine service response system should and would take care of any and all out of hours contacts.” **Client Panel respondent**

6. What's next?

Social Security Scotland and the Scottish Government will continue to work with the Client and Experience Panels to make sure the social security system works for the people of Scotland.

The results from this research have been shared with senior managers who deliver the telephony, web chat, and Local Delivery service to clients. Social Security Scotland will review the findings and decide whether any change in opening hours is needed at this stage. We will also consider repeating this research in the coming years to monitor whether opening hours are meeting clients' needs. The research team will keep panel members informed of any decisions or further research about opening hours through our regular newsletters.

Annex A: Survey respondent characteristics tables

This Annex presents a summary of respondents' demographic characteristics. Some results have been suppressed where the number of respondents in a category is fewer than 5. This is shown by * in the tables. So the suppressed figure cannot be calculated from other values shown, the next smallest category has also been suppressed in the table.

Table A1: Gender (n=479)

Response options	All respondents
Men	32%
Women	67%
Prefer not to say	*
Other	*

Table A2: Age (n=462)

Response options	All respondents
Under 44	35%
45-59	40%
60-79	25%
80+	*
Prefer not to say	*

Table A3: Caring responsibility (n=479)

	All respondents
Has caring responsibilities	60%
No caring responsibilities	37%
Prefer not to say	3%



Table A4: Disability (n=480)

Response options	All respondents
Has a physical or mental health condition	61%
No condition	35%
Prefer not to say	4%

Table A5: Geographical location (n=494)

Response options	All respondents
Urban	84%
Rural	16%

Table A6: Ethnicity (n=435)

Response options	All respondents
White	93%
Minority Ethnic	*
Prefer not to say	*



Table A7: Client Panels respondents' benefit experience (n=287-293)

Response options	All respondents
Carer's Allowance Supplement	57%
Best Start Foods/Grant	37%
Scottish Child Payment	34%
Child Winter Heating Assistance	10%
Funeral Support Payment	5%
Young Carer Grant	2%
Job Start Payment	-

Table A8: Experience Panels respondents' benefit experience (n=191-194)

Response options	All respondents
Personal Independence Payment	74%
Disability Living Allowance	60%
Carer's Allowance	35%
Winter Fuel Payment	31%
Cold Weather Payment	31%
Attendance Allowance	22%
Discretionary Housing Payment	21%
Universal Credit	19%
Severe Disablement Allowance	18%
Scottish Welfare Fund	18%

How to access background or source data

The data collected for this report:

- ☐ are available in more detail through Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics
- ☐ are available via an alternative route
- ☒ may be made available on request, subject to consideration of legal and ethical factors. Please contact ResearchRequests@socialsecurity.gov.scot for further information.
- ☐ cannot be made available by Scottish Government for further analysis as Scottish Government is not the data controller.

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