



Social Security Scotland
Tèarainteachd Shòisealta Alba



Social Security Scotland: Charter Research 2021-22

Summary report

Dignity,
fairness,
respect.



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Background

This report presents a summary of results from research with Social Security Scotland clients, staff and partners. The research was designed to provide data for a range of measures in the 2021-22 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 2022. Alongside the findings from the Client Survey, it forms a key source of data on people's experiences of Social Security Scotland.

The research involved interviews with 18 clients from our Client Panels; a survey completed by 426 staff (17% response rate); interviews with 24 staff who completed the survey; focus groups with 10 Client Experience staff; a survey completed by 74 partners; and interviews with 10 partners who completed the survey.

A People's Service

Client and partner experiences

Client participants said Social Security Scotland staff made them feel comfortable and trusted. Staff listened, treated them with kindness and understood their needs.

Almost all client participants said there had been no discrimination and felt treated “fairly and respectfully”. Some client participants described negative interactions with staff such as disliking an advisor’s tone or feeling they hadn’t been listened to.

Two thirds of partner participants thought Social Security Scotland had been open (65%) and honest (60%) about benefit launch and delivery. They felt the service puts clients first but said it would take time for clients to build trust in Social Security Scotland and understand the organisation’s ethos.

“I think it’s been doing really well to be fair. It’s always an open and honest conversation.”

Partner participant



Over half of partner participants said Social Security Scotland’s overall service was good or very good.



Two thirds of partner participants said Social Security Scotland had worked well with their organisation.

“Absolutely brilliant, no problem at all. Very courteous, very pleasant. You’re treated like a person, not just a number.”

Client participant

“I just felt like I wasn’t being listened to. I wouldn’t go as far as to say it was discrimination but certainly I was not listened to and things I said were not correctly put on to the notes.”

Client participant

Staff experiences

Staff participants felt a genuine commitment to understanding discrimination and preventing it. Staff said internal policies and procedures, training, and personal experience had helped them feel confident about not discriminating.

Participants enjoyed working for Social Security Scotland because the values of dignity, fairness and respect aligned with their personal values. Some raised concerns about whether these values were applied to staff relationships in the same way as for clients.

“The main reason I joined this organisation was dignity, fairness and respect.”

Staff participant

“We are given a lot of training around bias and trying to get rid of preconceptions. I do see that in the interactions with clients...people genuinely do want to do their job right for vulnerable people.”

Staff participant



89%

Most staff participants said they were familiar with Our Charter



93%

Most felt very confident or confident to deliver a service based on a human-rights system.



96%

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

“We should be treating one another with the same dignity, fairness and respect that we try and do with clients.”

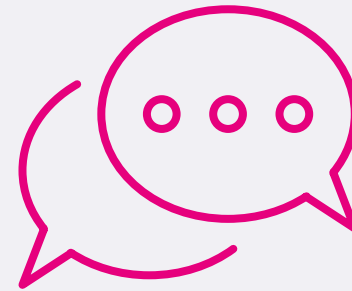
Staff participant

Processes that Work

Communicating with Social Security Scotland

Client participants were positive about Social Security Scotland's communication options and mentioned the advantages of letters, text messages and web chat. They said information was sometimes easier to understand over the phone. One client participant mentioned long wait times to speak to an adviser. Some found it difficult to find and understand online information about Social Security Scotland and its benefits.

Partner participants mentioned problems like a lack of call backs and not being able to speak to an advisor as a third party without the client's presence. They said the service could be more accessible for clients and reported problems with the translation service and the availability of information in languages other than English.



Partner participants who support clients were asked how easy or difficult they found contacting Social Security Scotland on clients' behalf. Slightly more participants said it was difficult than easy.

"The web chat is a great function. I didn't have to be on the phone, it was brilliant. I got the answer I needed."

Client participant

"The translation service is not very good and Social Security Scotland staff don't seem to understand how to access a translator for non-English speaking customers."

Partner participant

"When you go to speak to someone you know you're going to be waiting, 20 minutes, half an hour, before you speak to anyone. That was the experience I had."

Client participant

Getting information and help from staff

Client participants said staff were knowledgeable and helpful. They felt staff were open and honest when they didn't know the answer to a query. They appreciated when staff went to actively find the answer.

Some client participants felt staff lacked knowledge about entitlement criteria or found that knowledge and helpfulness varied across staff.



Client participants said staff provided information on other benefits or sources of support. A few wanted to be told about other benefit entitlement but had not been.

"They were explaining what the benefit was, what it covers. They were being open and honest and transparent, and not giving me any false expectations. They were so knowledgeable. It was world class."

Client participant

"The first [advisor] I spoke to wasn't overly knowledgeable. She said we wouldn't be entitled to anything. I went on the information I was given. I didn't know any better so I'm hoping that the staff would be able to tell me."

