

Literature Review: Experiences of the Scottish social security system among people for whom English is a second language

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The  Lines
Between



Scottish
Commission
on Social
Security

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Executive Summary

This report presents a rapid literature review on existing evidence of experiences of the Scottish social security system among people for whom English is a second language (ESOL). The review was commissioned by the Scottish Commission on Social Security (SCoSS) following earlier SCoSS research on communication needs, which identified the need for further research into the experiences of people whose first language is not English. The review focuses primarily on language-related barriers, while recognising that these often intersect with other forms of disadvantage.

The review addresses a set of research questions covering: awareness of Scottish social security benefits; experiences of applying for benefits; parts of the system people find difficult; languages prevalent among the Scottish population and among social security users; challenges posed by application forms and benefit concepts; the needs and expectations of Gaelic speakers; the extent to which social security charter expectations are being met; and gaps in the existing evidence base.

Given the limited volume of Scotland-specific research on ESOL and social security, the review adopts a deliberately broad scope. It draws on Scottish, UK-wide and international literature where relevant, while excluding work focused solely on accessibility issues unrelated to language, or on people with no recourse to public funds whose access to the system is highly constrained.

Identification and nature of the evidence

A broad and iterative search strategy was used to identify relevant evidence, including peer-reviewed academic literature, government and official statistics, and grey literature such as stakeholder reports and unpublished studies. Literature published from 2015 onwards was prioritised, with earlier sources included where judged to be particularly relevant. Research conducted in Scotland and the UK formed the core of the evidence base, supplemented by a smaller number of international sources.

In total, 237 sources were reviewed, of which 194 were included in the final synthesis. Sources were coded using a framework driven by the research questions and aligned to the commitments of the Social Security Charter. Stakeholders identified by SCoSS were also invited to submit evidence through a call for evidence.

The included literature spans a wide range of topics. Around one third relates directly to social security, while others address language use, ethnicity, poverty, discrimination, or access to public services more broadly. The evidence base includes public sector publications, academic research, and third sector reports, reflecting a diversity of perspectives but also uneven coverage across topics.

Prevalent languages spoken in Scotland

The report first considers evidence on languages spoken in Scotland, drawing primarily on data from Scotland's Census 2022. English remains the main language spoken at home for most of the population, with 94% reporting English as their main home language. Scots and Gaelic are spoken by smaller proportions of the population but are recognised as official languages and supported through specific policy frameworks.

Beyond these official languages, 5.2% of the population (273,015 people) reported speaking another language as their main language at home with earlier census data (2011) indicating Polish, Chinese languages, Urdu, Punjabi and French were among the most spoken minority languages. More up to date insight is provided by the Scottish Schools Pupil Census (2024), which shows Polish, Urdu and Arabic as the most common non-English home languages among pupils in state-funded schools.

This review highlights that country of birth and ethnicity are imperfect proxies for language use. Many countries are multilingual, and migrants may speak multiple languages, including English. English proficiency also varies widely and cannot be assumed based on language background alone.

English proficiency and language use among social security users

Census data indicates most people in Scotland report being able to speak, read and write English well or very well, though a minority have limited or no English skills. English proficiency varies significantly among those for whom English is a second language and is likely to be influenced by the length of time spent in the UK as well as age at the time of migrating to Britain.

Available data specific to social security users is very limited. Social Security Scotland's client satisfaction surveys indicate that around three quarters of respondents report English as their main language, with just under a quarter reporting another main language. This proportion is higher than in the general population, though the reasons for this difference are unclear.

The evidence suggests that reported English proficiency does not necessarily remove the need for multilingual support. Even where people can speak English, they may prefer to use their first language in official or stressful contexts, particularly when dealing with complex or technical information. Freedom of Information responses indicate that Social Security Scotland provides interpretation in over 100 languages for telephone applications and offers translated written materials in a smaller number of languages. The most frequently requested translations include Polish, Arabic, Ukrainian, Romanian and Urdu. However, comprehensive demographic data on language use among clients are not routinely published.

Awareness of social security benefits

Low awareness of social security benefits among people with English as a second language has been identified in both the Scottish literature and that from further afield. Low awareness of the Scottish social security system can arise for various reasons, including limited exposure to sources of information, social isolation, digital exclusion, unfamiliarity with government systems, and reliance on informal community networks. Evidence from Scotland indicates that people may be unclear about eligibility criteria, which benefits exist, and which organisations are responsible for delivery, particularly given the division between devolved Scottish benefits and reserved UK benefits.

Language barriers exacerbate these issues by limiting access to written and digital information, which is often available only in English. Inconsistent advice or misinformation can circulate within communities which can further cause uncertainty. Awareness is often

higher where information is shared through trusted intermediaries such as community organisations, faith settings, or welfare rights advisers.

Experiences of applying for social security benefits

The evidence reviewed shows that people with English as a second language face a range of challenges when applying for social security benefits in Scotland. These include limited awareness of benefits due to marginalisation or lack of prior contact with the social security system, information being provided solely in English, or perceived complexity of eligibility criteria.

While Social Security Scotland provides interpretation support for telephone applications and translated factsheets, applications themselves can only be completed in English. People with limited English proficiency can experience application forms as challenging which can lead to confusion, anxiety and stress, particularly where they fear making mistakes or misunderstanding questions. This can be compounded for those experiencing multiple disadvantages.

Some evidence suggests that translated materials are valued, but concerns are raised about translation requests causing delays and the quality and consistency of translations. Telephone interpretation is a key support mechanism, but reliance on this single application route can be limiting. Evidence found existing issues with the interpreting service available through Social Security Scotland such as people's preferred interpreters not being allowed and limited knowledge among staff of how to access interpreters. Evidence highlights variable experiences with interpreters, including issues around dialect, accuracy, continuity and trust. Some people in the wider literature express a preference for face-to-face support or alternative modes such as video interpretation.

Parts of the system people find difficult

Despite generally high levels of reported satisfaction with Social Security Scotland, the review identifies multiple barriers that can make engagement difficult for people with English as a second language. These include experiences of poor treatment by staff, lack of cultural sensitivity, perceived discrimination, and difficulties navigating complex systems and processes.

Language and cultural issues are often intertwined. Some studies report that staff may speak too quickly, fail to acknowledge anxieties, or misunderstand cultural contexts. While overt discrimination is not widely reported in Scottish social security literature, experiences of indirect or structural discrimination are identified in the UK based research on public services.

Complexity of language and systems is a commonly identified theme in the Scottish and wider UK social security systems. Technical terminology, acronyms, and bureaucratic processes can be difficult to understand and may deter people from applying. Difficulties are also reported in relation to providing supporting information, understanding decisions, and navigating appeals.

While data on denials by first language are not available, ethnicity-based data show increasing denial rates across all groups where ethnicity is disclosed. Reasons for denial are

not well understood, and evidence suggests fear of being denied can deter future applications.

Gaelic speakers and social security

Gaelic is recognised as an official language of Scotland, supported by statutory duties under the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 and strengthened by the Scottish Languages Act 2025. While there is extensive research on public attitudes to Gaelic and its cultural importance, there is very limited evidence on Gaelic speakers' lived experiences of accessing public services, including social security.

Comparative evidence from Wales demonstrates that proactive and enforceable language provision is associated with higher satisfaction, dignity and trust.

Social Security Scotland provides Gaelic translations of factsheets and includes Gaelic within its interpretation services, but it has not yet published a Gaelic Language Plan. No published evidence was found on how Gaelic speakers experience these services in practice, representing a significant evidence gap.

Extent to which charter expectations are being met

The report assesses findings against the pillars of the Social Security Charter: a people's service; processes that work; a learning system; and a better future. Progress is apparent in areas of improvements that benefit all users, such as efforts to simplify processes or provide multiple ways to engage. However, the evidence base is limited and often aggregated, making it difficult to assess experiences specifically for people with English as a second language.

Challenges remain in relation to trust, staff interactions, complexity of processes, and the suitability of language support. While some areas require more concerted effort, such as aligned objectives across policy areas, there is evidence that this can make a positive difference for people. Data gaps limit the ability to determine the extent to which charter expectations are being realised in practice for this group.

Evidence gaps

The review identifies substantial evidence gaps throughout. There is limited Scotland-specific research on ESOL and social security, a lack of clarity on data collected on language use among clients, and minimal evidence on benefit take-up by language or ethnicity. People with English as a second language are often included within broader participant cohorts in research studies, obscuring differences. Data collection challenges, reliance on self-reporting, and low trust in public services further constrain understanding. There is also a notable lack of research on Gaelic speakers' experiences of Scottish social security.

Overall conclusions

The review concludes that people with English as a second language are likely to face multiple, intersecting barriers when engaging with the Scottish social security system. These include low awareness of benefits, language-related challenges in accessing information and applying, system complexity, and broader issues such as poverty, discrimination and mistrust.

While Social Security Scotland is generally viewed positively and has introduced supportive measures, the evidence indicates that existing arrangements do not consistently meet the needs of people with English as a second language. Significant gaps in data and research limit the ability to fully assess progress or impact, highlighting the need for further research and targeted attention to language-related barriers located within a broader cultural context.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the stakeholders who contributed their views to this study and for their offers to support work in this area. Our thanks also go to the SCoSS secretariat and sub-committee for their thoughtful and insightful contributions and to the Scottish Government Social Security policy team for facilitating access to stakeholders.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

The Scottish Commission on Social Security (SCoSS) recently published research on how people with communication needs access the Scottish social security system. People whose first language is not English were not included in the research, but the need to research the experiences of this group were identified. [1] This led to SCoSS commissioning The Lines Between to conduct a rapid evidence review of existing research on language use in Scotland, and the type of barriers faced by people whose first language is not English when accessing social security. The review focuses on language barriers where these are reported.

SCoSS plays an essential role in the development and delivery of a Scottish Social Security system based on fairness, dignity and respect by providing independent scrutiny of legislation and practice. Their full functions are set out in the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018.¹ SCoSS is separate from the Scottish Government and carry out their work independently of both Scottish Ministers and the Scottish Parliament. Since their formation in 2019, their role has provided independent scrutiny of social security legislation and regulations. SCoSS also has a remit to assess the extent to which any or all of the expectations set out in the Scottish social security charter are being fulfilled, and making recommendations if those expectations are not met. For that reason, the evidence was considered alongside Social Security Scotland's charter, 'Our Charter', to support SCoSS's statutory role in evaluating the Scottish social security system's compliance with the commitments outlined in their charter.

The research, analysis and reporting sought to address the following questions:

- Which parts of the Scottish social security system do people whose first language is not English find difficult?
- What evidence exists concerning awareness of Scottish social security benefits where a person's first language is not English?
- What data exists on the numbers of Scottish social security applications being denied where a person's first language is not English?
- Is there comparable data on the experiences of people whose first language is not English from other social security systems?
- Which languages are likely to be particularly prevalent among a) the Scottish population overall and b) social security users in Scotland?
- What challenges do Scottish social security application forms pose to people whose first language is not English?
- What challenges do the concepts contained within Scottish social security benefits (such as Adult Disability Payment) pose to people whose first language is not English?
- What needs, rights and expectations of Gaelic speakers are relevant to their interactions with the Scottish social security system?

¹ [Social Security \(Scotland\) Act 2018](#)

- What evidence exists on the extent to which the social security charter expectations are being met in this area?

People whose first language is not English have been identified in previous research as being more likely to experience barriers to claiming benefits, due to issues such as access to information, forms and support in an appropriate language. The recently published independent review into Adult Disability Payment also highlighted that the language used to describe certain concepts e.g. mental health conditions, was a barrier for some people from minority communities, as was stigma. The review also noted no data appeared to exist on the numbers of applications being denied where a person's first language is not English.

Scottish Government research with seldom heard groups (broadly defined as mobile populations, vulnerable groups, end of life and carers and care experienced people) to inform its 2021 benefits take up strategy also found seldom heard groups are likely to experience reduced access to, or take-up, of the Scottish benefits to which they are entitled. Barriers identified in the first benefit take up strategy in 2019 are reflected throughout this report. These span psychological barriers (e.g. stigma, fear of authority, experiences of trauma), learning barriers (e.g. complexity of the social security system, lack of support to apply and inaccessibility of information on benefits) and compliance barriers (e.g. application difficulties, challenges providing supporting information and decision-making delays). [2]

In exploring experiences with social security systems among people whose first language is not English, a wider body of literature may be considered relevant. For instance, language issues when accessing public services are likely to be relatively consistent across countries. In addition, the broader experience of people whose first language is not English are likely to have relevance when considering social security, for instance, poverty, discrimination or marginalisation. A wider scope is also necessary for this study, given the lack of literature about the experiences of Scottish social security among people whose first language is not English.

Other groups may have communication or accessibility needs, such as people with low literacy ability or disabled people with communication needs, as identified in the SCoSS research. While these groups may experience similar issues when engaging with social security systems, such issues are generally not due to having English as a second language. As a result, literature sources focusing on accessibility per se have not been included. Similarly, while the experiences of refugees and people with no recourse to public funds are mentioned in the review, the full literature on those with unresolved immigration status was not included given their highly limited access to the system. As a result of their specific circumstances, their experiences have not been included in case this skewed the findings.

Recommendations are made based on the evidence found, along with identification of areas that that could be further addressed by the Scottish Government and Social Security Scotland.

1.2 Identification of evidence

A deliberately broad approach was taken to identifying relevant literature to include in this study, not least given the lack of directly relevant literature as noted above. The search included:

- Peer-reviewed academic literature
- Official statistics and government reports (e.g., Social Security Scotland, Scottish Government, DWP)
- Grey literature, including stakeholder reports, unpublished studies, and submissions from advocacy groups.

