



Social Security
Scotland

Tèarainteachd Shòisealta Alba



Charter Research 2022-2023

Summary report

Dignity,
fairness,
respect.

Contents

Background 3



A People's Service

Client and partner experiences	4
Staff experiences	5



Processes that Work

Communicating with Social Security Scotland	6
Experiences with staff	7
Applying for a benefit and transfer of benefits	8



Working for Social Security Scotland

Staff knowledge and skills	9
Support for staff	10
Communication	11



A Learning System

Experiences of giving feedback – clients and partners	12
Experiences of giving feedback – staff	13
Improvements based on feedback	14
Mistakes and complaints	15

Next Steps 16

Background

This report presents a summary of results from research with Social Security Scotland clients, staff and partners about their experiences in 2022-23. The research was designed to provide data for a range of measures in the 2022-23 Charter Measurement Framework. The **Charter Measurement Framework** is a co-designed list of measures. It shows how Social Security Scotland and the Scottish Government are getting on with delivering the commitments in **Our Charter**.

The research took place from February to June 2023. It involved interviews with 40 clients from our Client Panels; a survey completed by 1,568 staff (36% response rate); focus groups with 6 Client Experience staff; and a survey completed by 101 partners.

A People's Service

Client and partner experiences

Client participants said they had been treated with respect and dignity. They felt that Social Security Scotland genuinely wanted to help clients.

Almost all client participants said they had not been discriminated against, although there were two examples of negative experiences relating to communication barriers.

Half of partner respondents thought that Social Security Scotland had been open (51%) and honest (53%) about their processes and about challenges to the delivery of the service. Some felt Social Security Scotland could be more open about application processing times.



"I have found Social Security Scotland staff to be open and transparent about the issues they are dealing with."

Partner respondent

55%

More than half of partner respondents said Social Security Scotland's overall service was good or very good.

67%

Over two-thirds of partner respondents said Social Security Scotland had worked well with their organisation.



"All the people I've spoken to have tried to reassure me, they've been understanding, they've put across not to worry, we'll get in touch. There's been no discrimination there."

Client participant

"I said how difficult it was for me contacting them without a direct number or email. I said they were discriminating against people working the same hours as them."

Client participant

Staff experiences

Most staff respondents said they were familiar with Our Charter (88%).

Most felt confident or very confident to deliver a service based on a human rights system (89%).

Staff respondents said training and internal processes for things like interpretation and translation helped them to feel confident about not discriminating. Many felt the Charter commitments aligned with their own personal beliefs and were committed to avoiding and challenging discrimination.

Those who didn't feel confident raised the need for further training on Our Charter and discrimination. There was concern that issues with some processes was leading to discrimination of clients and staff. Some felt Social Security Scotland's values weren't always applied to staff.

"I feel it was made very clear in training about the Charter: dignity, respect of clients, learning more about discrimination. That has stayed with me, especially that social security is a human right."

Staff respondent



93%

Almost all staff respondents felt confident or very confident to deliver a service without discriminating.

"My beliefs align with Our Charter and I strive to be inclusive and adhere to the Charter in my work and behaviour."

Staff respondent

"Insufficient training provided for dealing with minority groups, in particular for transgender clients [...] there needs to be mandatory and regular equality and diversity refresher training for all staff so they are aware of how to treat vulnerable groups."

Staff respondent

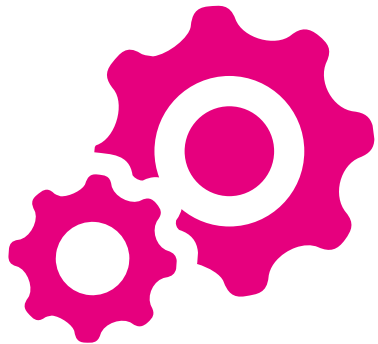
Processes that Work

Communicating with Social Security Scotland

Some client participants who contacted Social Security Scotland by phone said their call was answered quickly. Others experienced longer waits. Some didn't mind but a couple were unhappy with this. Call wait times was a common issue among partner respondents.

Clients and partners had positive experiences using web chat although some reported long waits. Clients would prefer to know their queue position while waiting to connect to an adviser.

Partners praised the availability of interpretation but felt staff needed more training on this. There were also examples of digital exclusion for clients who couldn't access information online.



"Ability to use an interpreter easily is great [...] some staff seem uncertain when it comes to using an interpreter which leads to confusion for clients."

Partner respondent

26%

A quarter of client-facing partner respondents found it easy or very easy to contact Social Security Scotland on clients' behalf.

53%

Over half found it difficult or very difficult.



Suggestions for improvement included:

- benefit-specific phone lines
- audio notifications when a web chat adviser becomes available
- a dedicated email service or helpline for partners who support clients.

