

**Mental  
Health  
UK**



# **Understanding Young Adults and Debt Advice**



**Insights into financial stress  
and help seeking among  
18 to 25 year olds**



# Contents

- 3 Executive Summary**
- 5 Key Findings**
- 8 Introduction and Project Context**
- 10 Research Approach**
- 12 Understanding Young Adults' Financial Stress and Help Seeking**
- 16 Understanding Young People's Experiences of Money and Debt**
- 18 Barriers to Seeking Advice**
- 24 How Young People Look for Help**
- 26 Youth Personas**
- 36 The Help Seeking Journey**
- 41 Implications for Debt Advice Services**
- 44 Engagement Playbook**
- 46 Conclusion**
- 47 About Us**

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# Executive Summary

Young adults aged 18 to 25 are experiencing significant financial pressure, but many do not recognise their situation as something that debt advice services can help with. Financial stress is widespread, yet engagement with support is often delayed or avoided altogether. Improving access for this group requires a better understanding not only of their financial circumstances, but of the emotional and behavioural factors that shape how support is perceived and used.

A key insight from this research is that many young people experience financial vulnerability without recognising it as debt or seeing advice services as relevant, meaning support is often sought late, if at all.

This discovery project, funded through the Money and Pensions Service Debt Advice Transformation Fund, explored how young adults experience money worries and debt, identified barriers to accessing advice services, and developed practical tools to support more effective engagement.

The research combined qualitative interviews, survey data and co-production with young people to build a detailed picture of financial stress and help seeking. It produced three applied outputs for the debt and money advice sector:

- Youth personas representing common patterns of financial experience and behaviour
- Journey maps illustrating pathways into and away from support
- An engagement playbook providing practical recommendations for improving accessibility



## 38%

of young adults cited the cost of living relative to income as the driver of their financial stress

Financial stress among young adults is closely linked to wider economic pressures rather than isolated financial behaviour. The cost of living relative to income was the most commonly cited driver (38%), alongside unstable or unpredictable income (14%). The impact is not only financial. It is experienced as an ongoing psychological burden, with 81% reporting feeling anxious or on edge and 77% reporting effects on their mental health or wellbeing.

For many, financial difficulties remain hidden or difficult to define. More than half of respondents said they do not like to use the word “debt” about their own finances (51%), and many rely on informal support from family or friends (48%), which can mask underlying vulnerability. Financial stress often develops long before young people see it as something support can help with.

When young people seek help, formal advice services are rarely the starting point. Most begin with trusted personal networks or private online exploration. More than a third said they would first turn to friends and family (38%), while relatively few would begin with formal or digital advice channels.

More than half of respondents said they do not like to use the word “debt” about their own finances

## Only one third

of respondents said debt advice services are for people like them

Awareness and perceived relevance of debt advice services remain limited. Only one third of respondents said these services are for people like them, and many believe support is only available once problems have reached crisis point. Among those who had accessed support, experiences were mixed. Many found advice helpful and realistic, but large proportions reported feeling overwhelmed or pressured during the process.

There is a clear gap between financial pressure and engagement with support. Financial stress often develops gradually and is experienced long before individuals consider seeking help. Shame, uncertainty about eligibility, low awareness of services and emotionally demanding pathways into support all play a role in delaying engagement.

The barrier is not only access to services, but whether those services feel relevant in the first place.

The personas, journey maps and engagement playbook developed through this project are intended to help services respond more effectively. They provide practical ways to understand how young people experience financial pressure, what shapes their decisions, and where services can intervene earlier.



# Key Findings

This research provides new insight into how young adults aged 18 to 25 experience financial stress and navigate support when facing money worries or debt. By combining survey data, qualitative interviews and co-production with young people, the project highlights several important dynamics shaping young people's financial experiences and help seeking behaviour.

These findings suggest that improving engagement with young adults requires services to address not only financial circumstances, but also the emotional, behavioural and informational barriers that shape how young people seek support.

## Financial stress among young adults is widespread and primarily driven by structural pressures

Survey findings show that financial stress among young adults is strongly linked to wider economic conditions rather than individual financial behaviour. The most cited driver of financial stress was the cost of living relative to income, reported by 38% of respondents. A further 14% identified unstable or unpredictable income as a main driver of their money worries.

For many, financial pressure is not a single crisis, but an ongoing condition shaped by rising costs, insecure work and limited financial buffers. As a result, managing money often becomes a continuous balancing act rather than a one-off problem to solve.

“Whenever I spend money, whenever I earn money... I'm thinking about should that go to something else I need.”

## Financial stress is experienced as an ongoing psychological burden

Financial pressure among young adults is not experienced solely as a practical financial challenge. Many participants described money worries as occupying mental space throughout the day, influencing decisions about spending, work and social participation.

Survey data underlines the scale of this impact. More than four in five respondents said money problems had made them feel anxious or on edge (81%), while 77% said their mental health or wellbeing had been affected.

“It just exacerbates into this massive worrying ball of thoughts.”

## Young people rarely turn first to professional advice services

For many, help seeking begins privately and informally, not through formal systems. When young people experience financial stress, they rarely seek professional advice immediately. Instead, early help seeking typically involves conversations with friends, family members or partners, alongside online research to understand financial issues.

The survey demonstrates that 38% would look first to friends and family for advice, compared with 15% who would begin with a search engine, 11% who would use an AI tool, and 8% who would start with social media.

“Probably the people that I live with... I'll always talk to them first.”





## Psychological barriers play a major role in delaying engagement with advice services

Many young people associate financial difficulties with feelings of shame, embarrassment or personal responsibility. These perceptions can discourage individuals from discussing financial problems openly or seeking professional advice.

Survey findings show that **34%** said shame or stigma had stopped them, or would stop them, from accessing debt advice services. Half said they would worry about being judged for their spending or financial choices (**50%**), and **56%** said contacting a debt advice service would be stressful or emotionally draining.

“I feel as well that it’s my own fault... so they wouldn’t want to help me.”

## Awareness and understanding of advice services remains limited

The research suggests that many young adults have limited awareness of specialist debt advice services or uncertainty about how these services operate. Only 33% said debt or money advice services are for people like them, and the same proportion said they know what such services actually do. More than a third believed they would need to be unable to pay their debts before a service could help them (37%).

This lack of clarity can create hesitation about contacting services, particularly where young people feel their situation is not yet serious enough to justify support.



## Financial vulnerability exists beyond visible debt

The research also identified a group of young people who are not currently in debt, but whose financial situation is highly fragile. These individuals often manage on tight budgets with limited savings or financial buffers. As a result, relatively small financial shocks, such as unexpected bills or changes in income could quickly lead to financial distress.

This finding highlights the importance of preventative support for young people who may not yet be experiencing debt but remain financially vulnerable.

## Improving engagement requires earlier, more accessible support pathways

The evidence suggests that improving engagement with young adults requires services to reach people earlier in their financial journeys.

This includes:

- Reducing stigma associated with financial advice
- Clarifying what advice services offer and who they are for
- Improving the visibility of services in the digital spaces where young people search for information
- Creating simpler and more accessible routes to support

By addressing these barriers, advice services may be better able to engage young people before financial pressures escalate into crisis.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the gap between financial pressure and engagement with support is shaped by more than service availability alone. Young adults often experience financial stress as emotionally burdensome, difficult to define and not yet serious enough to justify formal help. Support is therefore often delayed not because need is absent, but because relevance, trust and emotional readiness have not yet been established. This points to a clear need for debt advice services to engage earlier, communicate more clearly, and design access routes that feel emotionally as well as practically accessible.



# Introduction and Project Context

## Why this project matters

**Young adults aged 18 to 25 are navigating financial independence in a challenging economic context. Rising living costs, housing pressures and insecure or unpredictable income mean that many experience ongoing financial stress early in adult life. For some, these pressures develop into debt or wider financial difficulties that affect wellbeing, confidence and longer-term financial resilience.**

Despite this, relatively little is understood about how young people interpret money worries, how they decide whether their situation is serious enough to seek help, and how they navigate the route to support. Existing debt advice services are often designed around crisis or acute financial difficulty, yet many young adults experience sustained financial pressure well before problems reach this point.

Understanding how young people experience money worries and how they look for help is therefore critical to improving access to debt advice. This project was designed to explore these experiences in greater depth and identify practical opportunities for improving engagement with young adults experiencing financial stress.

## Project aims

The aim of this project was to develop a deeper understanding of how young adults aged 18 to 25 experience financial stress and how they navigate support when facing money worries or debt.

Specifically, the project sought to:

- Explore young people's experiences of financial pressure and debt
- Understand the emotional and behavioural factors that shape help seeking decisions
- Identify barriers that prevent young adults from accessing debt advice services
- Examine how young people search for information and support when experiencing financial difficulties
- Generate practical insights that can help services engage more effectively with young adults

By combining qualitative interviews, survey data and co-production with young people, the project aimed to build a clear picture of the financial journeys which young adults experience and the points at which services can intervene more effectively.

## What this report contributes

This report contributes new insight into a group that is often discussed in relation to financial vulnerability but less often understood in relation to how help seeking actually unfolds. By combining in-depth qualitative insight, broader survey patterning and co-produced output development, the project offers both an evidence base and a set of practical tools for organisations seeking to improve engagement with young adults experiencing money worries and debt.