The following types of evidence areas were deemed within scope of the review:

- Published in, or after, 2015. Where an article or report was exceptionally relevant, researchers accepted an earlier publication date. This occurred in 16 instances.
- Included evidence published in Scotland and the UK, and, in cases of exceptional relevancy, internationally
- Research with clearly identifiable sources or primary research with clearly identifiable methods.
- Research that examines barriers experienced by minority ethnic communities when either in accessing or using public services, focusing mainly on social security systems in the UK and where language is likely to be an issue.

Research that included first-person accounts and lived experience of the Scottish social security system was prioritised. In practice, almost all literature included in the study was from the UK, with a small number of sources covering Europe and Anglo-America.

Alongside the iterative search, key stakeholders as identified by SCoSS were contacted in a Call for Evidence. In total, 12 stakeholders were invited to provide further relevant sources of literature.

Each source identified was reviewed and coded using a framework driven by the research questions and directly informed by the Social Security Charter. In total, researchers reviewed 237 sources. While several sources were deemed out of scope, these sources are provided in a 'Continued Reading' section in Annex A.

1.2.1 Framing the Review in Relation to 'Our Charter'

The following steps were taken to ensure the review aligned with the Charter:

- **Policy Focus:** The review was explicitly framed in relation to the expectations outlined in Our Charter, with all findings mapped to Charter principles, including dignity, fairness, and respect.
- **Inclusivity:** The perspectives of people with lived experience of disability and those involved in redetermination processes are included, drawing on stakeholder engagement and qualitative evidence.

1.3 Summary of evidence

In total, 149 resources were included in the review. The evidence was published between 1990 and 2025. Just under half of these related to Scotland, with over four in ten considering the UK as a whole or other parts of the UK, such as England and Wales only. The remainder related to evidence from further afield, notably Europe and Anglo-America.

Over a third of publications considered social security specifically and over four in ten addressed language use or ethnic minorities. Just over one in six addressed public sector services and the remainder were more overarching in nature, such as addressing concepts like racism or poverty. Almost two thirds of the reports on social security considered the Scottish social security system.

Under one half of the evidence included in the review was published by the public sector and over a quarter was academic i.e. published in a peer reviewed journal or book. Just under one in six of the reports were produced by the third sector and a few were produced by other organisations such as think tanks. As a result, a wide body of literature was included, from a variety of sources and on numerous topics.

1.4 Report outline

Chapter 2 presents data on languages used among the Scottish population overall, and among social security users in Scotland.

Chapter 3 presents evidence on awareness of Scottish social security among people whose first language is not English, experiences of the application process and the forms used to apply for social security.

Chapter 4 explores parts of the Scottish social security system people whose first language is not English find difficult, including concepts used and applications denied.

Chapter 5 identifies what needs, rights and expectations of Gaelic speakers are relevant to their interactions with the Scottish security system.

Chapter 6 provides a commentary on the extent to which social security charter expectations are being met in relation to people whose first language is not English.

Chapter 7 presents an overview of gaps in data.

Chapter 8 provides conclusions and recommendations for further action by the Scottish Government and Social Security Scotland, to address evidence gaps and fulfil expectations of the social security charter.

2. Prevalent languages spoken in Scotland

2.1 Introduction

This chapter considers literature on what languages are prevalent among the Scottish population, and more specifically, social security users. Census data is a key source of information on prevalent languages used, but does not provide a full, detailed current picture across the population. The latest Scotland’s Census (2022), for instance, does not account for more recent developments in migration patterns, such as the resettlement of people displaced by the war in Ukraine or other humanitarian crises. Prevalent languages among the Scottish Population

A large variety of languages are spoken in Scotland. The 2022 Census provides the most up-to-date data on the composition of Scotland’s population and languages spoken across the country. [3] Census participants were asked to report on the main language spoken at home (shown in Table 1). The results indicate that English remains overwhelmingly the main language spoken in Scotland, with 94% of the population reporting it as their main language. Among Scotland’s other official languages, the Census data shows that 13,433 people speak mainly Scots and 3,551 mainly Gaelic.

Table 1: Main Languages spoken at home in Scotland [3]

	Main language spoken at home (n= 5,294,863)				
	English	Scots	Gaelic	Sign language	Other language
No. of people aged 3 and over	5,002,242	13,433	3,551	2,619	273,015

Both Scots and Gaelic are increasing in prevalence among Scotland, supported by targeted Scottish Government policy to revive these languages. [4] The Scottish Languages Act 2025 formally granted official status to Gaelic and Scots, providing an overarching framework and targets to increase the presence of both languages in Scottish communities, education settings, and local authorities. [5] In the 2022 census, over 1.5 million people reported themselves as speaking Scots, with 1.17 million of these able to speak, read and write Scots. [3] The highest proportions of Scots speakers were found on The Shetland Islands, Aberdeenshire, Moray and Orkney Islands.

While spoken by a smaller proportion of the population than Scots, Gaelic remains culturally and linguistically significant and its prevalence is increasing. The 2011 Census records just over 57,000 people able to speak Gaelic, whereas the 2022 Census reports an increase to 69,701. [6] [3]

One study of Gaelic speakers in Glasgow found the most frequent users of Gaelic were parents/carers of a child in Gaelic education. A quarter of respondents reported being raised

in a Gaelic speaking household, with 41% of those also being raised in a Gaelic speaking community. Of those raised in a Gaelic speaking household, under half identified as native speakers. [7] Another recent study of Gaelic speakers in Glasgow found only one-tenth used Gaelic in non-social settings, such as when speaking with GPs or paying for shopping. Despite 80% of the study's respondents describing themselves as fluent Gaelic speakers, confidence in their spoken ability was less strongly reported and most did not feel confident speaking Gaelic when using public services or visiting businesses in Glasgow [8]. In contrast to the previous study, most of these participants had learnt Gaelic as adults.

Most Gaelic speakers are currently found in the northwest Highlands and Islands or Scottish cities; [9] Scotland's Census 2022 found Na h-Eileanan Siar is the most prominent Gaelic speaking council area with 57.2% of its population having some Gaelic skills. [3] Data from the 2011 Census indicates that those living in Barra, Vatersay, Eriskay, South Uist and northern Lewis were more likely to speak Gaelic than not, with between 1.1% to 1.5% of people in these areas having no skills in English, mostly due to speaking Gaelic [10].

Beyond Scotland's official languages, the 2022 Census recorded that 273,015 people living in Scotland (5.2% of the overall population) speak mainly "other languages". [3] The Census, however, does not provide a breakdown of specific languages and therefore it is not possible to identify which "other languages" are likely to be prevalent among the Scottish population from this source.

Information about specific languages may be drawn from census data on countries of birth and the 2022 Census illustrates the diversity of the Scottish population (shown in Annex 2). Many European countries are strongly represented in this data, as part of the legacy of the United Kingdom's past membership of the European Union. The UK was previously a popular destination country for EU migrants, with data from 2016 describing a five-year increase in the number of European Economic Area (EEA) nationals living in the UK from 700,000 to 3.3 million people. [11] Approximately half of these migrants moved from Poland and Romania, with a further 24% entering from Italy, Portugal and Spain, most likely triggered by high levels of unemployment in Southern Europe. [12]

While data on country of birth may indicate what languages might be present in the Scottish population, data on country of birth and ethnicity are possibly unreliable indicators of the language's individuals use in practice. Many countries are linguistically diverse, for example India, China or Nigeria are well-documented as multilingual societies, with dozens or even hundreds of recognised major or regional languages. [13] Migrants may also fluently speak multiple languages, including English, particularly where they come from minority language communities within their country of birth, or where borders cut across linguistic groups. [14] [15]

Although the 2022 Census asked about the "main language" spoken at home, it did not break the data down into specific community languages². [3] In 2011, Census data reported that Polish was the most widely spoken minority language, with around 54,186 people reporting it as their first language. [6] This is followed by Chinese languages (including Mandarin Chinese, Cantonese, Hakka, Min Nan Chinese, and Chinese), spoken at home by 27,903 people. Urdu (23,394 people), Punjabi languages (23,238 people) and French

² Though raw Scotland's Census 2022 output area data are available on country of birth by English language skills [here](#).

(14,623) also feature prominently. While many of these languages will likely still be prevalent within the Scottish population, the 2011 Census cannot be deemed to provide a reliable, representative picture of the Scottish population in 2026.

Providing a more up-to-date data source, the 2024 Scottish Schools Pupil Census further strengthens the understanding of languages spoken within Scotland (see Annex C). [16] In 2024, Polish was the most common non-English language among Scottish school pupils (17,253 pupils), followed by Urdu (7,899 pupils) and Arabic (7,111 pupils). It should be noted, however, that the data only represents pupils within state-funded education and does not include young people outwith the school system or those educated in independent schools.

2.2 English proficiency where English is a second language

The Scotland's Census 2022 found 94.2% of all people living in Scotland said they speak, read and write English well or very well, compared to 93.8% in 2011. [3] English proficiency datasets have been published for Scotland's Census 2022³. These show 9,067 people living in Scotland have no skills in English, 19,727 understand spoken English only, 46,535 speak and read English but do not write English and 157,969 speak but do not read or write English. It should not be assumed that people with English as a second language have greater literacy challenges than others. Recent data is not available on English proficiency in the UK. The 2012 International Survey of Adult Skills found that English as an additional language had no significant correlation with low literacy levels. However, this illustrates the risk of viewing English as a second language as a homogenous group, as English proficiency can vary significantly among those with English as a second language. An analysis of 2021 Census data from England and Wales found variations in English use and ability to speak English. Those who migrated at a younger age or who had lived in England and Wales for a long time were more likely to report speaking English as their main language. [17] This is likely to be similar for those living in Scotland too, though cannot be substantiated based on the available data.

2.3 Languages among social security users in Scotland

Data in the 2022 Census data indicates that most social security users in Scotland can communicate in English to some degree. This does not, however, account for the remaining 5.5% who mainly speak another language at home. [3] It can also not be assumed that reported English language skills remove the need for multilingual support. Data for the most recent client satisfaction survey by Social Security Scotland found that just over 75% of respondents reported English as their main language and just under a quarter (8,713) had another main language. [18] This suggests a higher proportion of non-English main-language speakers among social security applicants compared with the general population, however, no contextual information is given so it is unclear why the rate is so high.

Even where clients report speaking English, there may be limited proficiency or confidence levels, or a preference to use first languages when interacting with public services. While recognising the importance of English, migrants may choose to switch between different languages in different contexts. [19] Research by Stella and Kay found that migrant ESOL learners felt it was important to speak English to deal with public bodies and utility

³ The National Records of Scotland English Language Skills Scotland's Census 2022 datasets can be found [here](#).

companies and to increase employment opportunities. [20] Scottish Government research, however, has found that some who could speak English in a face-to-face conversation, did not feel comfortable reading websites and official information materials due to concerns about misunderstanding complicated and technical language. [21] The evidence implies that while people with first languages other than English may report speaking English, or speak English at home, they may prefer their first language in official settings, particularly where stress or bureaucratic processes are involved.

Given that people who speak other languages may prefer to use their first languages in official contexts, it is important to understand the languages prevalent among current or potential social security users in Scotland, however, there is a paucity of data on the prevalence of specific languages spoken by current social security users. Social Security Scotland funds interpretation and translation costs for clients who need information in languages other than English, but does not routinely publish comprehensive data on demographics, languages, or translating services. It offers interpreter support in over 100 languages for phone applications and provides translations of publicly available benefits information and documentation, such as fact sheets, in the following twelve languages⁴:

- Arabic
- Farsi
- Gaelic
- Kurdish Sorani
- Lithuanian
- Polish
- Romanian
- Russian
- Slovak
- Traditional Chinese
- Ukrainian
- Urdu

Some insight on language prevalence can be found in responses to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to Social Security Scotland, which indicates languages spoken among clients. For 2022, the top five language translations procured by Social Security Scotland were Polish, Arabic, Ukrainian, Romanian and Urdu. Over the 2024/2025 financial year, Social Security Scotland provided translations of 75 languages, spanning:

- Afrikaans
- Albanian
- Amharic
- Arabic
- Assyrian
- Belarusian
- Bengali
- British Sign Language
- Bulgarian
- Cantonese
- Croatian
- Czech
- Dari
- Dutch
- Edo
- Estonian
- Farsi
- Filipino
- French
- Georgian
- German
- Greek
- Gujarati
- Hindi
- Hungarian
- Italian
- Japanese
- Khmer
- Konkani
- Korean
- Krio
- Kurdish Kurmanji
- Kurdish Sorani
- Latvian
- Lingala
- Lithuanian
- Malay
- Malayalam
- Mandarin

⁴ See Social Security Scotland's 'Translated resources' webpage [here](#)

- Mandinka
- Nepalese
- Norwegian
- Oromo
- Polish
- Portuguese
- Punjabi
- Pushto
- Romanian
- Romany
- Russian
- Scottish Gaelic
- Sinhalese
- Slovak
- Slovenian
- Somali
- Spanish
- Swahili
- Swedish
- Sylheti
- Tamil
- Telugu
- Thai
- Tigrinya
- Turkish
- Twi
- Ukrainian
- Urdu
- Uzbek
- Vietnamese
- Welsh
- Wolof
- Yoruba

[22]

Breakdowns of Social Security Scotland costs for translation may show the prevalence of languages among social security users. Data drawn from a FOI response notes that the highest costs were for translations into: Arabic, Farsi, Gaelic, Polish, Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian, Urdu, and Traditional Chinese. [23]

When considering current and future language prevalence, consideration of the current and potential population profile of social security users in Scotland is important. Recent ethnicity data from the Social Security Equalities survey shows that 85% of applicants for social security benefits were White (including ‘Scottish’, ‘Other British’, Irish, ‘Gypsy/Traveller’, Polish and ‘Other white ethnic group’ identities, with 3% Asian, 1% African, and 8% preferring not to give an ethnicity. [24] It should be noted, however, that this data is taken from equalities forms submitted by clients alongside their benefits applications.

