



Social Security Scotland
Tèarainteachd Shòisealta Alba



Social Security Panels Research – Working location of staff

Summary report

Dignity,
fairness,
respect.



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Background

Like many organisations, the majority of Social Security Scotland's staff have been mostly working from home during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Social Security Scotland is now designing and testing plans for the future working location of staff. This report presents a summary of results from a survey with Client Panel and Experience Panel members to gather views about interacting with staff working in different locations.

The Client Panels are made up of Social Security Scotland clients from across Scotland. Researchers speak to panel members to find out what people's experience of Social Security Scotland has been like. 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.

The survey covered three main themes:

- Experiences of recent communication with Social Security Scotland
- If it is important to know whether staff are working in an office or at home
- Views about speaking to and sharing personal information with staff working at home and in an office.

The survey took place between November and December 2021. In total, 525 panel members took part in the survey (a response rate of around 10%).

The results only represent the views of the panel members who took part in the survey. Results shouldn't be interpreted as being representative of all Social Security Scotland clients.

Staff Location

Knowing staff location

All respondents were asked if it was important to them to know where staff are working from when they contact Social Security Scotland.

A third (33%) of respondents said it was important for them to know where staff are working from. Another third (33%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that it was important. The final third (34%) said they neither agreed nor disagreed.

Older respondents and those with a disability or long-term health condition were more likely to say they agreed or strongly agreed that it was important to know where staff were working from.

Location preference

Respondents were asked to imagine contacting Social Security Scotland for seven different reasons. Respondents were asked whether they would prefer to speak with Social Security Scotland staff working at home or in an office in each case.

A clear majority of respondents said they do not mind where staff they might speak with are working for all of the proposed scenarios. However, a substantial proportion of respondents did express a preference to speak with staff based in an office in each case. This ranged from:

- one in ten when seeking general advice or information (11%), to
- one in three when challenging a decision (32%) or making a complaint (33%).

	Strongly prefer/prefer staff in an office
Getting advice or general information	11%
Getting an update about my application or payment	22%
To discuss a bereavement	23%
Updating my information or a change in circumstances	24%
Making an application	26%
Challenging a decision about an application	32%
Making a complaint	33%

Personal and identifying information

Data privacy

All respondents from both panels were asked how much they agreed that when talking with Social Security Scotland staff they:

- would feel confident discussing their personal information
- trusted their personal information would be kept private.

Fewer respondents agreed with each statement in the context of staff working at home. Older respondents and those with a disability or long-term health condition were more likely to disagree or strongly disagree with the statements in relation to staff working from home.

Identifying information

Only three per cent of respondents said they would have concerns about staff viewing identifying information about them whilst working in an office. In contrast, 22% would be concerned about staff viewing such information when working at home.

Agree or strongly agree that they would feel confident discussing personal information with staff:

In an office
82%

At home
65%

Agree or strongly agree that that personal information would be kept private when speaking with staff:

In an office
86%

At home
73%

Sensitive topics

Most respondents said they would feel comfortable discussing any topics with staff in either location. However, almost one in five (18%) said there was something they would not feel comfortable discussing with staff working at home. This fell to 7% of respondents if they were speaking to staff who were office-based.

Some respondents mentioned specific topics that they would feel uncomfortable discussing with staff working at home. These were:

- health and medical issues
- financial or banking information.

"I'd be cautious about discussing personal health information as I couldn't be sure about who might hear it."

Experience Panel respondent

"Finances, extent of my physical and mental disability and giving personal information."

Experience Panel respondent

Key themes from respondent comments

Respondents were also able to provide comments to explain or expand on their views throughout the survey. Respondents often made similar points across different sections of the survey, so comments provided were analysed together.

Knowing staff location

A number of respondents said they would like to know where staff were based during interactions. Some said that this kind of transparency builds trust with clients. Others said that knowing location could help them make sense of background noise heard in calls.

Respondents also said information about location could help explain delays or staff being distracted.

A couple of respondents felt clients should be told about location to allow those who prefer to speak to office-based staff to request this.