## Candidacy Framework

A useful way of understanding these findings is through the idea of candidacy: the process through which people come to see support as relevant to them, work out how to access it, and decide whether engaging feels possible. From this perspective, access is not a single event but a negotiated journey shaped by confidence, stigma, system design and past experience. This is particularly relevant for young adults, whose financial stress often develops gradually and may not immediately be recognised as something formal support can help with.

## Project outputs

- »»» **15 in-depth qualitative interviews**
- »»» **A survey of 300 young people experiencing money worries**
- »»» **Two co-production workshops to test and refine personas and journey maps**
- »»» **Co-production embedded throughout the project**

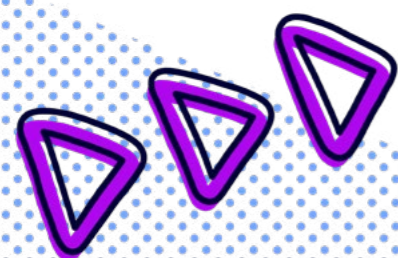


The project produced a set of practical outputs designed to help organisations better engage young adults experiencing money worries and debt. First, five youth personas were developed to represent common patterns of financial experience, emotional response and help-seeking behaviour among young adults. These personas provide a structured way for services to understand the different ways young people experience financial stress and interact with support.

Second, four journey maps were developed to illustrate common pathways through which young people move from early financial stress towards support, avoidance, or crisis. These maps highlight key decision points, emotional responses and friction points where individuals may either move closer to help or disengage from it.

Third, the project produced an engagement playbook that translates the findings into practical guidance for services. The playbook includes recommendations on communication, service design and accessibility, helping organisations reflect on how they present support, how easy they are to access, and how well they respond to the emotional as well as practical realities of financial stress.

Taken together, these outputs are intended to support debt advice organisations to develop earlier, clearer and more accessible routes into support for young adults.



# Research Approach



**This project used a mixed methods approach combining qualitative research, survey data and co-production with young people. The aim was to develop a rich understanding of how young adults experience financial stress and how they navigate support when facing money worries or debt.**

By drawing together multiple sources of evidence, the project sought to capture both the lived experience of young people and the broader patterns shaping help seeking behaviour.

## Study overview

This discovery project used a mixed methods design to explore how young adults aged 18 to 25 experience money worries and debt, and how they navigate support. When we speak about “young people” throughout the report, we are referring to 18–25 year old individuals.

The research combined 15 in-depth qualitative interviews, a survey of 300 young people experiencing money worries conducted via Censuswide, and co-production workshops used to test and refine emerging findings.

The project was designed to generate practical insight and applied outputs for the debt advice sector rather than a nationally representative picture of all young adults.

## Qualitative interviews

The project began with a series of in-depth interviews with 15 young people aged 18 to 25. Participants were purposively recruited to ensure diversity across financial circumstances, demographic characteristics and prior engagement with debt advice. This included a deliberate split between young people who had previously accessed debt advice and those who had not, enabling comparison between those who had navigated support services and those who had avoided or not engaged with them. The sample included individuals currently in debt, those with experience of debt, and those experiencing financial strain without formal debt.

Recruitment also aimed to achieve variation across age, ethnicity, employment status and living situation, with participants drawn from a range of regions across England. A minimum threshold of 50% female participants was set to ensure strong representation of young women’s experiences, reflecting both known patterns in help-seeking behaviour and the gendered nature of financial vulnerability and mental health. The intention was not to produce a statistically representative sample, but to capture a broad range of perspectives and financial experiences relevant to the project aims.

As part of the recruitment process, screening criteria were applied to exclude individuals experiencing acute or highly complex debt situations where participation may have posed safeguarding risks. This helped ensure that the research remained appropriate and ethically sound for participants. As a result, the findings are less reflective of those experiencing the most severe financial crisis and instead focus more strongly on young people experiencing low to moderate financial difficulty, financial fragility, or earlier stages of debt.

The interviews explored participants’ experiences of financial pressure, their attitudes towards debt and money management, and the ways in which they seek information or support when facing financial difficulties. Particular attention was given to the emotional and behavioural factors that influence whether young people seek help, delay seeking help, or avoid engaging with advice services altogether. These conversations provided detailed insight into how financial stress is experienced in everyday life and how young people interpret and respond to financial challenges.

## Survey

To complement the qualitative work, a survey of 300 young people experiencing money worries was conducted via Censuswide. The survey explored the drivers of financial stress, its impact on wellbeing, attitudes towards debt and money advice, and the ways in which young people seek information or support when facing financial problems.

The sample was designed to include young people with experience of debt or ongoing money problems, ensuring that responses were grounded in relevant lived experience rather than reflecting the wider general population. Quotas were applied to support broad demographic representation, including ethnic diversity across England, in order to capture a range of perspectives among young adults experiencing financial pressure.

The survey was designed to provide broader patterning and contextual insight alongside the qualitative interviews. It does not provide prevalence estimates for all young adults aged 18 to 25, but instead helps indicate how common particular attitudes, behaviours and experiences may be within a sample of young people already experiencing money worries. This broader quantitative picture was used to complement and test themes emerging from the qualitative work.

## Co-production workshops

Co-production workshops with young people were used to test and refine the emerging findings and support the development of the project outputs. Participants were invited to review early insights from the interviews and survey and to provide feedback on draft personas and help seeking journeys.

These workshops helped ensure that the outputs developed through the project reflected young people’s experiences and perspectives in a grounded and practical way.

## Limitations

As a discovery project, this research was designed to identify patterns and generate practical insight rather than to provide a nationally representative picture of all young adults aged 18 to 25. The qualitative interviews provide depth and insight into lived experience, while the survey offers broader context around common attitudes and behaviours among young people already experiencing money worries.

The qualitative sample was purposively structured to capture diversity across key demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, including ethnicity and gender, as well as a range of experiences of financial stress and prior engagement with debt advice. The survey sample was also targeted rather than drawn from the general population of 18 to 25 year olds. In addition, individuals experiencing acute or highly complex debt situations were excluded from the qualitative research on safeguarding grounds. The findings should therefore be understood as insight into a financially pressured group, rather than as population-level estimates for all young adults.



# Understanding Young Adults' Financial Stress and Help Seeking

Across the interviews, survey data and co-production workshops, a consistent pattern emerged in how young people experience financial stress and navigate support. While individual circumstances varied, four interconnected dynamics appeared repeatedly across the research.

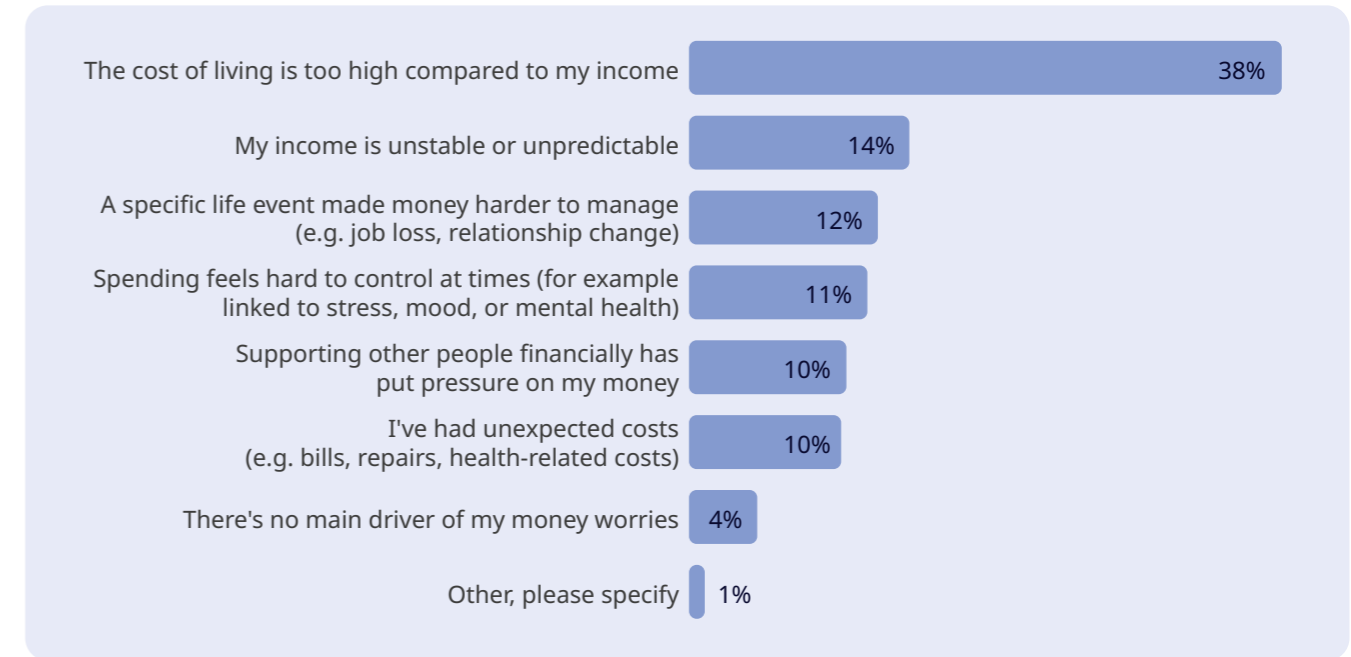
These dynamics help explain why financial stress can develop gradually, why it often remains hidden, and why professional advice services frequently appear late in young people's help seeking journeys.