Social Security Scotland notes that equalities form response rates are lower among those who make telephone applications for Adult Disability Payment, Child Disability Payment, and Pension Age Disability Payment. [24] Online and postal application forms are in English only, and telephone applications are the only form of application for which Social Security Scotland offers an interpreting service, Equalities data, therefore, could be less representative of the diversity of clients, and their range of respective languages, who apply for these benefits.

Increased migration to Scotland warrants careful consideration of the country’s changing demographics and the implications for Social Security Scotland. There is evidence of the growing presence of minority ethnic communities within the groups strongly associated with social security usage. For example, although no official data exists on the relationship between minority ethnic status and receipt of disability benefits, people who belong to minority ethnic backgrounds nonetheless comprise 3.7% of those with a reported learning disability or developmental disorder. [25] [26] This compares to Census 2022 data suggesting 7.1% of the population are from a non-White ethnic group, or 12.9% of the population from any ethnic group (non-White and White minority groups combined). Similarly it is estimated that the number of Black and minority ethnic unpaid carers has risen by 143% between 2011 and 2022, from 14,458 to 35,375, with the latter figure representing 5% of the estimated total number of carers in Scotland. [27] [28] The authors note a significantly faster increase than the white majority. Given that disabled people and unpaid

carers are among the groups most likely to access benefits, this has direct implications regarding languages people may use when engaging with Social Security Scotland [29] [30].

2.4 Summary

Scotland's population is ageing and becoming increasingly diverse, with deaths now significantly outnumbering births and recent population growth largely being sustained by migration. While most people in Scotland were born in Scotland and speak English as their main language, migration over the past two decades has increasingly come from non-English-speaking countries, alongside continued migration from the rest of the UK and the EU. The data on language prevalence reflects this change. Alongside growing numbers of Scots and Gaelic speakers, over 5% of the population mainly speaks another language at home, with the most prominent including Polish, Arabic, Ukrainian, Romanian, and Urdu. Evidence suggests that English proficiency varies widely and that many people who can speak English prefer to use their first language when interacting with public services, particularly in stressful situations. Social Security Scotland therefore serves a population with diverse language needs and a growing demand for interpretation and translation services.

3. Experiences of applying for social security for people whose first language is not English

3.1 Introduction

This chapter considers literature on the experiences of applying for social security for people whose first language is not English. It considers evidence from both the Scottish social security system as well as that from other parts of the UK to further illustrate points raised. Evidence was found on a range of barriers that clients may face in accessing social security, both in terms of a limited awareness that may prevent them from applying in the first place, as well as challenges experienced once an application is underway.

Consideration is given to how clients might gain knowledge or information about social security benefits available to them, and what factors might play a role in a lack of awareness. In addressing experiences of the application process itself, the evidence draws on user experiences with written materials, application forms, and telephone applications.

3.2 Awareness of social security benefits

Overall, the evidence suggests there is a low awareness of social security benefits among people whose first language is not English, including in Scotland, and this section explores likely reasons for this.

Most evidence focuses on awareness among minority ethnic groups rather than specific groups of people who speak English as a second language. Low awareness of benefits or the eligibility criteria of those benefits among marginalised groups in the UK has been widely reported. [31] [32] [33] [34]. Low awareness of benefits among groups likely to have English as a second language has also been identified as an issue in Scotland . [1] [18] [35] [36] [21] [37] For instance, stakeholders felt awareness of the five family payments was low among those with English as a second language. [38]

The literature indicates that a key reason for lack of awareness of benefits is having little exposure to people or places that can provide such information. In Scotland it has been noted that marginalisation can stem from: isolation in later life; a lack of engagement with education, employment or training; carer status; digital exclusion; recent migration or a lack of awareness of community places where information would be shared. [39] [26] [21] [40] [27] [24] [41] [42] [43]. These findings replicate those identified in UK based studies. [39] [44] [45] [32] [34]

UK based studies have identified a lack of prior contact with the benefits system can also result in a low awareness of benefits. [31] This has also been raised as an issue via Scottish social security experience panel research involving those with English as a second language. [46] [35] For instance, in one UK-based study, a little over 20% of migrants who were eligible to apply for benefits either felt they were not eligible for benefits or did not know, rising to 27% with indefinite leave to remain and 32% of eligible pre-settled status holders (i.e. people with pre-settled status who were also in work). [47] Independent information and advice services can help people maximise their income through providing support to access benefits. However, in recent research with minority ethnic carers in Scotland, 44% of respondents agreed with the statement 'I did not know that information and advice is available', with only 10% reporting no barriers to obtaining advice. [27]

Low awareness of benefits can also occur for other reasons and is likely to be a particular issue for those with communication needs living in Scotland, given their reliance on others for assistance. [2] [18] [48] Language barriers can make it hard for people to navigate information when it is only provided in English. In Scotland this has been found to affect the ability to find information, understand information and to express oneself. [27] [49] [50] [48] [41] Recent social security experience panel research with carers found many were unaware of which services offered interpretation support or provision of information in their first language. [35]

Written information can be a barrier if it is only available in English, particularly when solely provided in a digital format. [27] [45] People with communication difficulties who had looked at Social Security Scotland's websites were less likely to say the websites were 'easy to navigate' (68%) and the 'information easy to understand', compared to those with no additional communication needs (76% and 77% respectively). [51] To illustrate, the 'Translated resources' page of Social Security Scotland has a button in English that states 'Apply in a language that's not English' which takes the reader to a page written in English. Accessing materials in minority languages can also be a barrier where someone has low literacy in their native language. [34] [38]

Low awareness of benefits has been found in Scotland to be compounded by the potential for miscommunication, inconsistency or inaccuracies in information provision, for instance inconsistent advice given by different workers or misinformation spread in communities. [18] [49] Challenges understanding who can apply, and how to apply, for benefits have been identified in relation to the Scottish social security system. [36] [49] [43] [21] For instance, minority ethnic participants taking part in a Social Security Experience Panel talked about the lack of clear information on eligibility. [21] This is likely to impact those with English as a second language due to the reliance on other community members for information, often provided verbally which can potentially result in complex information being inaccurately interpreted into other languages due to fragmented understanding.

In addition, community-held beliefs or misconceptions about services can also impact awareness and up-take in both Scotland and across the UK, such as:

- not identifying with concepts of disability or caring or not wanting to be seen to accept help; [27] [35] [49] [34]
- believing benefits are given automatically, without having to apply; [52]
- a desire to avoid services due to fears of negative consequences such as having their children removed, being arrested or being deported despite having the right to remain. [40] [50] [31]

Perceived complexity of eligibility criteria or the service landscape has also been found to contribute to a lack of awareness or knowledge of social security benefits among certain groups, including those with English as a second language.

Issues relating to the service landscape identified in Scotland include: people being unaware of which organisations provide benefits or of the roles of support agencies more broadly; a lack of signposting from other organisations and providers; a lack of cultural familiarity with government services among New Scots; and general confusion of changes in responsibilities between the UK Government and the Scottish Government or of differences between the

DWP and Social Security Scotland. [21] [50] [18] [53] [49] [1] This can lead to time wasted searching for relevant information resulting in financial challenges. [43] [49] As one carer with English as a second language is quoted as saying during a Social Security Experience Panel discussion:



“We don’t know how to apply, how to get it. We don’t know who qualifies and doesn’t qualify.” [35]: 3

There is some evidence that intersectionality is relevant here too, where multiple and compounding inequalities might intertwine to create further barriers for people with English as a second language. For instance, UK wide reports have found people experiencing more than one type of disadvantage are likely to experience low awareness. [39] [54] [31] [37] [45] This was also reported in a Scottish report on intersectionality. [41] To illustrate this, complex information can create barriers for people with certain health conditions, which is likely to make it exhausting to comprehend for someone who also has English as a second language. [49]

Evidence from Scotland suggests people with English as a second language who are aware of benefits often find out about them through their local communities. Common sources of information on benefits include through people they are in contact with, such as friends and family, ‘word-of-mouth’ or workers supporting them and those relied on to assist with communication. [36] [48] [51] [21] [27] [1] [40]

Community-based resources (e.g. Job Centre, Citizen’s Advice, libraries, GP practices, coffee mornings) have been identified in Scotland as sources of information, as are faith settings, such as Mosques, Temples and Gurdwaras. [27] [55] [21] [48] Similar findings are reported elsewhere in the UK [56] [52] Recommendations in the Scottish literature have therefore been made to promote Social Security Scotland and social security benefits more widely in trusted places like community or faith settings, or through welfare rights advisors located in these premises. [35] [43] [55] [21] [40] [37]

Approaches to promotion of certain Scottish benefits to support families were highlighted as positive with claimants for whom English is a second language. For instance, promotion of Scottish Child Payment was felt to have been especially effective, with one study also singling this benefit out, noting a mother reported hearing about it from a friend. [40] [36] This campaign had involved paid for marketing, engagement with stakeholders who shared messaging in innovative ways, such as through school enrolment or health visitor packs, and inclusion of materials in the Baby Box. [57]

3.3 Experiences of applying for benefits among those who speak English as a second language

This section considers evidence of applying for social security benefits where a person’s first language is not English. This includes views on social security written materials, challenges with application forms, as well as how challenges with application forms might intersect with other disadvantages experienced by people whose first language is not English. Finally, it explores the challenges of making a social security application by phone, including the evidence on interpretation support.

For their current application processes, Social Security Scotland offers the use of translators and interpreting services to assist with applications made by telephone. Social Security Scotland offers application support through translations in over 100 languages with support from interpreters. Clients are not currently able to apply for social security benefits online or by written form in any language other than English. Social Security Scotland does, however, provide benefit factsheets in 12 alternative languages and offers to translate decision reports when a determination of entitlement is made.

3.3.1 Views on social security written materials

Social Security Scotland's provision of benefit factsheets in minority languages aligns with research that suggests written materials are preferred by people with English language needs. [58] Written guidance allows clients to use dictionaries, and for family members or friends to help with translation. Scottish Government research has shown that some clients with English as a second language found it helpful to have information in a written, paper format, so they had a copy they could refer to and take their time understanding. [35] Views differed on whether this was a translation in their own language or written material in English. In other Scottish Government research on minority ethnic clients, participants wanted to see more translated materials, including Social Security Scotland communications and any additional information sent with application decision letters. [21]

Limited data exists on what people think of translated materials from Social Security Scotland, though one client reported translation services had always been available to support his discussions. [43] Another survey noted that some staff thought translation processes were good, but other staff described clients experiencing long waits and sometimes low-quality translations, which often delayed decision letters; staff also felt they had received inadequate training and guidance on inclusive communication processes. [59]

3.3.2 Challenges with forms among clients who speak English as a second language

Given that many social security clients perceive social security application forms to be long, complex and sometimes unclear, it is likely these can present a barrier for those who speak English as a second language living in Scotland. [1] [46] This was found to be the case in evaluations of the Best Start Grant, the Young Carer Grant [60] [61] Social Security Experience Panel research with Gypsy/Travellers, refugees, and seasonal migrant workers found clients perceived the application forms as repetitive and long, and found it difficult to understand what information was being requested from them. [48] In another English study, many participants also reported difficulty expressing their care needs in writing. [62]

Evaluations of the five family benefits and Young Carers grant awarded in Scotland note people with English as a second language experience benefit applications as challenging. [60] [61] [38] Respondents in the interim qualitative evaluation of the Best Start Grant suggested the provision of support and advice to help complete the grant application would help those who experienced difficulties in reading and writing and for those for whom English is not their first language. [60]



"I have been advised we are unable to send translated copies of completed application forms to clients who do not speak English, meaning they do not get the same level of information provided to them accessibly like an English speaker would." [63]: 50

Application forms can prompt negative emotional experiences among clients and particularly those who speak English as a second language. The Scottish social security experience panel research with Gypsy/Travellers, refugees and seasonal migrant workers found clients felt anxious and stressed by benefits application processes. [48] Adjustments in tone on forms were identified in a 2018 Scottish research report as being key to reducing stigma and stress for applicants. [46]



"If I read some information on my own, I can't work out exactly who is eligible, what is expected of you once you are getting benefits. I can't work out other bits of the process, and I would feel like I was telling a lie if I tried to answer something I didn't fully understand." [21]: 23

The challenge of completing social security application forms when a person's first language is not English may also intersect with other disadvantages to create further barriers to accessing benefits. Application forms may pose extra challenges for those who do not speak English as a first language, with poor literacy levels; other than limited qualitative evidence, there is a lack of data to substantiate this claim.

As noted in chapter 2, it should not be assumed that such individuals will have lower English literacy ability than White adults. Individuals may have limited literacy in English and low literacy levels in their first language, seen particularly in elderly people with English as a second language. [64] Stella and Kay's mapping of ESOL provision in Scotland found that ESOL learners ranged from highly qualified people who need to learn or improve their English, to those with broader literacy needs and with little schooling in their own countries. [20]

Stakeholders involved in a review of five Scottish family benefits noted people can experience challenges understanding interpreted materials where they were illiterate in their own language or spoke a rare dialect. [38]

Digital exclusion for those with lived experience of poverty and intersecting protected characteristics can also create challenges in accessing online application forms as highlighted in research with Social Security Experience Panel members. [48] Other Scottish research has found digital literacy and access can be particularly excluding for older clients and for women from some communities. [35] [49] [65]



"Because they are not literate don't know where to go or how to get help. Sometimes women rely on their husbands." [21]: 24

Challenges with application forms and fear of making errors are also worsened by the bureaucratic language and level of English literacy required for social security application forms. [25] [57] Social Security Scotland have invested in Easy Read resources, based on research that emphasises the importance of explaining benefits application processes in a clear and accessible way. [1] Issues relating to social security system complexity are considered further in the next chapter.