"The person I spoke to was helpful. I did wait a while. You don't need to sit by the phone anymore, you can do stuff while on hold. The wait was about 40 minutes. I called about 4pm, so it might be quite busy. It was my choice to wait so I didn't mind."

Client participant

Experiences with staff

Client participants said staff were friendly and made them feel trusted. They appreciated that staff were honest even when things went wrong.

Clients said staff answered their questions and gave them the information they needed, including signposting to other forms of support.

A few clients had less positive experiences to do with poor staff manner and receiving conflicting information from different staff members.

Some partner respondents said staff were helpful and knowledgeable when dealing with queries. Others felt staff lacked knowledge and training on things like specific benefits and processes.

“[The staff member] went above and beyond. He explained other benefits that may be applicable, like the Blue Badge scheme. [...] I applied for the Blue Badge and got that. I now have safe parking, I’m close to wherever I’m going. It changed my life for the better.”

Client participant



50%

Half of client-facing partner respondents rated their experience of speaking to staff on clients’ behalf as good or very good.

“There is a lot of being put on hold as the worker needs to check things. This can happen three or four times in one call.”

Partner respondent

“Social Security Scotland [staff were] really friendly and [I] felt they genuinely wanted to help you and would go out of their way... I feel valued and that I’m important and they want to do the right thing for me, which builds a lot of trust.”

Client participant

Applying for a benefit and transfer of benefits

Client participants said the application process was easy and questions were clear. They felt it was straightforward to provide information and submit the form.

Some had applied online and felt it was accessible and convenient, but a few experienced difficulties with this.

Client participants who had their benefits transferred from the Department for Work and Pensions to Social Security Scotland said the process was smooth and straightforward. They got letters with information about the transfer. Feedback was less positive where participants experienced issues including missing letters and payments not arriving as expected.

“Didn’t need to do anything. It was seamless. There were letters quite far in advance to explain it was going to change. Advance notice is always a good thing.”

Client participant

Client participants were positive about the support they’d received from Social Security Scotland’s Local Delivery service when applying.

“[Online is] far easier than hand writing it [or] doing it on the phone. I can take breaks. [I] get brain fog, I lose my words sometimes, it might not make sense later on, so I can double check it later... Questions are difficult but the option to save and complete later is good for my condition.”

Client participant

“The woman was really, really, really good. I couldn’t fault her...She was absolutely brilliant. Informal. It felt like she had been to the house lots of times. Wish everyone could be like her. The appointment was made bang on time [and she made] sure my daughter was at ease.”

Client participant

Working for Social Security Scotland

Staff knowledge and skills

Most (73%) staff respondents who interact with clients as part of their job, or will do so in future, rated their knowledge of the social security system in Scotland as good or very good. Most knew about support services (69%) and how to refer clients to these (60%).

Training, self-directed learning, support from colleagues, and previous experience had helped staff respondents to feel confident.

Training covered topics like:

- Our Charter and human rights
- Discrimination
- Inclusive communication
- Understanding benefits and internal processes



“More training is needed on systems. Staff are left to work it out. The guidance is not accessible or easy to find.”

Staff respondent



82%

Most staff respondents felt confident or very confident in their knowledge and skills to do their job.

Some felt they would benefit from more training on things like handling challenging situations and using internal systems. There were also suggestions for guidance to be improved and to be shared in a more systematic way.

“Learning and development and continuous improvement are actively encouraged in our team. Information sharing and collaborative workshops provide plenty of opportunity to share and learn from each other.”

Staff respondent

Support for staff

Staff respondents said line managers were approachable and understanding.

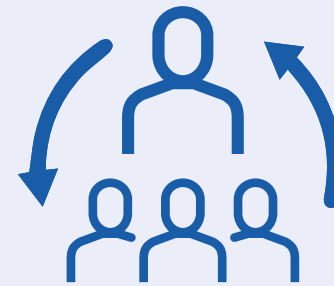
They said line managers had supported them with things like professional development and additional needs at work. Regular meetings had helped them to feel supported and they felt trusted to manage workloads.

Those who didn't feel supported by line managers mentioned issues like:

- poor communication
- infrequent meetings
- gaps in line managers' knowledge and experience.

"I have assistive technology which is great but I also need time off for medical appointments and I have received great support to enable me to do this."

Staff respondent



82%

The majority of staff respondents said support from their line manager had been good or very good.

"My line manager is very approachable, will listen to concerns and act on them and makes themselves available when needed. The only down side is that they don't have the client-facing experience and therefore, is not always able to answer operational questions, therefore, I will go to peers for advice rather than my line manager."

Staff respondent

Communication

Staff respondents felt Social Security Scotland prioritised inclusiveness through things like accessible documents and the use of plain English. Support from the inclusive communication team and internal training had helped staff to feel confident. Some felt there was room for improvement as the organisation grows.