## Structural financial pressures create ongoing stress

Across both the survey and the qualitative interviews, financial stress among young adults was strongly linked to wider economic pressures rather than isolated financial decisions. Participants frequently described financial difficulties emerging from rising living costs, unstable income and unexpected expenses.

Survey responses reinforce this pattern. The most frequently cited driver of financial stress was the cost of living relative to income, reported by **38%** of respondents. A further **14%** identified unstable or unpredictable income as a main cause of their financial worries.

## Drivers of money worries



These findings highlight the extent to which financial pressure among young adults is shaped by wider economic conditions. For many respondents, financial stress was linked less to individual spending behaviour and more to the broader challenge of balancing living costs against limited or uncertain income.

Participants frequently described feeling financially exposed even when they were actively trying to manage their spending carefully.

“Whenever I spend money, whenever I earn money... I'm thinking about should that go to something else I need?”

For many young people, financial stress therefore emerges from a combination of structural pressures and limited financial buffers, meaning that relatively small financial shocks can have a significant impact.





## Financial stress is experienced as a psychological burden

Financial pressure was consistently described as an emotional experience as well as a financial one. Participants frequently described constantly monitoring their finances and feeling unable to switch off from concerns about money.

For some young people, this mental monitoring becomes a persistent background pressure that affects everyday decision making.

Survey findings highlight the scale of this emotional impact. More than four in five respondents said money problems had made them feel anxious or on edge (81%), while 77% said money worries had affected their mental health or wellbeing.

Around seven in ten said financial stress had affected their ability to socialise (73%) or cope with everyday life (71%). Many also reported impacts on confidence or self-esteem (68%) and sleep or energy levels (62%).

**“It just exacerbates into this massive worrying ball of thoughts.”**

This shows that financial stress among young adults often functions as a continuous mental load rather than a single moment of crisis.

## Informal support and digital exploration dominate early help seeking

Young people rarely move directly from recognising financial stress to contacting a professional advice service. Instead, help seeking tends to begin with informal conversations and private exploration of information online.

Friends, partners and family members often provide the first opportunity to discuss financial concerns.

**“Probably the people that I live with... I’ll always talk to them first.”**

Survey findings confirm this pattern. More than a third of respondents said they would first look for advice from friends and family (38%). In comparison, 15% said they would begin with a search engine, 11% with an AI tool and 8% with social media.

Participants also described using digital tools to explore financial questions privately before considering formal advice. These tools often provide a way to test ideas, explore scenarios and gather information without feeling exposed.

However, digital exploration is usually part of an early sense checking process rather than a replacement for professional support.

This has important implications for service design. Formal debt advice services are often not competing with inaction, but with informal reassurance, private sense-checking and low threshold digital exploration. This means that services need to become visible and intelligible earlier in the journey, before a young person is ready to identify themselves as someone who needs formal support.



## Psychological and informational barriers delay engagement with services

Despite experiencing financial stress, many young people delay or avoid contacting professional advice services. Interviews highlighted several factors that contribute to this hesitation.

**Shame and stigma were frequently mentioned. Participants often described the word “debt” as emotionally loaded and associated with failure or judgement.**

**“It’s a weighted word... debt... it’s got a lot of association with it.”**

Some participants also described feeling personally responsible for their financial difficulties, even where wider structural pressures were clearly involved.

**“I feel like it’s my own fault... so they wouldn’t want to help me.”**

Survey findings reinforce these insights. Just over half of respondents said they do not like to use the word debt about their own finances (51%), while 54% said their mental health made it harder to notice when money problems were building up. Nearly half said they regularly relied on financial help from family or friends (48%).

Awareness of debt advice services was also limited. Only 33% said debt advice services are for people like them, and the same proportion said they know what such services actually do. More than a third believed they would need to be unable to pay their debts before a service could help them (37%).

Collectively, these barriers help explain why professional advice services often appear relatively late in young people’s financial journeys. The following sections explore these dynamics in more detail, examining how young people experience financial stress, the barriers that prevent engagement with support, and the pathways through which help seeking typically unfolds.



# Understanding Young People's Experiences of Money and Debt

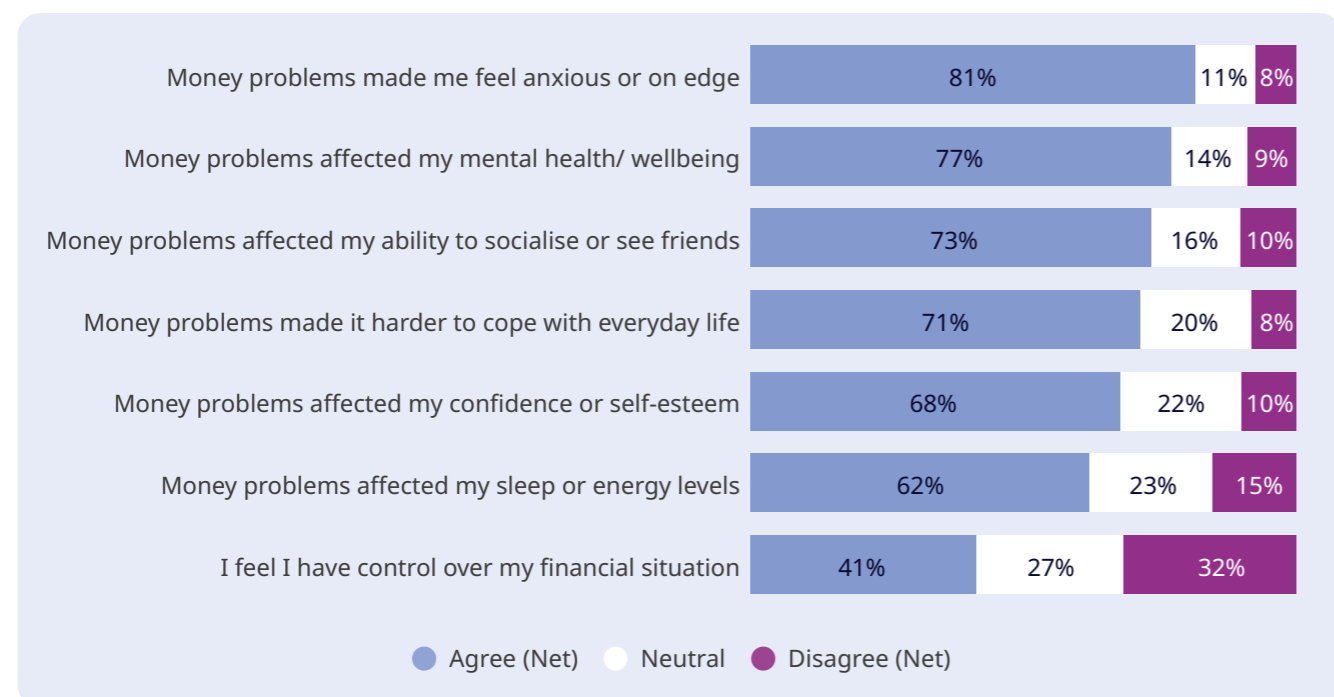
**For many young adults, financial stress is not experienced as a single crisis event but as an ongoing background pressure that shapes everyday decision making.**

Survey findings highlight the significant emotional and psychological impact that money worries can have on young adults. Financial stress is not experienced only as a practical financial challenge. Instead, it often affects multiple aspects of wellbeing, including mental health, confidence and everyday functioning.

Many respondents reported that money worries shape daily decisions and contribute to ongoing anxiety. For some young people, the emotional impact of financial pressure can be substantial, affecting sleep, social participation and their ability to cope with everyday life.

## Impact of money problems on wellbeing and daily life

Survey results indicate that money worries have a wide-ranging impact on young people's wellbeing, affecting mental health, social participation and everyday functioning.