3.3.3 Challenges with telephone applications

For people who wish to communicate verbally in a language other than English, Social Security Scotland provide an interpreting service, with this available only for telephone applications and can be booked in advance. One Scottish study found support from an interpreter for making an application can be a positive experience [36] Telephone interpretation can work well if implemented correctly, particularly where extra measures have been considered by case workers, such as clarifying professional terminology with an interpreter before an interview. [66] [67] In fact, research on social work has demonstrated the significance of the case worker's skill in managing interpreter-mediated sessions and improving outcomes for non-native-speaking families. [68]

Only offering support for applications in other languages by telephone does, however, constrain clients to this sole application method and leaves them reliant on interpreters. Applying via telephone calls can also cause difficulties if there are issues with interpreting; there is evidence from Scotland, that interpreting services can lead to poor outcomes for people if there are issues,, for instance, as they could result in limited uptake of services contributing to persistent inequalities. [36] [69] Information provided in a recent FOI response found only three complaints had been received by the translating company commissioned by Social Security Scotland and reported that data was not held on languages that had received the most negative feedback or complaints. [70] Charter research by Social Security Scotland, however, found numerous issues with interpreting services such as people's preferred interpreters not being allowed, limited knowledge among staff of how to access interpreters, interpreters being rude or unreliable and the translation process as slow and sometimes low quality. [63] Other UK based studies have noted similar issues with poor quality interpreting, an inability to retain the same interpreter over time and limitations of interpreters in acting as advocates for clients. [34] [71] There can also be issues with interpreters using a different regional dialect or having different accents from their clients, that may make it difficult for them to be understood over the phone. [35] [69] [72]. This issue has been raised for instance by Punjabi clients in relation to the Scottish social security system. [35]



“Sometimes an interpreter is provided, yet they may not have the appropriate skills. In some countries, for example, there are very distinctive regional differences in dialect. So, the assumption that an interpreter is right for the job, based on a broad-brush understanding can be profoundly misleading.” [55]: 41

As they were perceived to be less rushed than helpline contact, face-to-face meetings were also preferred by some with low English language proficiency, offering a better opportunity to clarify any areas of confusion than on the telephone. [58] Other research has suggested that live video interpretation may be an effective replacement for telephone interpreter services. [66] [21]

3.4 Summary

The evidence reviewed in this section demonstrates that people whose first language is not English tend to have low awareness of Scottish security benefits, alongside significant challenges in accessing information and applying. Language barriers intersect with social isolation, digital exclusion, limited literacy, and unfamiliarity with the welfare system. These challenges are reinforced by complex eligibility rules and fear of negative consequences. Although translated materials and interpreting support are valued, their effectiveness can be inconsistent. Application processes are widely experienced as long, complex and stressful, particularly for those with English as a second language. Awareness and engagement are more likely where information is shared through trusted community networks.

4. Parts of the social security system people find difficult

4.1 Introduction

This chapter considers literature on what parts of the Scottish social security system people whose first language is not English may find difficult. The literature identifies a range of barriers that can affect experiences with the social security system, either during their contact with the system or that impact their experience of the benefit system and willingness to apply for benefits.

Practical, personal and cultural barriers and challenges when attempting to access social security systems are described. These include the ways services are delivered, including treatment by Social Security Scotland staff or other professionals and complexity of systems and processes. In addition, cultural beliefs and personal experiences can impact perceptions and experiences of engaging with social security systems are explored, including cultural beliefs, poverty and mistrust.

4.2 Satisfaction with the Scottish social security system

There are fairly high levels of satisfaction with people's overall experience of engaging with Social Security Scotland, including among people with English as a second language as shown in Table 2 below.

However, it is evident that satisfaction with Social Security Scotland has decreased over the past three years, with rates declining from 90% of those with English as a second language rating their overall experience as 'very good' or 'good' in 2022-2023 to 80% in 2024-25. Reasons for the declining satisfaction rate are unknown but coincides with declining levels of trust reported across all client groups (from 80% in 2022-2023 to 72% in 2024-2025). Satisfaction levels are broadly in line with service satisfaction levels among DWP clients, albeit DWP satisfaction ratings appear have increased in the past three years while those for Social Security Scotland have declined. DWP do not break down satisfaction ratings by main language used, though no statistically significant difference was found in satisfaction rates by ethnicity.

Table 2: % of respondents rating their overall experience with Social Security Scotland as 'very good' or 'good'

	Main language		Can speak, write and understand English very well	
	English	Other	Yes	No
2022–2023 [73]	88%	90%	89%	87%
2023–2024 [51]	80%	83%	81%	80%
2024–2025 [18]	76%	80%	78%	75%

4.3 Barriers when dealing with social security systems

This section should be read in conjunction with the sections on awareness of social Scottish security benefits (section 3.2) and on the application process, including the application form (section 3.3), as both contain relevant information on why people with English as a second language may find accessing benefits difficult, such as due to low awareness of benefits, difficulties understanding information particularly when only provided in English, and finding application forms challenging.

4.3.1 Treatment by staff

People with English as a foreign language may experience treatment by public sector staff as difficult. Issues relating to the Scottish social security system can include feeling misunderstood, judged, or treated dismissively or rudely. [53] [18] [48] [21] Scottish social security staff not acknowledging anxieties caused by claiming benefits or speaking too quickly or not making enough effort or spending enough time to help people understand and guide them through the system have also been identified in work undertaken with the Social Security Experience Panels. [21] [35] Similar issues have been identified among Department for Work and Pensions and Job Centre Plus staff. [52] [74]

A key factor identified in the UK and European literature is a lack of cultural sensitivity among staff. Culture and language can be entwined and it may be difficult to separate cultural aspects from linguistic meanings. [69] [75] [56] [31] For instance, research from elsewhere highlights issues when staff do not respect cultural values or traditions such as honouring traditional health beliefs or gender roles, family ties and collectivist approaches to care. [76] [56] [32] This has also been found in a recent study of carers living in Scotland. [27]

In contrast to the earlier concerns raised about interpreter use, it has been found that interpreters can act as cultural and language ‘conduits’, decreasing the possibility of inaccurate assessments and lessening power differentials. [77] Similarly, the value of using trusted partners, such as third sector organisations, to engage with the system on behalf of older people from minority ethnic communities has been noted by Independent Age, a charity supporting people facing financial hardship in later life. Scottish Government research highlights the value of employing people from minority groups and providing better benefits training for bilingual support workers. [35] This has also been reported in UK based studies. [31] [52]



“A few talked about how awkward moments with staff – both on the phone and in person - had made them less likely to persevere with the system.” [21]: 7

Another pertinent factor that may affect experiences with the Scottish social security system is perceived discrimination, and this may explain some of the reported staff treatment noted above. There is evidence that people from minority groups experience discrimination by public services, including the social security system, in Scotland. [35] [36] [21] [48] [50] Similar findings are reported in the UK literature. [31] [69] [78] [79] This can occur directly, being discriminated against by staff with whom they come into contact, or

more indirectly, in the form of institutional and structural discrimination. Under the Equality Act 2010, direct discrimination occurs where a person is treated less favourably because of a protected characteristic, while indirect discrimination arises where a seemingly neutral provision, criterion or practice places people who share a protected characteristic at a particular disadvantage and cannot be objectively justified.

Discrimination could more commonly be experienced among refugees, asylum seekers or mobile populations compared to other groups. [18] [36] [48] [55] Both race and migrant status can trigger discrimination, and the impact is cumulative, acting as a 'double disadvantage', likely compounded even further among those who may experience challenges communicating in English. [78]

Some studies have found participants reporting they had not been discriminated against, and treatment from Social Security Scotland staff was praised in the Scottish Human Rights Commission study. [55] [36] Overt discrimination may have decreased with time, but according to academic authors considering the topic generally, other insidious forms of racism are still prevalent, for instance, microaggressions and systemic bias. [80] [81] [82] As a result, it may be difficult for some people to articulate that they have experienced racism or indirect discrimination.



“There is some prejudice or some attitude in there. I really believe that’s the attitude they’re holding. When you’re not speaking English or [you’re] from an ethnic minority [background] they make it harder. [...] It’s easy to just follow the process. It’s easier for them to reject people than stay on the call and give people as much information as they can. [...] Yes, you need to be professional but at the end of the day you need to be a human being as well.” [35]: 7

4.3.2 Complexity of language and systems

Difficulties for people with English as a second language can arise when engaging, or thinking about engaging, with the Scottish social security system because of complexities with the official language, systems or processes, which can put people off applying. [40] Additionally, some partner agencies (external organisations that support people to engage with Social Security Scotland) have found navigating the Scottish system more complex when supporting those with specific needs. [63]

A body of research exists on difficulties with bureaucratic and technical language in accessing other services, such as health and social care. In the Scottish Government research with those who are seldom heard living in Scotland, language used to describe social security is considered 'complicated and technical'. [49] This finding is supported by other research that identifies people with English as a second language living in Scotland perceiving benefits information as complex. [26] [27] [1]

Communication issues identified among people living in Scotland include people struggling to understand what is said, being unclear what acronyms mean, access to digital based information for those experiencing digital exclusion, and the length and complexity of automated systems, such as on phone calls. [1] [42] [36] Similar findings have been identified in UK based studies. [83] [44] [45] Difficulties have also been encountered during communication with Social Security Scotland over problems with payment amounts and

timings, though this was across all respondent types not just those likely to have English as a second language. [73]

Medical terminology or “jargon” may not easily translate between first languages and English and therefore have presented communication challenges for clients in describing their situation in Scottish health settings. [55] MECOPP found that many terms used to describe dementia from a medical perspective do not have an equivalent within community languages. [64] MECOPP have also encountered this issue in other contexts, producing their own translation guide and animated video with the guidance of interpreters to translate and explain the more confusing and complex language around the social care system of Self-Directed Support (SDS). [84]

Social security systems and processes can be perceived as complex with challenges in understanding commitments and rules or when making challenges and appeals. [45] [32] [34] [85] The Scottish Government has noted complexity has been raised by many stakeholders, largely in relation to UK-based benefit applications rather than the Scottish system. However, other evidence published by the Scottish Government suggests people in minority groups also perceive complexity in the Scottish social security systems, such as complex eligibility criteria, application processes and lengthy decision-making periods. [57] [49] [26] In particular, research into seldom heard groups within the Scottish social security system discusses this issue in some detail. [49] This has led to calls for greater use of plain English and culturally relevant language to improve understanding, with information provided about rights and services shared in accessible formats – like videos, community radio and social media – and translated into multiple languages. [27]

One report suggests carers tend to view the application process for Carer’s Allowance in Scotland fairly positively as it is considered as straightforward and trust-based, though other studies report carers and young carers from minority ethnic communities can find applying for carers benefits through Social Security Scotland complex to navigate. [61] [27]

4.3.3 Delivery of services

A range of issues have been identified regarding how services are delivered that impact negatively on how people experience service provision. While many of these may not be specific to people with English as a second language, they are likely to further compound barriers faced by them. Within the Scottish based literature reviewed, issues included excessive waiting times or delays or conversely, tight timeframes, repeatedly providing the same information, assumptions made around administrative and clerical skill levels, and the need to engage with two systems – the DWP and Social Security Scotland - if in receipt of benefits from each. [1] [42] [49] [46] [40]

A lack of flexibility over appointment times has been noted within Social Security Scotland’s Local Delivery Service, with clients only provided general morning or afternoon slots, rather than specific times. [1] The SCoSS report on those with communication needs found access to the Local Delivery Service could be impacted by people’s busy schedules through offering general time slots.. [1] MECOPP also note timings of services can clash with prayer times or religious days, so potentially, general time slots can also be inconvenient for observing religious practices. [27]. However, to identify if people do experience this as an issue within the Scottish social security system it would need to be investigated further, as no evidence was found as part of this review.

Such issues are not specific to the Scottish social security system as similar challenges have also been identified in the UK benefits system, for instance, delays in receiving initial payments, excessive waiting times and a preference for working with the same advisor to avoid repeating themselves were found in a study of minority ethnic customers use of Jobcentre Plus services. [74] [54] [85] A lack of specialist support for New Scots via Jobcentres and the DWP has also been identified [53]

4.3.4 Obtaining support from Social Security systems

Of respondents to the 2022/2023 Social Security Scotland client survey, 17% had faced barriers to getting help from the organisation. [73] Those with communication needs were far more likely to say they had experienced such a barrier 28%, compared to 13% who had not. [1] For instance, there is evidence that people have to ask for support, rather than being offered it proactively by Social Security Staff and that awareness of the availability of advocacy support through VoiceAbility is low and that more could be done to promote it. [1] [40]. [53] An evaluation of the Best Start Grant found some recipients were unaware its guidance letter was available in other languages and needed help to read it. [86]

4.3.5 Applications denied

Data from Social Security Scotland is published on social security applications denied by ethnicity. Published data on applications denied for those whose first language is not English was not found. The ethnicity data is obtained from applicants, based on optional self-reporting. While the percentage of applications denied are given, the number of applications denied are not. The number of applications denied has therefore been extrapolated in Table 3 below based on the total number of people in each ethnic group who reported on their ethnicity.