Client participant

"They've been able to answer questions. If there was something that they weren't sure of, they were like 'I'm not quite sure but I'll find out for you, I'll phone you back' which was great because you knew that you were heard."

Client participant

"She seemed to understand the service inside out which was good because she was telling me things I hadn't been told before, things I didn't know, things I think I should've been told in the first phone call."

Client participant

Applying and getting decisions

Client participants said applications were straightforward and were positive about the support they'd received from client advisors to apply.

Most client participants found it easy to submit supporting information but a couple reported issues with this.

Client participants said decision letters were clear and concise.

Most client participants agreed with their benefit decision. A few were unhappy because the decision letter didn't explain why the award was lower than expected. One client participant said the letter contained wording that put them off challenging the decision in case it resulted in a lower payment.

Client Experience staff participants said common reasons for re-determinations included clients feeling the payment was too low or thinking Social Security Scotland had not considered all available evidence. They said decisions had been changed in cases where the client supplied more evidence to demonstrate eligibility. Decisions had been unchanged when clients missed the application window or hadn't met the eligibility criteria.

"[The letter was] straight to the point, there wasn't a big preamble, it was really clear. I felt like they had read what I had submitted and that they had actually listened. It felt like I was believed and it made me feel valued."

Client participant

"A Child Disability Payment client was initially awarded nothing. They put in a re-determination and provided more information like NHS letters and testimonies from the health visitor. So loads of additional information. They ended up being paid the highest and higher. The new information helped make the decision fairly straightforward."

Client Experience staff participant

Working for Social Security Scotland

Staff knowledge and skills

Most (71%) staff who interact with clients as part of their job, or will do so in future, rated their knowledge of the social security system as very good or good. Most knew about support services (71%) and how to refer clients to these (62%). Findings showed that staff knowledge increased with length of service.

Staff said they felt confident due to: ongoing training; guidance; and previous professional experience. Examples of training included:

- online learning
- workshops and seminars
- and support from managers and colleagues.

Training covered things like:

- diversity and discrimination
- inclusive communication
- understanding benefits and Our Charter.

Some highlighted a need for further training and improved guidance. A few found remote learning challenging and would prefer in person training. Others wanted more specific training for responding to challenging situations with clients.



The majority of staff participants said they felt very confident or confident in their knowledge and skills to do their job.

“It was a thorough induction. We had about 6 weeks of training before starting the job which was really good. We had role play, case studies to do, job shadowing. A variety of different ways to get us ready for the job.”

Staff participant

“I think that maybe in the Local Delivery training they should focus a bit more on the situation when you’re in somebody’s house, when you’re doing a visit. What if they get really upset, because they didn’t really cover that. It was more about the technical issues and signposting. Nothing about how to handle a difficult situation.”

Staff participant

Support for staff

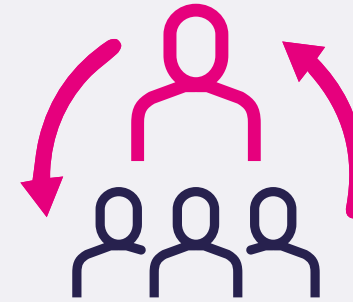
Staff said a number of things helped them feel supported:

- Good relationships with managers and colleagues
- regular organisation-wide communications, and
- internal social channels to talk with colleagues.

Those who didn't feel supported reported issues like understaffing, workload, and inconsistencies when receiving information from managers.

"I think the wider support that Social Security Scotland has provided has been quite good. There's been quite a lot of regular communications about different things and about areas of support that they have, like wellbeing. And even little things that do make a difference, like the yammer pages about festive quizzes or things to do with your teams, like icebreakers, which I think are really important and takes a lot of the pressure off of individual teams to create some of those informal conversations. I think that's all been beneficial and I've not experienced that before. So that was good."

Staff participant



92%

Almost all staff participants said support from their line manager had been good or very good.

Communication

Internal training and working with the inclusive communication team had helped participants to feel confident. Staff said a culture of inclusiveness was embedded in the organisation in things like branding and not using acronyms. Some felt they would benefit from ongoing learning on inclusive communication.

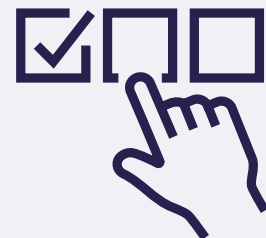
Most staff participants (84%) said it had been easy or very easy to communicate with colleagues in a way that felt inclusive of their own needs. Participants said colleagues and managers had been accommodating about their preferences.

Some described negative experiences of accessibility at work. They said written communication and emails were not always formatted in an accessible way. Others said internal systems were incompatible with screen readers.

"We've recently had the inclusive communication team come along to our own branch and deliver a presentation and we're going to actively work with them moving forward."

Staff participant

88%



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

"I express better in writing. And my manager has been very accepting of written communication so it hasn't been an issue."