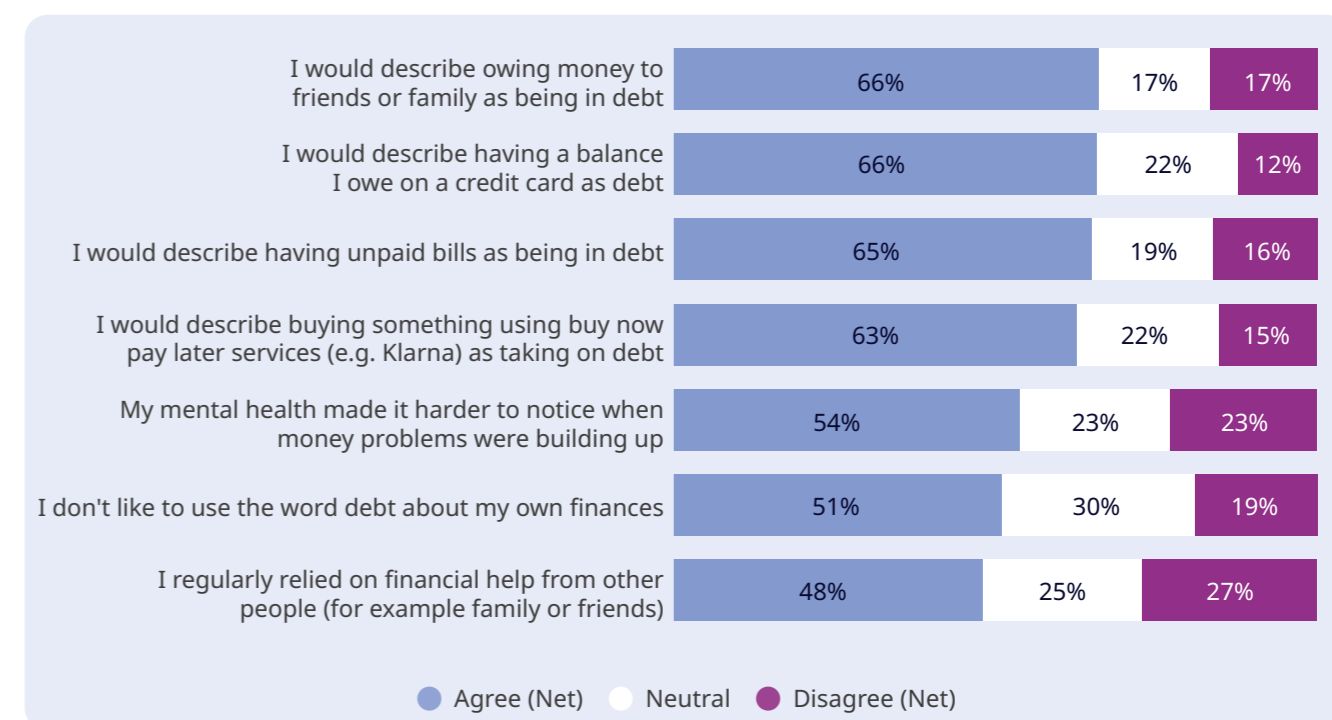


The analysis illustrates the extent to which financial stress can affect young people's emotional wellbeing. More than four in five respondents reported feeling anxious or on edge as a result of money worries, while over three quarters said their mental health or wellbeing had been affected.

Financial stress also appears to shape everyday behaviour. Many respondents reported avoiding social activities or experiencing reduced confidence as a result of financial pressure. For some young people, the need to constantly think about money creates an ongoing mental burden that affects daily life.

## Financial stress is often hidden, emotionally difficult to name, and linked to mental health

Many young people rely on informal financial support, feel uncomfortable describing their situation as debt, or report that mental health challenges make financial problems harder to recognise.



This evidence highlights several important features of how financial stress develops among young adults.

First, almost half of respondents reported relying on financial help from family or friends. While this support can provide an important safety net, it can also mask the extent of financial vulnerability by allowing individuals to manage pressures informally rather than seeking formal advice.

Second, more than half of respondents reported feeling uncomfortable describing their financial situation using the term "debt". This suggests that

the language associated with financial difficulty may carry stigma or emotional weight that discourages young people from identifying their situation in these terms.

Finally, more than half of respondents said that their mental health made it harder to recognise when financial problems were developing. This highlights the close relationship between financial stress and emotional wellbeing and suggests that financial difficulties may build gradually without being fully recognised until pressures become more severe.

This highlights that financial stress among young adults is often experienced privately and may remain hidden until financial pressures escalate.

Participants frequently described constantly calculating or anticipating financial pressures. Everyday decisions such as attending social events or making small purchases could trigger anxiety about future affordability.

One participant explained:

“Whenever I spend money... I’m thinking about what that means later.”

Another described the emotional impact of financial insecurity:

“It just exacerbates into this massive worrying ball of thoughts.”

These experiences highlight how financial pressure can become mentally exhausting even when the amounts involved are relatively small.

Financial vulnerability was often linked to the absence of savings or financial buffers rather than excessive borrowing. Unexpected costs such as housing issues, transport expenses or administrative errors could quickly destabilise finances.

Housing costs in particular were a recurring source of strain. One interviewee described having to pay for two accommodations simultaneously due to a dispute with a landlord, requiring financial support from family.

Participants also described how financial stress can affect daily life and social participation.

One interviewee explained:

“I can get quite anxious about going to social events if I realise how much money it will cost.”

The research illustrates how financial stress can shape everyday behaviour and contribute to isolation or reduced social participation.

Overall, the findings suggest that financial vulnerability among young adults is often shaped less by dramatic crisis than by the cumulative effect of ongoing exposure, low financial cushioning and constant mental monitoring. This is important because it means that need may be substantial even where debts are relatively small, hidden, or not yet formally recognised as debt by the young person themselves.



## Barriers to Seeking Advice

**Although many young people experience ongoing financial stress, the research suggests that a combination of emotional, psychological and practical barriers can delay engagement with professional advice services. These barriers rarely operate in isolation. Instead, they tend to reinforce one another, meaning that young people may continue managing financial pressure alone even when support could be beneficial.**

One of the clearest barriers identified across the research is shame. For many young people, financial difficulty is not viewed purely as a practical issue. It is also associated with judgement, failure and personal responsibility. Participants often described debt as a serious or loaded term, and some found it difficult to talk openly about financial struggles because doing so felt exposing or embarrassing.

The survey findings support this strongly. Around a third of respondents said shame or stigma had stopped them, or would stop them, from accessing debt advice services (34%). Half said they would be worried about being judged for their spending or financial choices if they accessed debt advice (50%). More than half said they expected contacting a debt advice service to be stressful or emotionally draining (56%).

These perceptions are often tied to self-blame. Many participants understood their financial problems as something they should be able to manage themselves, even when wider structural pressures such as housing costs, inflation or insecure work were clearly involved. This can create a strong internal expectation that financial difficulties should be dealt with privately, without outside intervention.

Taken together, these findings suggest that barriers to support are not only informational or practical. They are also relational and emotional. Young people are often making judgements about whether support is “for people like me”, whether their situation is serious enough, and whether contact with a service will leave them feeling exposed, judged or overwhelmed. These internal thresholds can delay help seeking even where services are available.

The research also highlights the importance of internal thresholds for help seeking. Many young people compare their own situation with what they imagine to be more serious or legitimate financial crises experienced by others. Unless their situation feels severe, urgent or visibly unmanageable, they may conclude that seeking advice is unnecessary or that services are intended for someone else.

Survey data reinforces this pattern. Only **33%** said debt or money advice services are for people like them, and only **33%** said they know what debt advice services actually do. More than a third believed they would need to be at the point of not being able to pay their debts before a debt service could help them (**37%**). Only **36%** said they would know where to find services that provide support with debt, and **39%** said they would know where to look for reliable help with money problems.

Avoidance also plays an important role. When financial worries become emotionally overwhelming, some young people respond by postponing or avoiding engagement with the issue altogether. Participants described avoiding checking bank balances, delaying conversations about money, or putting off decisions because these actions intensified anxiety in the short term.

Mental health can compound this process. More than half of survey respondents said their mental health made it harder to notice when money problems were building up (**54%**). Nearly half said they regularly relied on financial help from family or friends (**48%**), suggesting that young people may often cope through informal support rather than formal recognition of the problem.

Alongside psychological barriers such as shame and self-blame, many young people also described uncertainty about advice services themselves. Participants frequently reported that they were unsure what debt advice services actually do, who they are intended for, or when it is appropriate to seek support.

This uncertainty can create hesitation about contacting services, particularly if individuals believe that advice services are designed only for people experiencing severe financial crisis. Survey findings highlight several aspects of this uncertainty.

## Awareness and perceptions of debt advice services

Many young people are unsure how debt advice services work or whether they are relevant to their situation.

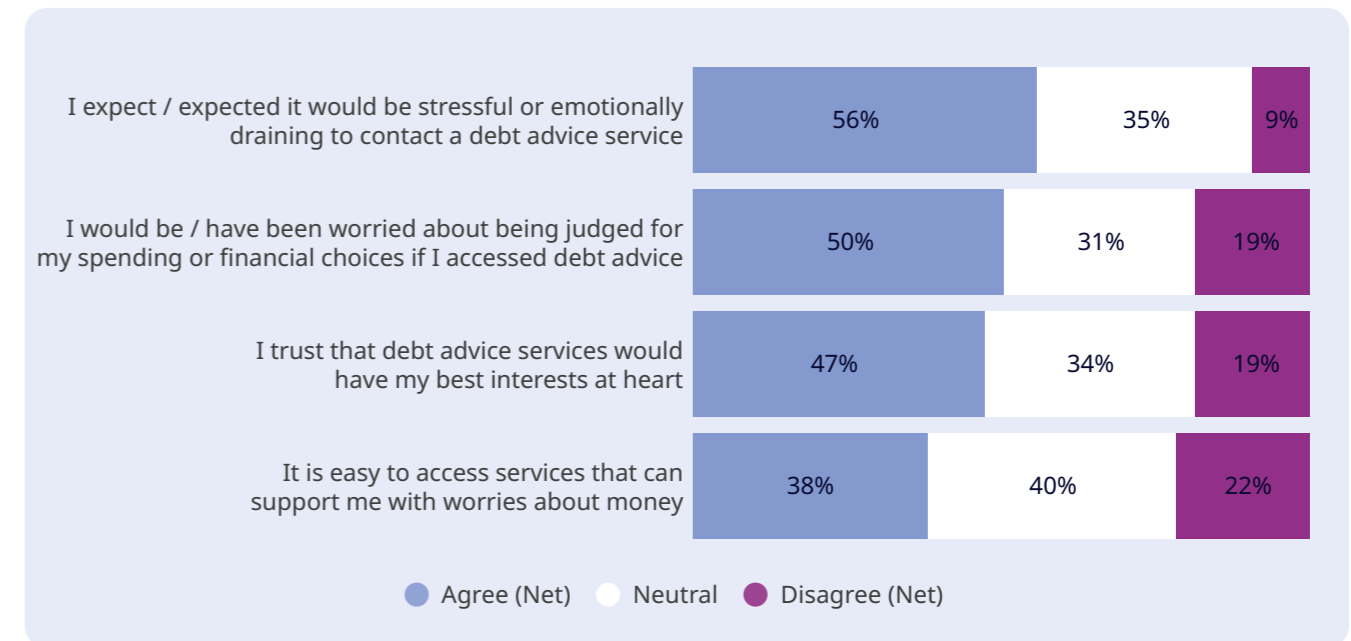
In addition to uncertainty about how advice services operate, many young people also anticipate that contacting a service may be emotionally difficult. Participants frequently described concerns about being judged for their financial decisions or feeling overwhelmed by the prospect of discussing financial problems with a professional adviser.