As shown in Table 3, applications denied have increased across all ethnic groups since 2020/22, except for the 'prefer not to say' category, which has a lower percentage of declined applications. Variation exists across benefits, for instance, the 2025 report highlighted the overall approval rate had mainly declined from the previous year due to lower approval rates for Adult Disability Payment and Child Disability Payment.

Table 5: Scottish social security applications denied by ethnicity

Ethnic group	1 December 2020 to 31 May 2022 [87]		1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025 [24]	
	No.	%	No.	%
White	13,933	23	46,966	37
Asian	749	28	1,997	41
African	247	23	635	36
Caribbean or black	18	23	119	41
Other ethnic group	192	30	567	36
Mixed or multiple	109	22	534	39
Prefer not to say	546	23	2,605	22
Total	15,794		53,422	

There is some variation across benefits, for instance, the 2025 report highlighted the overall approval rate had mainly declined from the previous year due to lower approval rates for Adult Disability Payment and Child Disability Payment.

The Social Security Scotland Client Satisfaction Survey 2022-2023 [73] found one in ten respondents had received an unsuccessful decision on their application. Of those, 11% asked for Social Security Scotland to review the decision, 14% made a new application for the same benefit, and more than half took no further action (57%). Around a third (32%) of Best Start Foods applicants reported being unsuccessful with their application; [86] of those, the majority (76%) reported taking no further action. Being denied a benefit can also deter people from applying for further support in the future [73].

Social Security Scotland note applications can be denied for multiple reasons including the client not being a Scottish resident, not being in receipt of a qualifying benefit or the application being made outwith an application window. It acknowledges it is currently not possible to analyse the data based on denial reasons and state they are working with the Scottish Government to improve the data. [24] Cebula and Evans suggest other potential factors for denying applications such as a lack of accessible materials that are easy to understand as well as discrimination [88]. This is supported by the limited literature on this subject. One older UK study reported that misunderstanding requirements due to language barriers can lead to applications being refused, for instance, due to people not being aware that they needed to attend interviews within a certain timeframe. [52] However, evidence of this was not found in the Scottish literature. Fear around applying for benefits in case

they are denied has been reported among those with English as a second language. Concerns about making mistakes due to not understanding correctly, and thus being denied benefits or even prosecuted, has been reported in the Scottish literature [48] [26]. This anxiety can also extend to being nervous about speaking to others about their potential right to claim benefits in case their application is denied [89].

4.3.6 Institutional racism and structural disadvantage

This section explores the evidence on factors such as inequality, structural barriers and institutional racism. The data cited below indicates that the context of social security policies, processes and practice may combine to deter people with English as a second language from applying for benefits or mean they experience the system negatively when they do.

Institutional racism is viewed here as systemic disadvantage embedded in conventions, policies and structural practices. [90] Racism is considered to operate in tandem with other forms of hierarchy and disadvantage that infiltrates structures, and while racism and discrimination are not the same, they have clear links. [91]

Social Security Scotland reported 92% of staff felt confident they could deliver a service without discriminating against others, though 8% did not for reasons related to practical constraints, high workloads and problems with internal processes, policies and systems in practice. [63] Formal and informal barriers to accessing public services were often found to intertwine with direct discrimination or disempowering systems in the Poverty and Inequality Commission's report on intersectionality. [41] In this study, language barriers were found to be a 'specific and persistent challenge' for participants seeking to access public services, with the authors highlighting:



“Participants’ faced practical barriers – in the form of language barriers, a lack of access to information, or complicated routes to accessing services or support – that often interacted with overt discrimination engaged by individuals and enabled by the systems they were part of.” [41]: 18

The report concluded that poverty in Scotland cannot be effectively addressed without embedding intersectionality across all policymaking, with current strategies considered too often treating issues in isolation – gender, race, disability, migration and class. Its authors highlight the significant gaps in data that make it difficult to understand intersecting inequalities and that structural inequalities must be explicitly recognised as drivers of poverty.

Structural inequalities are 'the outcomes of the interaction between social categories, power relations and contexts' which are unlikely to be overcome at an individual level. [92] [53] There is considerable evidence that poverty in the UK is structural in nature, and disproportionately impacts certain groups, including those from minority ethnic communities. [93] [56] [44] [94] [95]

UK asylum policy has been considered one causative factor in such structural barriers, whereby policy interacts with the social security system in ways that systematically exclude certain groups from protection, reinforcing existing inequalities rather than merely reflecting them. [96] [53] [95] In Scotland, asylum remains reserved to Westminster which

creates structural tension, whereby devolved systems may seek inclusive practice, but UK level asylum rules limit eligibility and constrain what Social Security Scotland can achieve.

Fisher et al. highlights research that shows unemployment levels among New Scots with the right to work remain consistent despite their varied backgrounds, experiences, education levels, employment history, English language skills, gender and age before arrival in Scotland. [53] They also note many employment related ESOL classes require accredited ESOL qualifications to attend, acting as a barrier to employment. Similarly, structural barriers were discussed in Brown's analysis of the role of ESOL in the settlement of immigrants. [97] While this example refers to employment, similar structural barriers are likely to exist in relation to social security. For instance, Joseph Rowntree Foundation's literature review of ethnicity and family dynamics in the UK underscores the role of institutional and structural discrimination in areas such as health, social security and housing policy. [56] The role of systemic racism in Scotland has also been highlighted in a recent report on housing insecurity by Shelter Scotland and the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights (CRER). [98]

There is considerable evidence of a tightening net of welfare support since the introduction of austerity measures. [99] [100] [101] [56] [95] Explanations identified in the evidence for this increasingly restrictive welfare system include the rise of right-wing populism and institutional racism. [102] [103] [56] [104] [85] [105] Benefit reductions and cuts have been found to disproportionately impact those from minority ethnic communities, with reductions in eligibility and amounts awarded. [56] [106] [107] [100]

Recent research into structural and institutional racism found that these themes are "far from being properly addressed by the media, the general public and policymakers" ([108]: pg. 4), with discrimination and marginalisation felt to be underrepresented in the evidence base. [39] The experience of structural disadvantage that minimises the power of individual agency, alongside an increasingly politicised welfare climate, may influence why people choose not to engage with the Scottish social security system, or why they may report negative experiences when they do. In other words, people may view the system negatively, for instance, expecting not to be treated fairly, which in turn may influence their experience or willingness to apply for benefits.

4.4 Situational, practical and cultural factors

Factors such as culture and beliefs may impact how people with English as a second language may perceive applying for, and accessing, benefits. This can include concepts that people find challenging due to their cultural meaning; stigma; a lack of official documentation; the impact of living in poverty or mistrust in public services.

There is limited research on ways personal factors or circumstances can influence views or take up of social security benefits among people with English as a second language. Similarly, there was little evidence on how practical barriers might impact experiences of social security, except for having limited time to apply or engage e.g. due to caring responsibilities or a lack of required documentation. Obstacles in obtaining photo ID or birth certificates have been found to act as a barrier to taking up benefits. [27] [41] [49] Cases where National Insurance numbers have been delayed and refugees have been denied income support and housing benefit through DWP have been reported in Scotland, even though these should not be required when an individual has a valid biometric residence

permit. [53] This study also highlights New Scots were unable to open bank accounts when they did not have a fixed residence.

Personal considerations, such as experiences of trauma, negative emotions and a lack of confidence are also likely to affect willingness to apply for benefits, though there is a lack of research in this area. Research consistently shows that many New Scots experience repeated trauma at multiple stages of their journeys, which can significantly affect their mental health. [53] [109] Feelings of hopelessness, isolation and abandonment due to experiencing discrimination have been identified among Africans living in Scotland. [50] For instance, the Poverty and Inequality Commission noted that while one lone parent with English as a second language had successfully appealed against a Universal Credit decision, she knew others in a similar position who would be unlikely to do so due to a lack of understanding, capacity or strength, and highlighted some had decided '*just to live with it*'. [41]

4.4.1 Views on social security concepts

Difficulties in engaging with social security may also reflect variations in how welfare systems are conceptually understood or applied in practice in different countries. When moving away from their home country, migrants have to build "structural knowledge" about welfare and public services, beyond language skills. [110] Comparative research on welfare states has identified significant variation in their scope and underlying principles. [111] Further evidence demonstrates substantial international variation in the scope and generosity of welfare systems. [112]

The distinction between entitlement and charity is particularly important. Some clients can experience claiming benefits as feeling they are seeking charity, rather than believing it to be their right [54] [113] In some linguistic and cultural contexts, welfare is not framed as an automatic right. [114] The idea of charity or receiving help from support services may also be highly associated with stigma for minority ethnic communities, with feelings of embarrassment and shame or fear of other people finding out. [21] [36] For example, research has found that close community ties in Bangladeshi and Pakistani groups can entrench stigma around asking for help from formal support services, resulting from lack of trust or fear of lack of confidentiality. [56] In some communities, the idea of receiving money from the government is less acceptable than in others, but some specialists feel that this is often over-emphasised when exploring barriers to social security engagement. [32]

Cultural perceptions of a lack of entitlement may apply particularly to certain concepts, such as 'disability', which may be interpreted differently by speakers of languages other than English. [34] In some languages, this may refer to learning disabilities, or severe physical or mental impairments. [34] Conceptions of mental illness may also differ between cultures, particularly where mental health is stigmatised; these beliefs may act as a deterrent to seeking help. [27] [55] In some languages, mental health translates as 'mad'. [55] Research by MECOPP has highlighted different cultural perceptions of dementia, where cognitive decline may be seen as a normal part of the ageing process, or alternatively where the condition is highly stigmatised and leads to community isolation. [64]

The concept of being a carer may also differ between cultures and languages. Caring for ageing or vulnerable relatives can be a norm among adult children from various cultures, leading to perceptions in which the concept of an unpaid, informal carer is not understood

or there is no word for ‘carer’ in the community language. [27] A ‘solve it within the family’ attitude, where caring is a duty, may mean that cultural norms around caregiving clash with the idea of seeking formal help. [35] [27] It is important to recognise this is not universal across minority groups. [56]

Some languages may define terms like ‘carer’ based on the context and therefore consideration of this is required to produce high quality translated materials. For example, Cantonese-language research participants mentioned that carer could be defined in two different ways, denoting a paid or unpaid carer. They highlighted that there is often a need for double-translation in some terms: a literal translation from English to Cantonese, and then to an alternative Cantonese term that is more appropriate for the context. [35]



“There is a stigma with getting care providers in. It’s your duty and you are seen as failing in that duty. Therefore, it becomes a last resort.” [27]: 36

4.4.2 Experiences of poverty

A considerable body of research addresses poverty among people from minority ethnic communities (see notably the work of Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Runnymede). While this largely goes beyond the scope of this research to address in detail, it is worth noting that people from many minority ethnic communities are much more likely to experience poverty, including deep protracted poverty, than most ‘white British’ people, and evidence indicates Asian or Asian British groups are experiencing rising relative poverty levels [115] [116] However, it should also be noted that ‘white’ people from certain countries could also be more likely to experience poverty in Scotland than ‘white British’. For instance, Polish, along with African, Caribbean and Black groups, are highly likely to live in the most deprived areas of Scotland. [116] [50]

Poverty can act as a barrier to take up of benefits, for instance, due to poverty related stigma, by damaging confidence, and increasing feelings of shame. [40] [117] [118] Shame and self-doubt can prevent people from minority groups seeking support, as can the fear of not being believed or considered ‘at it’. [40] Similarly, marginalisation can also impact benefit take up as clearly described in the Scottish Government’s research into seldom-heard groups and the Scottish social security system. [49]

4.4.3 Trust in public services

Trust in public services among certain groups, including those from minority ethnic backgrounds, is likely to be lower than for the general population. [119] Low trust in public services can mean people are less likely to engage with social security systems, turning to their community for support instead, or being less willing to disclose their ethnicity when asked. [56] [34]

While Social Security Scotland annual client satisfaction surveys ask about trust in their services, this is not broken down by language or ethnicity. Overall, trust levels in Social Security Scotland across all types of respondents in annual client satisfaction surveys are reasonable at 72%. [18] Mistrust by clients has been noted particularly in how decisions are taken around disability, with doubts expressed that staff understood or knew about their health condition. [120]

Mistrust among minority ethnic communities can also stem from prior negative experiences, for instance among people from countries with poor human rights records, among older Black Caribbeans impacted by Windrush, historical racism or of treatment by the DWP. [32] [31] [116] [36] [46] Fear of trusting online information that may have been hacked, or of calling phone numbers that could be a scam, have been identified among those from ethnic backgrounds in studies about Scottish social security. [35] [21]

Staff actions and treatment can also erode trust. Examples from Scotland and elsewhere include lacking cultural awareness (see 'Treatment by staff' section above), failing to understand information provided, treating those from a minority ethnic background as a homogenous group rather than as individuals, or local teams being unreliable, such as failing to show up to appointments. [24] [34] [36] [27] One social work study considering child welfare workers in Norway and England reported that people feared interpreters, who may belong to their ethnic community, could leak confidential information back into their community. [83]

Additionally, aspects of the benefits system intersect with other services, such as health providers to supply supporting information for disability benefits or the courts system when raising an appeal. As with social security systems, there is evidence of mistrust in other public services, for example health and criminal justice. [56] [55] [119] [79] [71] Therefore, considerations of whether to access benefits among those with English as a second language, may also be impacted by trust in public services more broadly, as well as specifically in relation to social security systems. People with little or no English were among marginalised groups who struggled to provide supporting information during Scottish Government research into how supporting information is used in the context of disability benefits in Scotland though reasons were not given. [121]

4.5 Summary

Although overall there are high levels of reported satisfaction with the social security system, a wide range of factors can combine to create a challenging environment for people with English as a second language when engaging with the Scottish social security system. These could be broader issues, such as experiences of poverty, mistrust in public services, or cultural beliefs. However, there were also many examples within the social security system that could deter people from applying for benefits or generate negative views about it, including poor treatment by staff, complex systems and processes and applications denied.