Staff participant

"Improvements need to be made to our systems to make them accessible. For example, several main systems such as [internal record system] are not accessible for [screen readers]. I have taken this forward with several people and hope that some improvements can be made."

Staff participant

A Learning System

Feedback from staff and partners

Almost all staff participants (94%) said they would speak up if there was a problem or if something wasn't working in Social Security Scotland. Participants described a culture where staff feel able to provide feedback and make suggestions.

Partner participants were positive about Social Security Scotland's culture of actively encouraging and acting on feedback. Most felt their feedback was listened to and had been told how Social Security Scotland would use it to make improvements.

- Two thirds of partner participants (66%) thought Social Security Scotland is open to feedback.
- A third (34%) thought Social Security Scotland acts on feedback.

"I find everyone to be really open in receiving feedback from me and my team on areas which can be improved and are always willing to take on board any suggestions we have."

Staff participant

"Always found the agency staff very receptive and positive about feedback where we've identified potential access problems because they want to know, what we could do to improve the information that they're supplying, the wording of communication and things like that...so far very receptive."

Partner participant

Feedback from clients

A couple of client participants had given feedback to staff over the phone about issues such as Social Security Scotland's call back system. Participants were positive about the feedback process and felt that their feedback was taken on board.

Participants were pleased to have the chance to take part in research and discuss their experiences.

"I mentioned the fact that the call back system didn't seem to be working, so they were going to pass that on to the technical team. I understand about technology, it doesn't always work, it can fall down sometimes. It's not anyone's fault, it's just the system. [...] She apologised and said I'm sorry the system's not working. [...] It was taken on board. Speaking to them is a pleasant experience."

Client participant

"I'm quite happy to help. The fact that you're asking that's enough. See having the service user engagement, that's ideal. How else will you know if something's working or failing unless you speak to people who use it? This is great this system. I'm happy with it. I'm grateful you asked me to take part."

Client participant

Improvements based on feedback

Staff feedback had led to improvements such as:

- how work is organised and tracked
- changes to application forms, and
- closer relationships with policy and legal teams on things like benefit eligibility.

Partner feedback had led to improved information and accessibility for older clients and those who use British Sign Language.

"I was to deny a client their application for a Low Income Benefit as they did not meet the eligibility criteria. On questioning that particular reasoning, the case was put to policy and legal [teams] to be used as an example where this barrier was looked at and policy and guidance was amended to include this part for this particular group of clients."

Staff participant

"The example of, there was a number of film clips and there was an English person signing British Sign Language. What they've done is, they've made improvements. They're now using Scottish people doing British Sign Language. It's like a dialect, like the difference between for Glasgow and Edinburgh. We want to make sure people in Scotland understand British Sign Language."

Partner participant

Problems with feedback

Some staff participants reported problems with providing feedback including:

- not knowing how to give feedback
- having little or no control over making improvements, and
- a delay in the time taken to receive a response to suggestions.

Over half of partner participants (56%) said they had given feedback. Some said consultation had not lead to improvements and there had been inconsistencies with how Social Security Scotland handles feedback.

Some partner participants said they felt confident about giving feedback to Social Security Scotland staff they knew well or where there was a good working relationship.



"I feel there is a lot of consultation etc. but nothing ever changes."

Partner participant

"I've had reasonable access to people at various levels, that I would feel confident if there was any issues I would be able to approach someone. Which is maybe a bit more privileged than other stakeholders in that respect, just because of the nature of the work we're undertaking together at the moment."

Partner participant

Mistakes and complaints

Client participants said Social Security Scotland had made mistakes such as errors in processing applications and delays or problems in receiving payments.

Some client participants made a complaint about the mistake they experienced. Participants were pleased with how Social Security Scotland handled mistakes and complaints. They said Social Security Scotland acknowledged their mistakes and apologised for errors.

Client Experience staff participants said that complaints were usually related to problems with Social Security Scotland's systems. Other common reasons for complaints were long processing times and a lack of updates on applications.

"When I phoned up after the date I had been given had passed, the chap was really helpful ... It was at this time I found out that [the] details didn't match up with what was on the registry, and that was why there had been such a delay. He said to me, actually, somebody should have checked that before now...So he just looked into it and that's when we found out it was the name had been spelt wrong and that's why it hadn't been processed yet...I did feel like they acknowledged that there had been a mistake and he was apologetic for it."

Client participant

"A number of complaints have system issues at their heart. Uploads haven't worked or systems aren't working the way they are meant to. So quite a lot of complaints involve something going wrong with the IT side of things."

Client Experience staff participant

Next Steps

Findings appear in the relevant sections of the 2021-22 Charter Measurement Framework report. They will be fed into continuous improvement across Social Security Scotland.

Research will shortly begin with clients, staff and partners for the 2022-23 Charter Measurement Framework.



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