These perceptions can discourage individuals from seeking support, particularly if they already feel embarrassed or anxious about their financial situation. Survey responses illustrate several of these emotional barriers.

## Perceptions of accessing debt advice services



Many young people expect contacting a debt advice service to be stressful or worry about being judged for their financial decisions.



This highlights the emotional barriers that can influence young people’s willingness to seek financial advice. More than half of respondents reported that they would expect contacting a debt advice service to be stressful or emotionally draining. Half also reported worrying that they might be judged for their financial choices.

Although nearly half of respondents said they trust that advice services would have their best interests at heart, these concerns about judgement and emotional stress may still discourage individuals from reaching out for support.

Together with the findings presented earlier, this suggests that improving engagement with

young adults may require services to address both practical barriers and the emotional experiences associated with seeking help for financial problems.

This evidence suggests that a combination of uncertainty about services, perceived stigma and concerns about emotional stress can discourage young people from contacting advice services.

While many young adults experience financial stress, these barriers may delay or prevent individuals from seeking professional support. Survey responses illustrate the extent to which young people experiencing money worries have actually accessed advice services.

## Most young people experiencing money worries have not accessed advice services

A majority of respondents reported that they had not previously accessed debt advice or money support services.

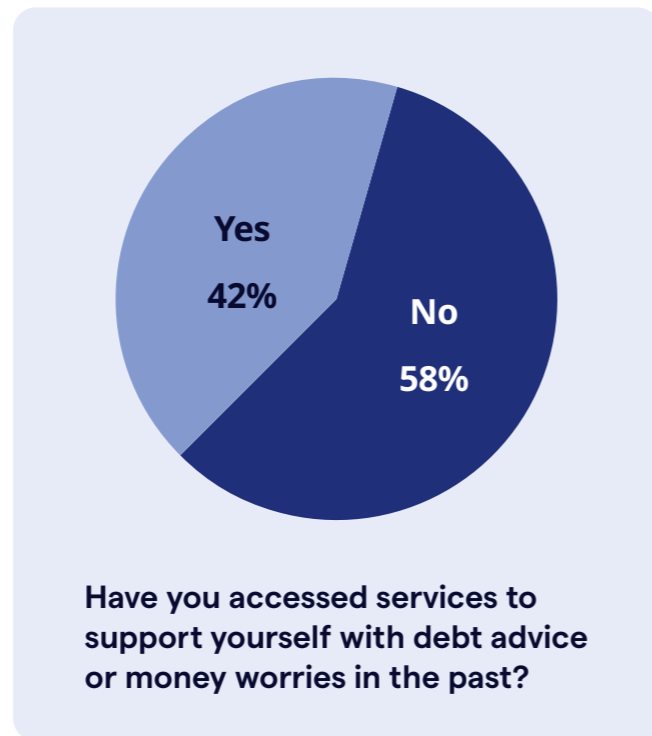
This suggests that although many young people experience financial stress, a majority have not accessed professional advice services. This gap between financial pressure and service engagement highlights an important challenge for organisations seeking to support young adults experiencing money worries.

Several factors identified earlier in the research may contribute to this pattern. Young people often rely first on informal networks such as friends or family members, while uncertainty about advice services and concerns about stigma or judgement can discourage individuals from seeking professional support.

Understanding how young people move from recognising financial pressure to considering external support is therefore critical. The following sections explore how young adults typically navigate this process and the points at which they may engage with or disengage from available services.

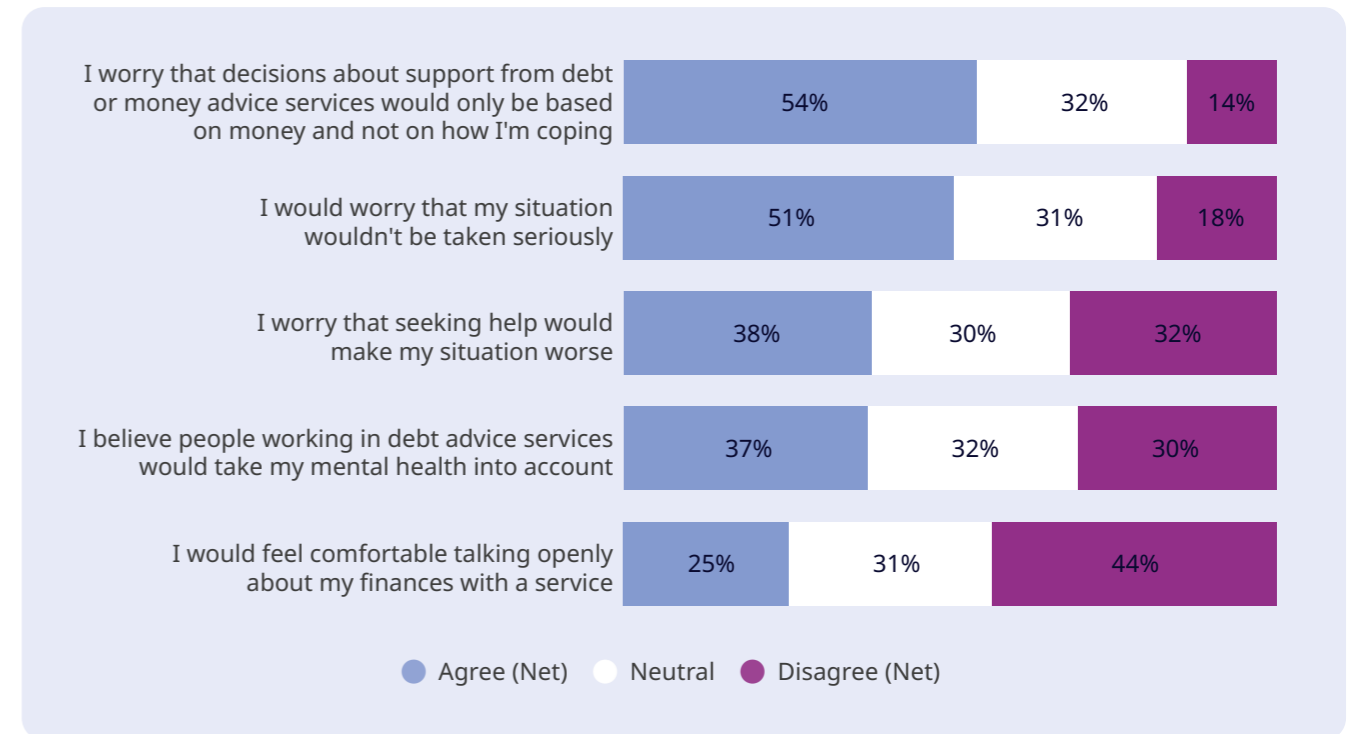
To better understand why many young people experiencing financial stress have not accessed advice services, the survey also explored the perceptions and concerns of respondents who had not previously sought support.

These responses provide insight into the barriers that may prevent individuals from reaching out for help, even when they are experiencing financial pressure.



## Concerns among young people who have not accessed debt advice services

Many young people who have not accessed advice services report concerns about judgement, not being taken seriously or services focusing only on financial circumstances rather than wellbeing.



This suggests that concerns about how advice services operate may discourage some young people from seeking support. Only one quarter of respondents who had not accessed services said they would feel comfortable talking openly about their finances with a service.

At the same time, many respondents expressed concerns about how their situation might be interpreted. More than half reported worrying that decisions about support might be based solely on financial information rather than their broader circumstances or emotional wellbeing.

These perceptions may contribute to hesitation about contacting advice services, particularly among young people who already feel vulnerable or uncertain about their financial situation. The data helps explain why professional advice services often appear relatively late in young people's

financial journeys. Reducing stigma, clarifying what services do, and making support feel relevant before crisis point are therefore likely to be central to improving engagement.

This gap between need and perceived relevance is one of the clearest findings in the study and helps explain why professional advice services often appear late in the help-seeking journey.