5. Needs, rights and expectations of Gaelic speakers relevant to interactions with the Scottish social security system

5.1 Introduction

This chapter considers literature on the needs, rights and expectations of Gaelic speakers within the Scottish social security system. It outlines the statutory framework which governs and promotes the use of Gaelic in Scotland, alongside research on public attitudes towards Gaelic and its social and cultural significance. It also considers how Gaelic provision is currently embedded within public services, drawing on local authority language plans and a comparison with Welsh language provision. Finally, it examines current arrangements for Gaelic within Social Security Scotland's services, highlighting a gap in research on Gaelic speakers lived experiences in accessing social security.

5.2 Scottish Government policy and values

Gaelic speakers' interactions with the Scottish social security system are shaped by a policy framework which recognises Gaelic as an official language of Scotland and places responsibilities on public bodies to support and promote its use. The Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 (the "2005 Act") established Gaelic as an official language. This framework has been further emphasised by the Scottish Languages Act 2025 (the "2025" Act), which confers official language status upon Gaelic and enhances the duties of public authorities to support, facilitate, and promote its use.

This national framework for the growth of Gaelic is also broadly supported by the Scottish population. The Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (2022) reported that the number of Scots who can speak some Gaelic has doubled in the past decade. [122] It also found that over half (56%) of those surveyed would like to see an increased number of Gaelic speakers in Scotland. In addition, 55% of those surveyed also believe that all children in Scotland should be taught Gaelic as a school subject. Despite these positive findings, Bòrd na Gàidhlig reports that the strength of Gaelic use in key island and Northwest Gaelic communities continues to decline, with language marginalisation affecting these communities. [123]

Under the 2005 Act, the Scottish Government has committed to supporting the Gaelic language under several key principles. [4] Firstly, that Gaelic is given "equal respect to the English language", where included as part of operations and services. Secondly that the government has an "Active Offer" of Gaelic services to employees and the public, raising awareness of the services and encouraging use of them. Finally, it has committed to the "mainstreaming" of the Gaelic language, ensuring that opportunities to use Gaelic are normalised and that Gaelic is used more often, by more people and in a wider range of situations.

5.3 The social and cultural significance of Gaelic

Existing research on Gaelic in Scotland largely focuses on public attitudes, cultural value and the broader social significance of the language, rather than on its use within everyday public service interactions. The Scottish Social Attitudes Survey found that 79% of those surveyed believed that Gaelic was important to Scotland's heritage and 31% felt it was important to

their own cultural heritage. [122] The survey also found that 56% felt they would like there to be more Gaelic speakers in 50 years' time, an increase from 46% in 2012.

Scottish Social Attitudes Survey findings are echoed by research indicating members of Glasgow's Gaelic community wish to see more young people developing their use of the language, and greater promotion of Gaelic in the city. [7] In this study, a majority reported regular attendance at Gaelic events in Glasgow, either weekly (22%) or periodically throughout the year (46%).

Beyond this broad assessment of attitudes, there is further research on the wider impact of Gaelic on members of the Scottish public, with Gaelic speakers reporting moderate or major positive impacts of Gaelic on various aspects of wellbeing, including national and local pride, sense of identity, individual mental health and wellbeing, and happiness. [124] [125] Preserving and maintaining the Gaelic language has been found to be ideologically and emotionally important to communities. [126]



“Members of other minority communities such as the LGBTQ+ and BAME communities describe feeling more accepted in Gaelic environments and, for those who have moved to Scotland, being a part of the Gaelic community has given them an increased feeling of ‘Scottishness’ and ‘belonging’.” [124]: 26

Studies have also explored the views of Gaelic speakers on measures to promote and support the use of Gaelic. This research has largely focused on the overarching cultural and policy discourse, rather than with lived, daily experiences of Gaelic use, such as access to and use of public services. For example, a survey of Glasgow's Gaelic community found consistent interest in promoting Gaelic through increased visible Gaelic signage, Gaelic television, hospitality sites featuring Gaelic, traditional music events, online learning resources, and a dedicated physical space for Gaelic events. [7] Increased exposure to the Gaelic language, for example, in childhood or through broadcasting, is also positively associated with more supportive attitudes. [122] [127]

5.4 Provision for Gaelic in Scottish public services

Historically, Gaelic has been bound up with stigma and associated with socio-economic disadvantage and Gaelic speakers still remain concerned about an “hostile public policy environment” and “institutional disregard” for Gaelic as described by some in the literature. [124]

The responsibility for overseeing the use of Gaelic across the public sector and promoting Gaelic language, education and culture was given to Bòrd na Gàidhlig, created under the 2005 Act. Further expansion of the role of Bòrd na Gàidhlig took place under the Scottish Languages Act (2025), strengthening their remit for monitoring compliance and supporting public bodies. This has, in turn, increased expectations that public bodies integrate Gaelic provision more consistently within their service delivery.

The 2005 Act requires Bòrd na Gàidhlig to submit a National Gaelic Language Plan, conferring responsibility upon several authorities, organisations and communities to meet its aims and targets. The 2023-2028 National Gaelic Language Plan identifies priorities for

increasing the use and learning of Gaelic in the work of public authorities, including creating their own Gaelic Language Plans and increasing Gaelic Visibility and Signage. [123]

Exploring Gaelic language plans across various local authorities gives a sense of the variation in provision in public services. For example, Glasgow City Council's Gaelic Language Plan includes promotional measures for Gaelic, such as bilingual logos, increased use of Gaelic in arts and culture, and bilingual news releases on Gaelic matters. [128] It also outlines targets of increased communication in Gaelic with the public, including written communication. Aberdeenshire Council's 2023 Gaelic Language Plan commits to ensuring that Gaelic services are made available to employees and the public and that those services are of an *"equal standard and quality as those that we provide in English"*. [129] It also commits to welcoming communication from the public in Gaelic, both in writing and on the phone.

5.4.1 Research on the experiences of Welsh speakers

Use of the Welsh language in public services provides an interesting point of comparison with the Scottish Government's approach to Gaelic. Wales previously operated under the Welsh Language Act 1993 which gave Welsh and English language equal status in Welsh public life. This measure placed a duty on public sector organisations to prepare a Welsh Language Scheme, setting out how they would provide services in Welsh. More recently, the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011, gave the Welsh language official status, creating statutory language standards with which public bodies must comply. This is enforceable by the Welsh Language Commissioner. In Wales, citizens have a legal right to receive many public services in Welsh and public bodies must proactively offer Welsh language services.

While Welsh social security provisions have not been devolved, interactions between Welsh clients and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) are covered by a Welsh Language Scheme, under the Welsh Language Act 1993. This means that phone lines, written correspondence, and forms are systematically available in Welsh and the DWP is under a statutory duty to treat the Welsh and English languages equally when providing a service to the public. [130]

There is also a much stronger research base examining the lived experience of Welsh speakers using public services compared to Scotland. Research by the Welsh Language Commissioner, based on service experience surveys across multiple public bodies, reports higher satisfaction where Welsh is available proactively (rather than reactively) and consistently; it documents poorer experiences where users must request it or switch to English mid-interaction. Survey findings have also shown that proactive offers of Welsh are associated with higher confidence in public bodies. [131] Not proactively offering Welsh language services has been found to be a barrier to the wider use of Welsh. [132]

In other user-centred research, the choice to use the Welsh language has been framed as an issue of dignity and respect. [133] Being addressed in Welsh is experienced as recognition and legitimacy of identity, particularly in health, local authority and frontline public services. [131] Welsh-speaking young people have been found to be extremely proud of their language and are keen to use it more in their everyday lives. [132]

Aligned with international studies that illustrate the importance of culture-linguistic congruity, other Welsh-based studies have linked Welsh language provision to emotional wellbeing, particularly in public services such as health. [134] [135] [136] [137] Qualitative

evidence has shown that Welsh speakers feel more comfortable and experience improved communication when health services are delivered in Welsh, particularly in primary care contexts. [138]

5.4.2 Gaelic and Social Security Scotland

The Scottish Government Gaelic Language Plan (2022) prescribes that Social Security Scotland will engage with Bòrd na Gàidhlig to prepare a Gaelic Language plan. [4] The Social Security Scotland language plan, however, has not yet been published, and so there is not currently a published framework or formalised set of targets for how it should actively offer and give equal respect to Gaelic in their practice. Public bodies with a Gaelic language plan that operate in a generally similar way to Social Security Scotland, such as being a national organisation and engaging regularly with members of the public include Police Scotland and Skills Development Scotland. Plans of local public bodies may also contain relevant information such as Glasgow City Council and NHS Highland.

The Scottish social security system is based on the principles of dignity, fairness and respect. These principles are particularly salient for Gaelic speakers, whose language might be closely associated with cultural, political, social and geographic identity and wellbeing. [126] [124] Previously mentioned research on Welsh service users has shown that a proactive offering of Welsh language services is associated with dignity and respect. [132] [131]

Some provisions for Gaelic use in client interactions with Social Security Scotland are evident, with the language given equivalent treatment to other minority languages. For example, Social Security Scotland provides all its benefits factsheets in Gaelic translation, and the organisation also has a bilingual logo, used on marketing materials. Like other languages, Social Security Scotland's interpretation services include the Gaelic language, so clients can speak in Gaelic over the phone. No published evidence was identified on client satisfaction or experiences with Gaelic provision within Social Security Scotland. The available literature and FOI requests provided information on what is offered, but there is currently no data on how Gaelic speakers experience these services in practice.

5.5 Summary

Gaelic speakers' interactions with Scottish public services are shaped by an increasingly strong statutory and policy framework, alongside widespread public support for the language and recognition of its cultural and social significance. There is still, however, the potential for further progress on embedding Gaelic across public services. Comparative evidence from Wales demonstrates how an enforceable, proactive offering of language provision is associated with experiences of dignity, wellbeing and trust in public institutions, highlighting the relative absence of equivalent statutory mechanisms in the Scottish context. While existing research on Gaelic in Scotland demonstrates the language's importance, there is a notable lack of evidence on Gaelic speakers lived experiences of accessing public services, including social security. This gap is particularly salient given Social Security Scotland's commitment to dignity, fairness and respect, and highlights a need for further research on the experiences of Gaelic social security clients.

6. Extent to which social security charter expectations are being met

6.1 Introduction

Social Security Scotland's 'Our Charter' sets out the service standards people can expect from the social security system in Scotland, aligning with principles of treating people with fairness, dignity and respect. This chapter considers the findings of this rapid evidence review in the context of the [Social Security Charter](#) that governs the work of Social Security Scotland. It explores current evidence relevant to meeting commitments in practice for people whose first language is not English.

The chapter is organised by the main charter pillars: A people's service; processes that work; a learning system and a better future. The first two are commitments for Social Security Scotland, the third is for both Social Security Scotland and the Scottish Government and the wider fourth pillar sets out objectives for the Scottish Government.

The review focused predominantly on the experience of the Scottish social security system of people for whom English is a second language. Adopting this lens highlighted literature that could illustrate how people might experience the system and therefore was less concerned with 'back office' aspects of the system that may be less visible to people, such as recruitment, training and support for staff. As a result, not all aspects of 'Our Charter' are considered below.

6.2 A people's service

This strand of the charter addresses how staff treat people who engage with the social security system in Scotland, such as being patient, kind and considerate and listening to people as individuals. It includes treating people equally, fairly and without discrimination and having regard to their wellbeing. This is to be achieved through recruiting people with the right values, building a diverse workforce and ensuring staff are trained, supported and well equipped to do their job. It is also about delivering local and accessible services. The review addressed how people with English as a second language felt treated by staff and their levels of trust in the system.

While it is likely that some people with English as a second language have positive experiences, challenges were found to exist for some when engaging with the Scottish social security system. Language barriers were a factor in this; however, other wider considerations were often evident too. These included prior negative experiences of public services, mistrust, cultural expectations and beliefs among people who might use English as a second language and practical barriers when trying to access the system. Taken together, these factors may serve to deter people from applying for benefits or make it difficult for them when they do so.

As the data is aggregated across users, it is unclear to what extent trust is an issue for those who do not speak English as a main language, though it is known that people from minority ethnic communities may mistrust public services, due for instance, to experiences of racism and discrimination. Some qualitative evidence in this review found staff reported to be

judgemental, dismissive or rude, spoke too fast, misunderstood or did not acknowledge anxieties among people from minority ethnic communities. There were calls for improved support from staff to help people navigate the system more easily.

Direct claims of discrimination against people from staff were not commonly identified in the literature on the Scottish social security system, though again official data was aggregated, so any reported discrimination was experienced across protected characteristic categories, not just due to ethnicity. Evidence of staff discrimination was found in the broader literature on public sector services, both in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK, and could be more prevalent among certain groups e.g. migrants.

It is unknown why some people felt they had not been treated well by social security staff, nor how this compares to how other groups feel treated. However, work could be undertaken to determine if there is evidence of discriminatory treatment, and if so, why this is the case. Prior experiences of discrimination could contribute to mistrust. However, a lack of cultural sensitivity was more likely to be reported, which could result in perceptions that the service was inaccessible.