Most (80%) staff respondents found it easy or very easy to communicate with colleagues in a way that felt inclusive of their own needs. Staff felt supported by colleagues to communicate in their preferred ways.

Some mentioned instances when their communication needs weren't met. This included the use of acronyms and internal systems that are incompatible with assistive technology.

"It is more difficult using assistive technology on [internal systems], and this makes the role as a client adviser more challenging."

Staff respondent



82%

The majority of staff respondents felt confident or very confident to deliver a service based on inclusive communication.

"I am able to communicate with colleagues in my preferred ways by being open about my preferences. My team are supportive and although I may have to remind/request information to be written, I am comfortable doing this."

Staff respondent

A Learning System

Experiences of giving feedback – clients and partners

Client participants were happy Social Security Scotland encouraged feedback. They were pleased to take part in research and share their experiences to help improve the service.

Partner respondents said Social Security Scotland welcomed and listened to suggestions, but felt action could be slow. Some had positive experiences providing feedback online or directly to staff.

Other partners experienced problems with the feedback process including:

- not knowing how to give feedback
- issues providing feedback to staff over the phone
- delays hearing back from Social Security Scotland or not hearing back at all
- feedback not being actioned.



58%

Over half of partner respondents thought Social Security Scotland is open to feedback.

20%

A fifth thought Social Security Scotland acts on feedback.



“I think it’s good Social Security Scotland are listening and trying to improve. I’m happy to do what I can to help and make things get better.”

Client participant

“Feedback is always gratefully received but action is slow.”

Partner respondent

Experiences of giving feedback – staff

Staff respondents felt strongly about the need to voice suggestions for improvements to ensure clients are receiving the best service possible.

Staff said there was a culture of welcoming feedback within Social Security Scotland. They felt confident and supported to share their suggestions.

Staff had suggested improvements to:

- internal processes
- guidance and training
- communication with partners who support clients.

However, many felt suggestions had been ignored or not actioned. They raised the need for better communication about what is being done with their feedback.

“Sometimes I have spoken up and nothing has been done about the issues I have raised. Then months down the line someone else raises it due to a client complaint and at that point it is taken seriously [...]”

Staff respondent



86%

Most staff respondents said they would speak up if they thought something wasn't working or that something was wrong in Social Security Scotland.

“I find it easy to speak to my colleagues and managers if I feel something is not working or if something is wrong because I feel it is expected and that they would rather know what isn't working so that changes can be made.”

Staff respondent

Improvements based on feedback

Staff feedback had led to improvements to internal processes and policies such as:

- accessibility
- the time needed to process some cases
- how information is communicated and shared within and between teams.

Client Experience staff participants said Social Security Scotland made improvements to information for clients who move away from Scotland. They said online information about processing times was also changed in response to client feedback and complaints.

“We got a complaint about someone who was moving out of Scotland so their money stopped but it was our fault as we didn’t have information out there about that. So I managed to get that improved.”

Client Experience staff participant

“I have raised issues in the past regarding communication and the lack of information that was being filtered down to practitioner level. I felt that this was listened to. I have also fed [back] to my senior [colleague] regarding time frames expected in particular cases and I received feedback about that too.”

Staff respondent

“As part of the Accessibility Champions, I noticed something in a different business area that didn’t meet accessibility guidelines. I reached out to the area that managed it, explained what I noticed and had a conversation about it. They appreciated the feedback and were able to tell me the plans that were in place to improve it.”

Staff respondent

Mistakes and complaints

Clients and partners experienced problems and mistakes made by Social Security Scotland including:

- errors in communications to clients
- problems processing applications.

Some client participants had complained about problems and mistakes. They said the complaints process was quick and staff apologised for mistakes. Most were satisfied that their issue had been resolved. Other clients were dissatisfied or unsure whether their issue had been fixed.

Partner respondents had complained in cases where applications were stuck or delayed. They felt a complaint was their only option to escalate issues.

Client Experience staff participants said complaints were commonly about long waiting times for decisions. Other complaints were about:

- parental responsibility for benefits involving children
- case transfer delays when reporting a change of circumstances.

“I got a letter saying the Scottish Child Payment would stop for my middle son, because they see a record that I don’t look after him anymore. I spoke to a man on the phone, he said it looks like a mistake and he will correct it [...] He phoned back the next day but I couldn’t answer so I still don’t know for sure.”

Client participant

“The adviser told me how to put in a complaint. [...] [Making the complaint was] very easy and it was quite quick. I can’t complain about the complaints process.”

Client participant

“When things go wrong, there is no escalation route to resolve the issue.”

Partner respondent

Next Steps

Findings appear in the relevant sections of the **2022-23 Charter Measurement Framework**. They will be fed into continuous improvement across Social Security Scotland.

Research will shortly begin with clients, staff and partners for the 2023-24 Charter Measurement Framework.



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