**Only one in three respondents said debt advice services are for people like them.**

# How Young People Look for Help

**When young people experience money worries, they rarely move directly from recognising a problem to contacting a professional advice service. Instead, help seeking tends to follow a gradual, exploratory process in which informal conversations and digital searching play a central role.**

For many participants, the first source of support is their immediate social network. Friends, partners, family members and housemates can provide an accessible and trusted space in which to talk

through financial concerns, sense check whether a situation is serious, and gather initial ideas about what to do next.

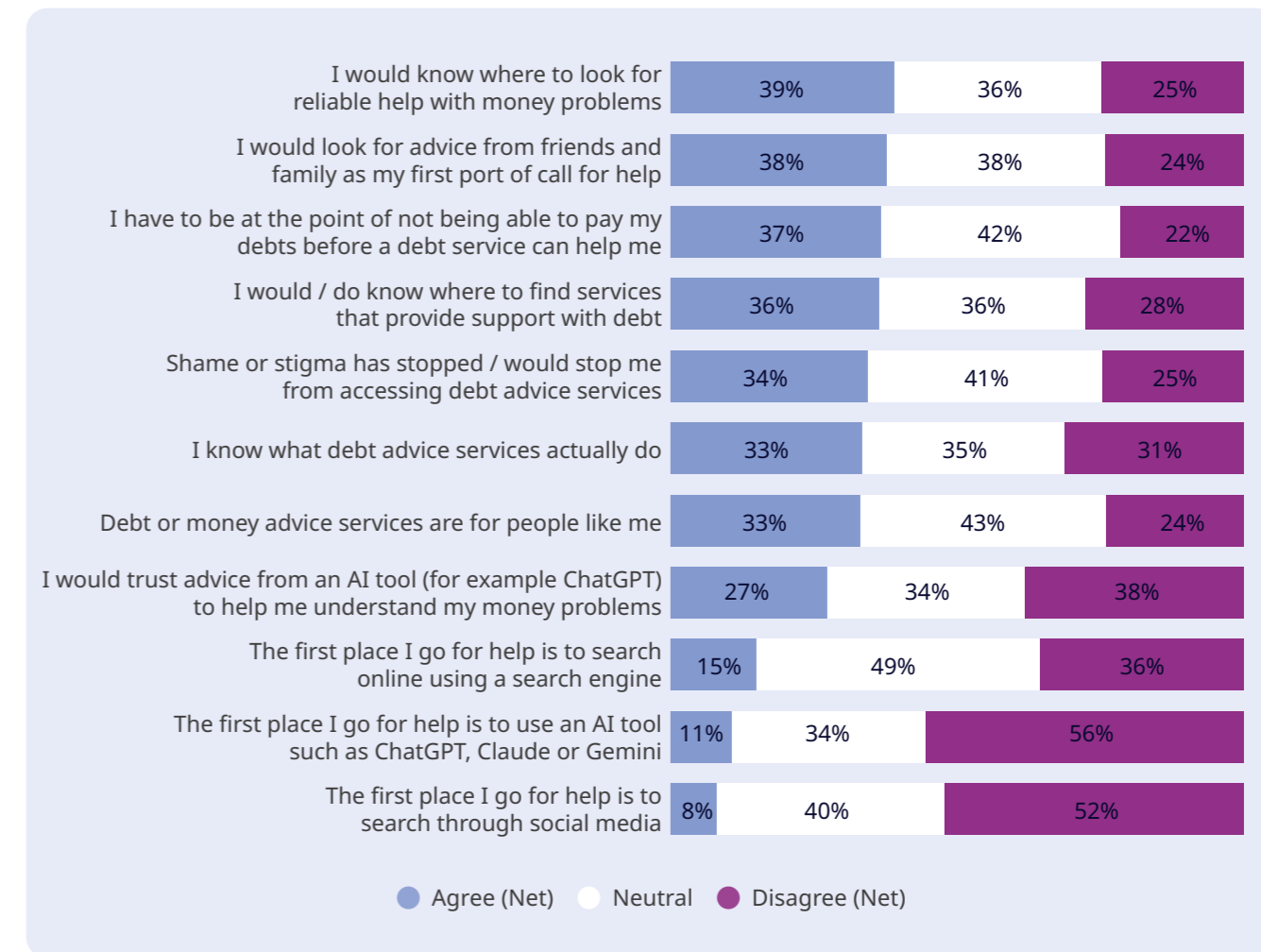
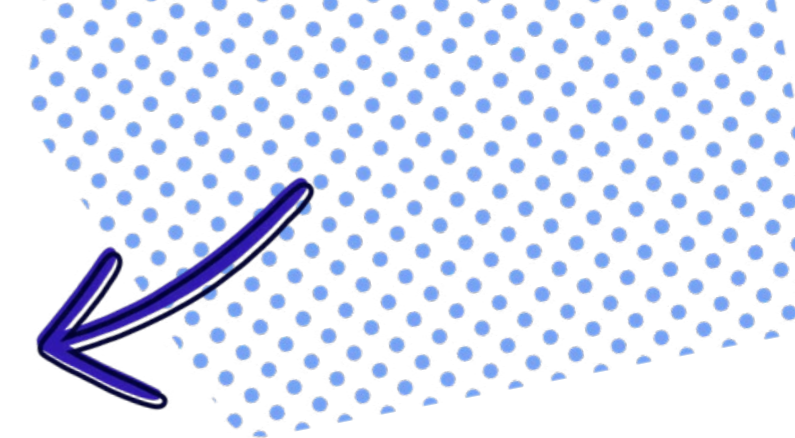
Friends, family members and housemates often provide the first opportunity to discuss financial concerns. Alongside these conversations, young people frequently search online to understand financial issues or explore possible solutions.

Survey responses highlight where young people say they would first go when seeking help with money problems.



## First places young people go for help with money problems

Friends and family are the most common first source of help for young people experiencing money worries.



The survey findings suggest that informal networks play a central role in young people's early help-seeking behaviour. More than a third of respondents reported that they would first turn to friends or family members for advice about money problems.

Online research also plays an important role in helping young people explore financial questions. Search engines, social media and digital tools provide accessible ways for individuals to investigate financial issues privately before deciding whether to seek further support.

At the same time, relatively few respondents reported that they would turn first to digital platforms such as social media or artificial intelligence tools when seeking financial advice. This suggests that while digital sources may play a role in information gathering, personal networks remain an important first point of contact for many young people.

This was reflected in the survey findings. More than a third of respondents said they would first look for advice from friends and family (38%). In contrast, 15% said they would first use a search engine, 11% said they would first use an AI tool such as ChatGPT, Claude or Gemini, and 8% said they would start with social media.

Informal support can be valuable because it is immediate, trusted and low stakes. However, it also has limitations. The quality of advice depends on the experience and confidence of the people around the young person. In some cases, informal networks can offer reassurance but little practical direction, particularly where peers are facing similar financial uncertainties themselves.

Alongside informal advice, online exploration is a major part of how young people make sense of money worries. Participants frequently described using search engines, online guides, social content and other digital sources to understand financial issues before deciding whether to seek more formal help. This allows young people to explore concerns privately and at their own pace, which can feel particularly important when shame or embarrassment is present.

Despite this active searching, awareness of specialist debt advice services remains limited. Only 36% said they would know where to find services that provide support with debt. As a result, professional advice services are rarely the first step in young people's help seeking journeys.

These findings suggest that early help seeking is often exploratory rather than decisive. Young people are not typically moving straight from problem recognition to formal support. Instead, they are testing, comparing, searching and sense-checking through people and platforms they already trust. For services, this means that visibility alone is not enough. Support also needs to feel relevant to everyday financial strain, easy to understand, and available before a situation has escalated into obvious crisis.

These patterns highlight the importance of understanding how young people search for information and support in practice. Advice

services that expect young adults to move directly to formal support may miss the fact that help seeking is often gradual, private and shaped by trusted relationships.

### The role of AI in early help seeking

The research explored young people's attitudes towards using artificial intelligence (AI) tools, such as ChatGPT, Claude or Gemini, when seeking help with money worries or debt. The findings suggest that AI is not currently a primary or widely preferred route into support. When asked whether they would use an AI tool as the first place to go for help, a clear majority of respondents (56%) expressed some level of disagreement, including one third (33%) who strongly disagreed. In contrast, only 11% expressed agreement, with just 4% strongly agreeing. This indicates that AI is not seen as a natural starting point when young people are experiencing financial difficulties, with most continuing to rely on more familiar routes into support.

Attitudes towards trusting AI tools were more mixed, but still leaned towards scepticism. Just over a quarter of respondents (27%) said they would trust advice from an AI tool to help them understand their money problems, while 38% expressed distrust. A further 25% were neutral, suggesting a degree of uncertainty or ambivalence. This distribution highlights that while a minority of young people are open to using AI in this context, confidence in its reliability is not yet established.

Taken together, these findings suggest that AI currently sits on the margins of young people's help-seeking behaviour. It is not widely used as a first step and is not consistently trusted as a source of advice. Instead, it appears to play a more limited role alongside existing behaviours, with informal support networks and familiar online sources remaining the dominant entry points. For services, this reinforces the importance of maintaining clear, accessible and trustworthy information across established channels, while recognising that AI may play a growing but still secondary role in how young people explore and interpret their financial situation.