6.3 Processes that work

This part of the charter states that Social Security Scotland will 'design services with the people who use them'. It involves a range of activities including supporting people to complete an application in a way that suits them, providing information on the application process and how applications are progressing and help with obtaining supporting information.

The main elements addressed in this review were the application process, including views on application forms, the complexity of systems, institutional discrimination, and support offered in minority languages to allow people to complete applications in a way that suited them.

There was evidence that complex social security systems pose challenges for many, compounded for those who speak English as a second language. Challenges navigating complex eligibility criteria and application processes within the Scottish social security system were highlighted, such as an inability to understand questions, a perceived lack of alignment with lived experience, the length of forms and complex and technical language used. These challenges were found to cause confusion, fatigue and stress to people and could compound feelings of shame and stigma. Limited evidence was found around other practical barriers, including a lack of access to identification, bank accounts or national insurance numbers.

Language support was available in certain areas of the Scottish social security system, such as interpreting services for applications made by telephone, or translating application forms in minority languages. However, the ability of people to apply in a way that suited them was limited. For instance, there was evidence of preferences for face-to-face meetings with an interpreter present, or for digitally based application forms in minority languages, yet these methods appear to not currently be available. Further, there was some limited evidence of concerns over the quality of interpretation and that people with low literacy levels could struggle with translated materials, whether in English or their native language.

Processes that are challenging for people were identified by Social Security Scotland staff as contributing to the delivery of a service that could discriminate against people. For instance, poor translation and interpreting support or not having enough time to ensure they fully understand what people are saying could contribute to a sense of being discriminated against. It is unclear why levels of benefits denied are so high for all groups currently and work to explore this further would be useful.

While Social Security Scotland stated they are committed to working to simplify processes, the evidence reviewed for this study found that people who speak English as a second language are likely to experience extensive challenges when engaging with the system. Further, while language support is available, this is not always delivered in forms that people would find helpful.

It is important that institutional discrimination is considered when designing processes that work to help build trust in the system and to address more insidious forms of discrimination. Similarly, continuing work to simplify processes can help avoid compounding marginalisation among vulnerable communities. There was considerable evidence of challenges for people where the ability to speak or write English is an issue, and of their identified preference for seeking support from local communities and trusted services.

As a result of challenges to people in taking up benefits, some authors have recommended the use of automatic benefit payments, so people do not need to apply for benefits they are entitled to. The Scottish Government committed to exploring automatic payment systems in the Programme for Government 2021-2022 to maximise benefit take up and these have now begun, for instance, Winter Heating Payments are now issued automatically based on existing benefit eligibility. [57]

6.4 A learning system

This charter element relates to encouraging feedback to help deliver the best service possible. It includes listening, learning and improving by valuing feedback, complaints and appeals decisions and involving people using the service to measure how well it works. Within this study, the research questions that consider the languages spoken by people who use the Scottish social security system are evidence of 'a learning system' in that the findings can help inform an awareness of the most prevalent languages in Scotland. In turn, these can help inform decisions, for instance about what minority languages written materials could be routinely translated into.

The need to avoid treating people from minority ethnic backgrounds, or with English as a second language as a homogenous group is of vital importance. This report has shown that differing linguistic and literacy abilities and preferences, cultural beliefs, personal and protected characteristics, prior experiences, socio-economic status and social integration are just some of the variables likely to intersect to create individual perspectives and differential use of the Scottish social security system.

Limitations of self-reporting are apparent. Low trust can impact a willingness to disclose ethnicity; people may wish to appear more proficient in English than is the case for fear of being perceived negatively or seek to avoid giving negative views on the system for fear of benefits being taken away. Care should be taken not to exacerbate consultation fatigue, through providing feedback to people about how their views have influenced change. The

need to provide feedback and demonstrate accountability has been recognised in a review of the charter measurement framework, indicating Social Security Scotland's willingness to learn and adapt. [139]

Challenges in using existing data also exist. For example, people may be underrepresented in complaints data as evidence suggests those who experience racial discrimination may be reluctant to make complaints as they do not see a value in it or feel they would not be taken seriously. [36] Self-reporting of ethnicity can skew data where people chose not to report their ethnicity. Note for instance, that benefits denied are lowest for those who do not report an ethnicity, though in the absence of further information, it is impossible to explain why.

Views on people with English as a second language in studies on the Scottish social security system are often included within a wider participant sample, so the ability to report comprehensively or examine differences among people is highly constrained. Benefit evaluations to date have said very little about people who speak English as a second language,

While social security experience panels included a small proportion of people who speak English as a second language, these have now been replaced by client panels, with more than 12,000 members. [140] However, there was a lack of evidence found regarding how these panels are made up, including the level of representation of those with English as a second language. As a result, it is recognised that Social Security Scotland and devolved benefits are relatively new for Scotland, and further evidence needs to be generated over time regarding how the system is learning from, and responding to, the needs of the disparate range of people who use English as a second language.

6.5 A better future

The final strand of 'Our Charter' focuses on the development of policy that supports equality, non-discrimination and the human right to social security. It also seeks to contribute to tackling poverty, through for instance promoting take up of benefits, reaching those most likely to be excluded, making eligibility rules fairer, reviewing payment levels and working with other public services to support delivery of the Scottish Government's National Outcomes for a fairer, more prosperous Scotland. These are a key aspect of the National Performance Framework, used to guide policy-making, assess progress and ensure public services are aligned to a wellbeing economy.

In this review several topics were broadly addressed that align with this agenda, including awareness of benefits, structural disadvantage and poverty and take up of benefits. Each of these are significant topics, and the rapid nature of this review means it is impossible to do justice to them all.

The extent of poverty among certain groups is stark. Destitution among migrants, high rates of Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani households moving into very deep poverty each year, households with children experiencing the greatest reductions in income due to benefit reductions, were some of the issues identified.

Up to date commentary on poverty among different ethnic groups is provided in Joseph Rowntree Foundation's (2025) analysis of over 250 studies that show how poverty outcomes are shaped by both group-specific factors such as migration history and culture and broader structural influences such as social networks, policy frameworks and local contexts. [56] Efforts to reduce child poverty are proving to be effective in Scotland, underpinned by the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 and supported by ambitious targets set out in 'Best Start, Bright Futures: Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan'. There is evidence that the introduction of the Scottish child payment has been instrumental in this [141]. This shows that structural disadvantage can be positively impacted when clear and sustained cross-cutting policies are adopted.

Benefit take up among those with English as a second language is currently unknown, due to a paucity of data. The lack of social security data on take up of benefits by ethnicity also hampers efforts in this area. While the second Benefit Take-Up Strategy published by the Scottish Government in October 2021 provided estimates of take up for low-income benefits, these are given as global figures and not broken down into take up by different groups. Combined with methodological difficulties, it was not possible to give figures for disability or carer related payments. [142] However, evidence from this review suggests that take up among those with English as a second language is likely to be impacted by a lack of awareness of benefits, compounded by issues such as complex eligibility criteria and a lack of understanding of the service landscape. Other factors likely to affect take up include stigma and cultural beliefs that emphasise self-reliance or community, over statutory, support as well as a lack of exposure to places where people would know about benefits.

A broader, structural understanding of why people may not want to engage with the social security system is important. Explanations that focus solely on issues at individual level, such as language use, are unlikely to elicit a thorough appreciation of the barriers people face. The Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights argue that a deficit model of racial inequality will not result in meaningful systemic change and can compound prejudice and other forms of disadvantage:



“The tendency to look for explanations for racial inequality within the actions and attitudes of minority ethnic groups is sometimes called the ‘deficit model’ of race equality. The prevalence of the deficit model in discussions about solutions to racial inequality not only replicates racial stereotypes, but results in continual investment in capacity building activities for minority ethnic people which only have an impact on the small minority of people who have capacity building needs. This is inefficient and reduces the amount of investment available to address social and structural racism.” [143]: 90

The review identified a wide range of factors that can conspire to impact benefit take up and serve to deter people from applying for benefits. Negative experiences among those who do attempt to engage with the social security system can also erode trust in the system, affecting their future willingness to apply for benefits to which they are entitled. When benefit take up is not maximised due to a 'hostile' environment, deep poverty is a likely outcome. [144]

A nuanced and informed policy approach to tackling inequalities faced by those with English as a second language is required. As noted in this review, this group is highly diverse in English proficiency. It is therefore appropriate to consider how to improve the social security system for those who cannot speak or write English well. Such people are more likely have certain characteristics, such as having recently moved to Scotland, though this too cannot be assumed, given challenges people face when attempting to improve their English skills. [145] [69]

Given the scale of poverty among minority ethnic communities in Scotland, concerted and dedicated efforts to address this issue within poverty strategies are required. The Social Security policy team of the Scottish Government should engage in cross-cutting policy work to address intersectionality, likely to offer effective means to address marginalisation. It could undertake collaborative work with other partners, such as in employment, housing and health, to address structural disadvantage experienced by such people with a view to overcoming stubborn barriers to full societal participation and to maximise life chances. To have a real chance of affecting change, sustained and strategic efforts must be prioritised to consider how best to improve outcomes for our most disadvantaged communities.

Evidence from the review suggested that certain conditions within the social security system at all levels – policy, procedures/processes, practice – conspire to deter marginalised people from engaging with the system. Under the ‘fairer’ goal of this pillar, the Scottish Government should consider how to ensure equitable access to social security, and treatment of, people with English as a second language.

6.6 Summary

There was some evidence of progress that would improve outcomes for people with English as a second language in some areas relevant to Our Charter. These were usually in areas where improvement efforts were being made to benefit a larger cohort of individuals, rather than action specifically targeting people experiencing barriers due having English as a second language or from a minority ethnic group. Certain areas, such as structural disadvantage, are likely to require concerted, sustained efforts to affect change. However, evidence in relation to declining rates of child poverty in Scotland, suggests that positive change is possible.

7. Evidence gaps

7.1 Introduction

This chapter highlights factors to consider when reflecting on the lack of existing relevant data for this review. It does not detail on all the gaps encountered, as these were substantial and are referred to throughout the report. It can safely be assumed that there is a need for significant improvement in data collection and research on how people with English as a second language experience the Scottish social security system. Throughout the report, the scale of evidence available has been noted; this chapter instead focuses on the main sources of evidence found for the review and briefly notes ways research with people with English as a second language could take place.

7.2 Overview of available data

This review identified a lack of evidence on experiences of the Scottish social security system among people whose first language is not English. Some Scottish based research, notably by the Scottish Government and Social Security Scotland does include such participants. However, these are usually included as part of a wider participant cohort, such as people with communication needs or experiences of poverty and marginalisation. As a result of people with English as a second language being a sub-group within larger samples, there is a tendency to treat this population as a homogenous group.

A range of evaluations have explored how devolved benefits are working in Scotland. However, these rarely mention issues faced by those with English as a second language. Where issues are raised, these are often from the perspectives of stakeholders who may support them to engage with the social security system.

Due to data limitations, the review has taken a broader view of issues facing communities likely to have a higher proportion of individuals whose primary language is not English, notably research regarding people with minority ethnic backgrounds. Within this wider body of literature, certain areas are better evidenced than others. For instance, there is a considerable body of literature on high rates of poverty, and some on discrimination, faced by people from minority ethnic backgrounds. However, even in those areas data is limited.

Cebula and Evans (2021) highlight that poor quality data makes it difficult to determine the extent to which each type of structural inequality contributes to 'unjustly high levels of poverty' experienced by people from minority ethnic backgrounds. [88] They highlight that self-reporting of ethnicity, and the 'prefer not to say' option make the data unreliable for understanding structural inequalities in the social security system and recommend efforts to increase trust in the system as a way to improve willingness to report ethnicity. Meyer and Bridgen (2022) note the 'very limited' research on how social policies impact the household income of working migrants. [101] Joshi, Finney and Hale (2025, p.1415) found only six qualitative studies in their scoping study of the lived experience of loneliness and social isolation among minority ethnic/immigrant older adults, arguing that discrimination and marginalisation remain 'significantly underrepresented in the existing evidence base'. [39]

It is difficult to accurately assess take up of benefits among minority ethnic communities and other seldom heard groups, due to data gaps. [33] [116] [37] [88] [49] There have been

calls for more data on take up of benefits among minority ethnic groups to identify whether measures in the Scottish Government Benefit Take Up Strategy are working, to ensure access to benefits for these groups, for instance, evaluations of awareness raising campaigns and simplified application processes. [21] [49] Cebula and Evans (2021) argued Social Security Scotland collects higher quality (than UK based) ethnicity data, such as applications denied by ethnicity, though note reasons for benefits denied is not known. [88] The revised Scottish Government Benefits Take Up Strategy, due for publication in October 2026, may shed more light on take up among seldom heard groups.

An intersectional approach is likely to enhance understanding of the experiences of people who use English as a second language, such as the combined effects of poverty, disability, gender and age. [106] [54] For instance, more research into the intersectionality of minority ethnic carers in Scotland has recently been recommended. [27] Primary research on intersectionality and experiences of the Scottish social security system is limited, and an evidence synthesis by the Scottish Government on using intersectionality to understand structural inequality in Scotland highlights the importance of such work and makes suggestions for how best to engage marginalised groups in research. [92]

Literature on Gaelic speakers, particularly in relation to their perceptions of public services, is notably lacking. No known research or published information was found on Gaelic use in the Scottish social security system, other than limited information identified in FOIs responses about translation and interpretation services. Therefore, it is unclear what measures have been taken by Social Security Scotland to support clients who may be a Gaelic speaker, nor how the rights or expectations of Gaelic speakers are met under the social security charter.