“While I feel happy to trust staff working from home, it’s something that requires transparency as not everyone will feel the same.”

Experience Panel respondent

“Just to know home or office. If at home they may be unwell, under additional family pressures, family distractions. Good to know if their situation is affecting their ability to listen, respond, attend to me.”

Client Panel respondent

Why working location shouldn't matter

Respondents often stated “as long as” location doesn't impact service then it doesn't, or shouldn't, matter where staff are working. Service expectations included things like:

- staff having access to the information and IT systems they need
- staff being able to answer and resolve queries
- staff being professional, knowledgeable and acting with integrity.

Many respondents said that the working location of staff shouldn't impact the security of clients' personal information. Respondents said that policies and procedures to keep client data safe should apply and be carefully followed by staff in both locations.

“As long as they are polite, friendly and helpful it is irrelevant where they are working from.”

Client Panel respondent

“As members of staff, I trust that they are bound by the same data protection laws that cover working in an office therefore have no issue with where that job is being done.”

Client Panel respondent

“It is the process and professionalism of the individual that matters not whether they are in an office or at home.”

Experience Panel respondent

Views about staff working from home

Some respondents had concerns about the security and confidentiality of their personal information when talking to staff working from home. A key concern was other household members overhearing or otherwise being exposed to confidential information about clients.

Respondents said it was important that staff working from home used IT equipment issued by Social Security Scotland and not personal laptops or computers. They also said it was important that staff working at home had a secure connection.

Some respondents left comments about wider benefits of staff working from home. These included:

- A positive impact on service if staff are comfortable and happy at home
- Giving a more diverse range of people the opportunity to work for Social Security Scotland
- Environmental benefits.

“If person at home working, how can I be confident that no one else is listening into my conversation and my personal info is being kept confidential.”

Client Panel respondent

“I think it’s becoming more normal now to deal with people working from home but it might be useful to provide clients with information about how security works.”

Experience Panel respondent

“I trust that there are passwords on computers, that staff members are provided with audio headsets for phone calls, and they are given privacy screen filters for their computer monitors to protect my data.”

Experience Panel respondent

“I strongly agree with staff working from home it is better for them and it helps keep traffic off roads which helps the planet they will also be more relaxed working from home so I think everyone benefits including the clients.”

Experience Panel respondent

Views about staff working in an office

Some respondents said they would prefer to talk to staff working in an office. Some respondents thought there were benefits when staff worked in an office. Respondents said things like:

- The office provides better privacy and confidentiality for clients.
- The office promotes professionalism among staff.
- Policies more likely to be followed and checked-up on in an office.
- IT security is stronger in an office.
- It's easier for staff in an office to get advice from colleagues or managers.

Some respondents raised concerns about talking to staff working in an office. A couple said privacy could be an issue if other staff could overhear conversations or see personal information. Others said staff could get distracted or discuss clients with their colleagues.

“The staff member would be surrounded by others who are obliged to keep information confidential so that no personal data is shared outside the office.”

Client Panel respondent

“When dealing with people’s personal information it should be dealt with within a secure environment like in an office. No one knows the security levels within staff members individual homes this therefore makes me feel insecure about giving out personal information/details to staff working from home.”

Client Panel respondent

“Easier for the Social Security Scotland staff to ask for advice from a more experienced person or refer a case to a manager if they are in the same office.”

Experience Panel respondent

“Open plan offices, not sure if privacy is so great.”

Experience Panel respondent

Next Steps

Social Security Scotland has now committed to a hybrid working approach in the future. This means that most staff will spend some time working in an office and some time working from home. We are currently working to design and test how this approach will work best. Results from this survey have been shared with colleagues who are delivering these plans. The research findings will also be taken into account by managers who deliver client services. This will help them plan how their teams approach and test hybrid working, taking into account which activities are best suited for each location.

Policies and practices are in place to keep client data safe and ensure IT security regardless of the working location of staff. The research findings will be used to consider additional ways to communicate with clients about the steps taken by Social Security Scotland to keep their data safe wherever staff work.



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