## Youth Personas

**These personas have been created using data and insights gathered from a mixed methods research study exploring how young people aged 18–25 experience money worries, debt, and the process of seeking help. The aim of the work was to understand not only what financial challenges young people face, but how these challenges affect their wellbeing, their behaviour, and their ability to access support.**

The researchers carried out 15 in-depth interviews and a targeted survey of 300 young people. This combination of qualitative and quantitative research allowed the creation of segments (groups of young people with similar patterns of experience), out of which personas (representing the typical needs, behaviours and feelings within those segments) were built.

The personas do not describe real individuals. Instead, they are evidence-based characters that capture common experiences and help us plan with real people in mind. They have been designed to help us think empathetically about different lived experiences, and to inform the design of services, pathways and communications that meet young people where they are.

The personas are not intended to represent fixed categories or mutually exclusive groups. Rather, they are evidence-based patterns that help explain recurring combinations of emotional impact, financial strain and help-seeking behaviour. Young people may move between these positions over time as their financial circumstances, living situation, confidence or mental health changes. Analysis suggests that these experiences can broadly be understood across two key dimensions:

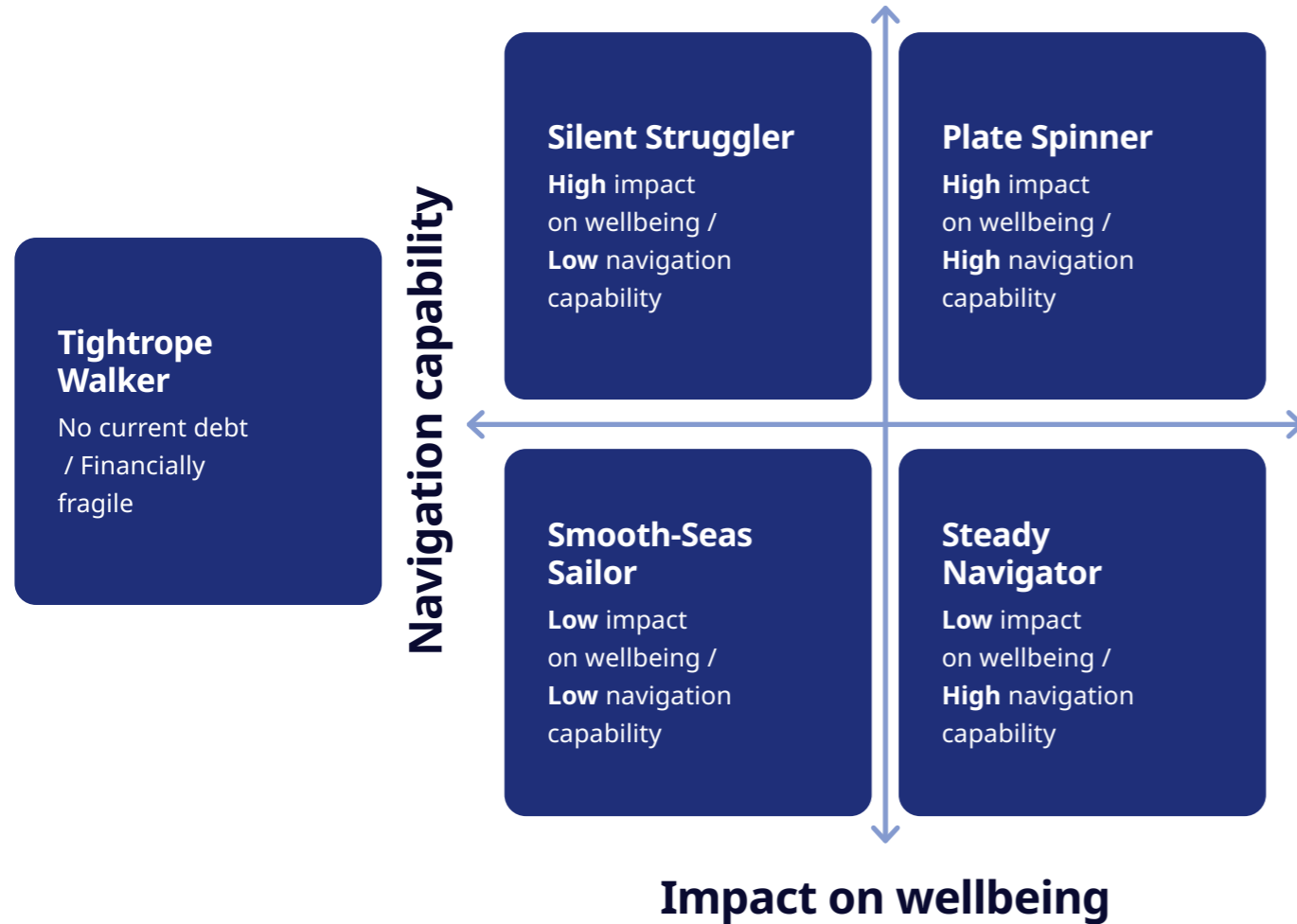
- Impact on wellbeing
- Navigation capability

The interaction between these dimensions helps explain why some young people actively seek support while others delay engagement or avoid services altogether. The personas deck also identifies an additional group, the Tightrope Walker, representing young people with no current formal debt but very fragile financial resilience.

This framework highlights that financial distress alone does not determine help seeking behaviour. Instead, the interaction between emotional impact and navigation capability shapes how young people respond to financial pressure.

## Youth Financial Experience Framework

Financial experiences vary based on both emotional impact and ability to navigate support



# The Silent Struggler

High impact | Low navigation

### Demographic snapshot

- **Age:** Typically late teens to early 20s
- **Gender:** Predominantly female (highest proportion across all groups)
- **Ethnicity:** Mainly White and Asian, fewer from Mixed or Black backgrounds
- **Income:** Around 64% in lower income brackets (most earning £15k or less)
- **Debt:** Many have £0-999 debt; Common types include overdraft, money owed to friends/family, credit cards, and BNPL
- **Mental health:** Highest rates of anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, and other mental health conditions
- **Use of services:** Lowest help-seeking of any segment



drives them to keep quiet and/or downplay what they are going through. They feel stuck, but they don't know where to start with seeking help. Formal services can feel intimidating or 'not for people like me'. Therefore, they tend to put off seeking help altogether until they reach crisis point, either emotionally or financially.

“It's like waking up with a weight on your shoulders... you just keep worrying about it and you can't escape it.”

The Silent Struggler may seem outwardly 'fine', but they are carrying a heavy emotional load. Their debts are usually relatively small: an overdraft, a low credit card balance, a few Buy Now Pay Later instalments. But to them, they feel overwhelming and deeply personal. Worry is a constant background noise. Money-related stress impacts everyday life, leading them to turn down social plans or avoid looking at their bank balance. Anxiety, shame and self-blame are powerful forces for the Silent Struggler.

They rarely talk about money. Opening up feels embarrassing, even risky; they don't want to be perceived as irresponsible or a burden. They often believe others have it worse than them, which

**Key support:** The Silent Struggler isn't disengaged; they are overwhelmed. What they need is reassurance, safe entry points, and step-by-step guidance that reduces shame and builds confidence.

Effective support therefore needs to:

- Reduce emotional barriers to engagement
- Offer reassurance alongside practical advice
- Be visible in trusted, low pressure environments



# The Plate Spinner

High impact | High navigation

## Demographic snapshot

- **Age:** Typically early-mid 20s
- **Gender:** Slightly skewed towards female
- **Ethnicity:** Higher proportion of White respondents; slightly lower proportion of respondents from mixed ethnic backgrounds
- **Income:** Largest proportion of high earners compared with other segments, but still almost 2 in 5 in lower income brackets; also the highest proportion reporting that they do not work
- **Debt:** More than 3 in 5 have debt above £1,000; highest proportion with debt across all categories above £0-£999; debt is often structured or actively managed
- **Mental health:** Impact on wellbeing is similar to Silent Strugglers; highest proportion reporting stress-related conditions, PTSD, eating disorders and ADHD compared with other segments and the total sample
- **Use of services:** More likely to have engaged with advice tools or services; higher navigation scores suggest greater confidence in knowing where to seek help

“I’m constantly checking my bank balance... I’m trying to manage it, but it still feels like everything is a stretch.”

The Plate Spinner is trying very hard to stay on top of everything. Money is on their mind every day. They track balances, use budgeting tools, know their repayment dates, and are often juggling multiple structured debts. The financial strain they are feeling is real: a perfect storm of rising costs, insecure work, and life’s transitions (e.g., graduating or changing jobs) keeping the pressure on.

Unlike the Silent Struggler, they do seek help. They research, compare options, and may have already contacted services like Citizens Advice or university support. But this doesn’t always leave them feeling better. They often fall into the category of ‘not eligible’ or ‘not in crisis’, and as a result don’t receive the practical, tailored advice they had hoped for.

Stress-related mental health challenges are more common among Plate Spinners than the other personas. There is also a higher prevalence of conditions such as depression and anxiety, ADHD, PTSD, and eating disorders in this group. Managing money requires high levels of organisation and mental energy, and this can feel like a heavy burden for the Plate Spinner to bear with the increasing precarity. They tend to say: “I’m trying; it’s just hard.” With this comes an exacerbation of pre-existing conditions and/or a spike in feelings of anxiety and stress, which can in turn make everything that little bit harder.