7.3 Social Security Scotland data

While there is uncertainty about the type of data captured by Social Security Scotland, its client satisfaction survey reports include questions as to whether a client's main language is not English and if they who do not speak, write, understand and read English well though findings are not reported in-depth in the published reports. People for whom English is not a main language who respond to such surveys are likely to be underrepresented, given surveys are sent in English to clients. In addition, given the data is based on self-reporting, English competence levels are likely to be based on subjective opinion.

Further, Social Security Scotland has been subjected to various Freedom of Information Requests (FOI) related to those for whom English is not a main language, such as on their translation and interpretation service. [70] However, the data obtained was sourced from their third-party translation and interpretation provider rather than being captured directly by Social Security Scotland. When asked in another FOI about the percentage of applications made with assistance from local delivery teams where clients preferred language is not English, Social Security Scotland did not answer the query stating, 'to locate and retrieve the information requested would require complex analysis'. It is unclear in this case whether the data is collected or not.

7.4 Social Security Experience panels

The Social Security Experience panels which ran between 2017 and 2024 were a valuable source of longitudinal, qualitative information, which gathered evidence about the lived

experience of using social security services. These were designed to help inform how the benefits devolved from the UK to Scottish Government would operate. However, the evidence suggests there were some issues with this methodology.

Although there was not a spotlight on people with English as a second language in research with the panels (except for research on carers with English as a second language), their voices could be somewhat heard. However, even within the panels, a 2020 report noted that the percentage of people from minority ethnic communities on these panels was only 2%. [116] A staff member reflected in a 'Legacy report' on the panels indicated one that diversity had been greater in earlier panels, suggesting the percentage may have been lower in later years. [140]

The Poverty and Inequality Commission (2021) suggested that the focus on 'lived experience' in social security experience panels had led to policy makers disregarding other approaches, even in the face of supporting evidence. [41] The authors queried how well government policy makers were able to facilitate research with groups facing multiple oppressions. They argued that while a 'lived experience' perspective was useful, there is a vital need to examine the perspectives and processes of the powerful in shaping policy and developing strategies to tackle inequality.

7.5 Engaging people in research

Attempts to gather more data on how people experience social security systems where English is not their primary language should be handled sensitively. Given language barriers, it may be preferable to allow people to talk in their native language, an approach taken by Trust, Hanover (Scotland) and Bield Housing Associations in their 2020 study of minority ethnic older people. [146]

Further, as trust in statutory services can be an issue people may find it easier to give their views freely in research led by third sector or community-based providers. It is important to be aware of what is called the 'chilling effect' or social desirability bias, where individuals might misreport, avoid or soften criticism of public services due to fear of reprisals such as deportation, loss of eligibility or other sanctions. [147] [148] There is also a need to be mindful that while there is evidence some people value being involved in research, others can feel fatigued by this, particularly if insights are not acted upon. [59] [40]

7.6 Summary

There are numerous, wide ranging evidence gaps in relation to how people with English as a second language experience the Scottish social security system. The way individuals have been included as a group as part of larger cohorts of people with other needs could potentially reinforce a view that the group is a homogenous one as reporting in a differentiated way becomes more challenging or can mean their voices are lost amongst others. Uncertainty regarding the extent of data collected by Social Security Scotland on people with English as a second language, and sensitivities when undertaking research with this group need to be considered.

8. Conclusion

This rapid literature review examined barriers faced by people for whom English is a second language when accessing the Scottish social security system. It considered why people may choose not to take up benefits to which they are entitled and experiences with the system. Adopting a broad approach, given the lack of specific research on the topic, the literature considered issues faced by populations where some would be more likely to have English as a second language, notably those from minority ethnic communities.

Many diverse languages are used in Scotland, driven by migration over many years. Similarly, English proficiency varies considerably among those using English as a second language with English ability depending on factors such as age, length of time in the country and access to learning opportunities. Data on languages used by social security users was mostly gathered through information provided by the translation and interpreting service provider. The most common languages requested for translation were Arabic, Farsi, Gaelic, Polish, Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian, Urdu and Traditional Chinese.

Awareness of social security benefits was likely to be low among those with English as a second language, with information often received through informal sources or community resources. A lack of familiarity with official systems, complex eligibility criteria, digital exclusion, or not knowing where to find information were highlighted as issues people may face.

Various barriers and challenges exist for people with English as a second language when applying for benefits. These included challenges with forms, such as length and complexity that could lead to exhaustion or negative feelings, serving to put people off applying. Issues with translating and interpreting were identified, such as delays in receiving information, poor quality or lack of choice.

Similarly, many issues were identified that people who speak English could find difficult with the Scottish social security system, though it was noted that the system was generally highly rated. Barriers could include poor treatment by staff, complex systems and processes, denial of applications, institutional racism, structural disadvantage, a lack of documentation and personal or cultural factors, such as poverty or a lack of trust in public services.

While little is known about how Gaelic speakers experience the Scottish social security system, the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 has increased attention among public services to ensure their services are accessible and welcoming to Gaelic speakers. Social Security Scotland has not yet produced a Gaelic Language Plan but has committed to doing so.

The lack of relevant literature to draw upon for the review was highlighted, with considerable gaps in most areas under investigation. While some relevant research on social security has been conducted, people with English as a second language are often included along with other groups. Further, it is unclear exactly what information Social Security Scotland hold on people with English as a second language, other than that obtained via user experience surveys.

Areas where pragmatic action could be taken or that impacted all client groups, such as efforts to streamline application processes appeared to be more likely to areas where work is ongoing to improve user experience. Even in these areas however, issues remain, such as the need to review translating and interpreting support and benefits denied. There was less evidence to suggest more challenging issues were being addressed or that any action being taken was making an impact, such as affecting change in structural issues such as poverty, institutional or intersectional disadvantage.

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Annex A: Continued Reading

Number	Author	Title	Date of Publication
1	BEMIS	How to Engage with Ethnic Minorities and Hard to Reach Groups	2015
2	BEMIS	Scotland, People and Language Forum Report	2015
3	BEMIS	Poverty and Ethnicity Agenda and Policy Development in Scotland — Lived experience of Ethnic and Cultural Minority Communities.	2016
4	BEMIS	A New Future for Social Security in Scotland: BEMIS Policy Position	2017
5	Black, N. and Junz, J.	The intergenerational effects of language proficiency on child health outcomes: Evidence from survey- and Census-matched health care records	2024
6	British Medical Association	BMA refugee and asylum seeker health resource (toolkit)	2025 (updated)
7	Davidson-Hine, D. et al.	Review of Equity of Access to Treatment for Gambling Harms in Racial and Ethnic Minority Populations: A Mixed Methods Study	2024
8	Diamond, L. et al.	A Systematic Review of the Impact of Patient–Physician Non-English Language Concordance on Quality of Care and Outcomes	2019
9	Dinisman, T. et al	Language barriers in the criminal justice system: The experience of victims and witnesses who speak English as a second or additional language	2022
10	Equality and Human Rights Commission	Social security systems based on dignity and respect	2017
11	Graham-Brown, Nafisah	ESOL and Integration: the story so far	2018
12	Guentner, S. Lukes, S. and Wilding, J.	Bordering practices in the UK welfare system	2016
13	Guo, A	Addressing Structural Racism in Social Impact: Lessons from the Social Safety Net	2020
14	Harrow Law Centre	‘To Be Understood’: Are the police doing enough to help victims with low proficiency in English report crime.	2024

15	Ho, L. et al.	Health and social care needs of adult asylum seekers in high-income countries and their experiences of accessing care services: An overview of systematic reviews	2025
16	Johnson, R. and Smith, K	Limitations on Social Security Benefits for Black Retirees	2023
17	Kidd, S.	Social exclusion and access to social protection schemes	2017
18	Ko, W. and Moffitt, R.	Take-Up of Social Benefits	2022
19	Kremer, M.	Earned Citizenship: Labour Migrants' Views on the Welfare State	2016
20	Lindorff, A., Strand, S. and Au, I.	English as an Additional Language (EAL) and Educational Achievement in England	2025
21	MECOPP	Briefing Sheet 6: An Introduction to Cultural Competence	2017
22	MECOPP	Informal Caring within Scotland's Briefing Sheet 3: Black and Minority Ethnic Communities	2017
23	Moreno, I. H.	Gaelic language, identity and sense of place in the Outer Hebrides	2025
24	Narayan, M. M.	Social Service Programs Must Be Accessible to People Who Speak Limited English	2023
25	Needham, B. et al	Institutional Racism and Health: a Framework for Conceptualization, Measurement, and Analysis	2022
26	NHS England	Improvement framework: community language translation and interpreting services	2025
27	Northumbria University	New research will examine the use of welfare reform to tackle health inequalities	Ongoing research
28	Paez-Izquierdo, V.	Exploring Language and Communication: Factors Impeding Retirement Migrants Access to Social Services	2024
29	Pandey, M. R. et al	Impacts of English language proficiency on healthcare access, use, and outcomes among immigrants: a qualitative study.	2021
30	Parveen, A. A. and Watson, R.	Language barriers and their impact on provision of care to patients with limited English proficiency: Nurses' perspectives	2017
31	Rabinovich, L and Perez-Arce	Understanding the Social Security Communication Needs of Hispanics with Limited English Language Proficiency	2023

32	Rasi, S.	Impact of language barriers on access to healthcare services by immigrant patients: A systematic review	2020
33	Salih, A.	Language Barriers And Their Impact On Effective Communication In Different Fields	2024
34	Sepali Guruge, Mary Susan Thomson and Sadaf Grace Seifi	Mental Health and Service Issues Faced by Older Immigrants in Canada: A Scoping Review	2015
35	Shamsi, H. I et al.	Implications of Language Barriers for Healthcare: A Systematic Review	2020
36	Siân Lucas	Spoken language interpreters in social work	2020
37	Social Security Administration, USA	Language Access Plan	2023
38	Sustain	Food insecurity reveals baked-in institutional racism	2021
39	The Alliance	Accessible information on Self-directed Support – lived experience research report	2024
40	Theiss, M. and Szelewa, D.	Institutional Sources of Citizens’ Trust in the Welfare State: A Literature Review	2025
41	Walsh, D.	The changing ethnic profiles of Glasgow and Scotland, and the implications for population health	2017
42	Why Me? Transforming Lives Through Restorative Justice	Overcoming Language Barriers in the Criminal Justice System	2023
43	Randall, V. R.	Live Black ... Retire Poor ... Die Early: How Social Security as an Institution Continues to Perpetuate the Social Racism of the 1930s	2017

Annex B: Country of Birth of people aged 3 and over in Scotland [149]

Europe: United Kingdom: Total	Europe: Other Europe: EU Member countries in March 2022: Republic of Ireland	Europe: Other Europe: EU Member countries in March 2022: France	Europe: Other Europe: EU Member countries in March 2022: Germany	Europe: Other Europe: EU Member countries in March 2022: Greece	Europe: Other Europe: EU Member countries in March 2022: Italy	Europe: Other Europe: EU Member countries in March 2022: Netherlands	Europe: Other Europe: EU Member countries in March 2022: Spain	Europe: Other Europe: EU Member countries in March 2022: Czech Republic	Europe: Other Europe: EU Member countries in March 2022: Hungary	Europe: Other Europe: EU Member countries in March 2022: Latvia
4,884,959	22,083	9,348	23,315	6,294	14,486	5,193	12,208	3,367	6,600	6,924

Europe: Other Europe: EU Member countries in March 2022: Lithuania	Europe: Other Europe: EU Member countries in March 2022: Poland	Europe: Other Europe: EU Member countries in March 2022: Romania	Europe: Other Europe: EU Member countries in March 2022: Slovakia	Europe: Other Europe: Non EU countries: Russia	Europe: Other Europe: Non EU countries: Turkey	Africa: Nigeria	Africa: Kenya	Africa: South Africa	Africa: Zimbabwe	Middle East and Asia: Middle East: Iran
7,814	75,351	12,102	3,249	3,184	4,348	21,286	3,179	15,253	5,282	4,803

Middle East and Asia: Middle East: Iraq	Middle East and Asia: Eastern Asia: Hong Kong (Special Administrative Region of China)	Middle East and Asia: Eastern Asia: China	Middle East and Asia: Southern Asia: Bangladesh	Middle East and Asia: Southern Asia: India	Middle East and Asia: Southern Asia: Pakistan	Middle East and Asia: South-East Asia: Malaysia	Middle East and Asia: South-East Asia: Philippines	Middle East and Asia: South-East Asia: Singapore	The Americas and the Caribbean: North America: Canada	The Americas and the Caribbean: North America: United States of America
3,683	11,901	21,396	4,063	37,729	28,891	5,295	6,245	3,725	9,920	23,863

Antarctica and Oceania: Australia	Antarctica and Oceania: New Zealand
9,575	3,883

Annex C: Main home languages of pupils [16]

Language	Pupils
English	619,651
Polish	17,253
Urdu	7,899
Arabic	7,111
Scots	5,050
Punjabi	3,110
Romanian	2,604
Chinese (Modern Standard/Mandarin)	2,374
Ukrainian	2,355
Chinese (Cantonese)	2,116
Russian	1,975
Spanish	1,783
Malayalam	1,482
Bengali	1,256
Portuguese	1,245
Hindi	1,241
Yoruba	1,205
Lithuanian	1,121
Kurdish	1,076
Italian	1,049
Pashto	1,001
Tamil	984
Turkish	928
French	914
Bulgarian	756
Latvian	737
Hungarian	722
Telugu	718
Igbo	649
Slovak	613
Nepali	586
Farsi	521
Gaelic (Scottish)	512
Shona	501
Greek	399
Not known	1,176
Other (198 languages were reported)	7,755