**Key takeaway:** The Plate Spinner is capable and proactive, but stretched thin. They need clear next steps, tailored advice, and support that recognises both their effort and their stress.

# The Smooth-Seas Sailor

Low impact | Low navigation

## Demographic snapshot

- **Age:** Typically early-mid 20s
- **Gender:** Slightly skewed towards female
- **Ethnicity:** Higher proportion of Asian respondents; Smaller proportion of White, Mixed, and Black
- **Income:** Second-highest proportion in lower income brackets (many earning £15k or less)
- **Debt:** Lowest proportion with debts over £1k; Little to no current borrowing
- **Mental health:** Lower distress overall; Highest proportion reporting eating disorders
- **Use of services:** Low engagement; Little prior contact with financial advice services

“It hasn’t really felt like a problem... I just assume I’ll work it out if something comes up.”

On the whole, the Smooth-Seas Sailor feels financially okay. If they have any debt, it is small and manageable. Money isn’t a major source of stress, and their wellbeing is relatively stable. They often have stable living arrangements (such as living with family) which provide a safety net. If something goes wrong, help typically comes from parents or close friends rather than formal services.

Because they haven’t needed to navigate financial support systems, they don’t know how to; nor do they feel a sense of urgency to learn. To the Smooth-Seas Sailor, debt feels abstract rather than real. If a problem arises, they assume they can ‘sort it out’, despite often having a low income, minimal savings, and little practical experience when it comes to managing financial shocks.



As things feel stable right now, they’re not inclined to seek advice, and they may view services as being for other people with ‘serious problems’. Their vulnerability is hidden: their situation is only secure for as long as their circumstances stay the same. Furthermore, stress-related conditions are more common here than in other groups.

Support for this group should focus on:

- Early awareness
- Normalising preventative support
- Building confidence before crisis

**Key takeaway:** The Smooth-Seas Sailor isn’t struggling now, but they may be relatively ill-equipped for future challenges. They need gentle prompts towards independence, skills-building, and resilience.

# The Steady Navigator

Low impact | High navigation

## Demographic snapshot

- **Age:** Typically early-mid 20s
- **Gender:** More mixed, with highest proportion of males across all segments
- **Ethnicity:** Lower proportion of White respondents; very high representation of Black respondents
- **Income:** Strong representation in middle-income brackets (£25-35k); Approx. 40% in lower-income brackets
- **Debt:** Lowest levels of severe debt (most have £0-999)
- **Mental health:** Highest proportion of any segment reporting no mental health conditions
- **Use of services:** Comfortable navigating and contacting services early

“I’d probably look into my options and make a plan before it got too serious.” ”

The Steady Navigator is confident, organised, and financially self-sufficient. They may have some debt, such as a student loan or a credit card balance – but it feels structured and under control. Money doesn’t carry heavy emotional weight; it’s something to manage rather than something that defines them.

They compare options, seek information early, and make plans before problems escalate. They’re comfortable navigating systems, using online tools, and contacting services if needed. Their emotional wellbeing is generally stable, and fewer report mental health conditions than in other groups.

They are often working, earning mid-range incomes, and building their financial independence. Their financial capability acts as a buffer, keeping stress low even when costs rise or circumstances shift.

**Key takeaway:** The Steady Navigator is proactive, rational and resilient. They need clear, trustworthy information and tools that help them continue to plan well, as opposed to crisis-focused services.



# The Tightrope Walker

No debt | Financially fragile

## Demographic snapshot

- **Age:** Typically early 20s
- **Gender:** Mostly female (around 87%)
- **Ethnicity:** Mixed (includes White, Asian and Mixed respondents)
- **Income:** 3 in 5 on low incomes (no one earning over £45k)
- **Debt:** None significant; some cases of BNPL, small arrears, or overdraft use
- **Mental health:** Lower impact scores but persistent background anxiety
- **Use of services:** Lowest engagement; least likely to have accessed services previously

“If something unexpected happened, like my car breaking down, that could be everything... that’s my job possibly gone.” ”

The Tightrope Walker looks stable on paper: no debt, no crisis, no major distress. But in reality, they are living close to the edge. Their income is low, their savings are minimal, and their budget is tightly controlled. They avoid borrowing because it feels risky, and they often rely on family or their living situation to absorb shocks.

They don’t consider themselves to be ‘in debt’ or in need of support, even though they occasionally use overdrafts or owe small amounts to friends or family. They are financially cautious and self-reliant, often declaring that they are fine even when things are precarious. They rarely seek advice, assuming they won’t be eligible or that others need help more than them.



Their vulnerability becomes visible only when something changes, like a rent increase, an unexpected bill, or moving out of the family home. Without a buffer or strong navigation skills, they could slip into difficulty quickly.

## Key takeaway and support opportunity:

The Tightrope Walker is coping – for now. They need preventative support, reassurance that help exists before crisis, and guidance to build resilience.

Support implications are clear:

- Preventative offers are critical
- Eligibility perceptions must be challenged
- Services must engage *before* debt occurs

## Key insights from the personas

Across all personas, four consistent themes emerge:

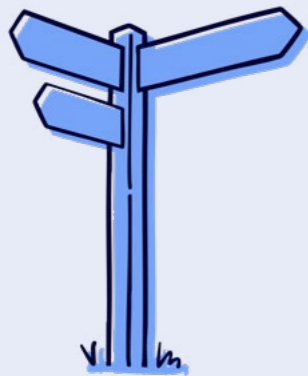
### 1. Navigation capability shapes outcomes as much as financial pressure

Two young people with similar financial circumstances may respond very differently depending on how confident they feel in understanding support, knowing where to go, and taking action.



### 2. Informal networks are the default entry point

Friends, family and partners are often the first place young people turn when financial stress begins to build. Professional services rarely represent the first step.



### 3. Emotional barriers are as significant as practical ones

Shame, fear of judgement, uncertainty about eligibility and concern about being overwhelmed all play a major role in delaying engagement. These are not secondary barriers. They are central to how support is experienced and approached.

- 34% report stigma as a barrier
- 50% fear being judged

Shame and perceived eligibility strongly influence behaviour.

### 4. Many young people delay support until crisis point

Even where awareness exists, support is often seen as something for later, for crisis, or for people in worse situations. This means opportunities for earlier intervention are frequently missed.

Taken together, the personas show that improving access is not only about increasing awareness. It is also about shaping how support feels, when it becomes visible, and whether young people can see themselves reflected in it.

# The Help Seeking Journey

The research suggests that young people's experiences of financial stress typically unfold over time rather than emerging as a single moment of crisis. Before engaging with professional advice services, many move through a series of stages in which they recognise financial pressure, attempt to manage it independently, and gradually explore different sources of support.

To illustrate these patterns, the project developed four journey pathways. These represent common patterns observed across the interviews and survey responses. These journeys align with four of the personas developed through the project and illustrate common patterns in how young people move towards, away from, or around support. They are not fixed or fully linear. Rather, they highlight recurring stages, emotional responses and friction points that shape how young people navigate financial difficulty.



## The Journey Maps

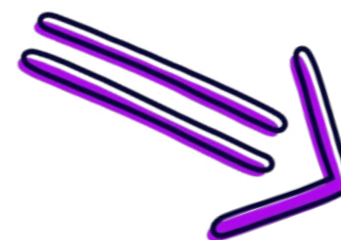
The journey maps illustrate how young people's experiences of financial stress typically develop over time, rather than emerging as a single moment of crisis. Across all personas, financial pressure builds gradually, often accompanied by emotional strain, before individuals begin to recognise the need for support. However, this recognition does not consistently lead to engagement with services.

Instead, young people tend to move through a series of stages, beginning with self-management and informal support, followed by exploratory help-seeking, and only later engaging with formal services, if at all. At each stage, there are multiple friction points, including low awareness of services, uncertainty about eligibility, emotional barriers such as shame or fear of judgement, and a lack of clear, accessible pathways into support.

The journey maps also highlight that engagement with services does not necessarily resolve financial stress. Many young people continue to carry the burden of managing their situation independently, even after accessing support. Together, these journeys show that access to support is not a single decision, but a process shaped by confidence, perceived relevance, emotional readiness and system design.

# The Silent Struggler

The Silent Struggler experiences financial stress as an emotional and mental health burden rather than a clearly defined financial problem. Early signs often include anxiety, avoidance and withdrawal, with difficulties remaining hidden until a crisis point is reached. Help-seeking tends to begin informally, with low awareness and fear of judgement limiting engagement with formal services. Even when support is accessed, individuals may struggle to fully articulate their needs, leading to partial engagement and mixed experiences. Without ongoing, emotionally informed support, there is a risk of disengagement and continued distress.



## Friction points

- Financial distress is experienced as an emotional and mental health issue rather than being recognised as financial
- Avoidance behaviours prevent people from recognising the need for support and advice
- Recognition happens late at a crisis point because financial issues are identified indirectly or at crisis
- Lack of consistent integration between mental health and financial support
- Reliance on informal networks means no escalation to formal support
- Low awareness of services
- Perception that services are for more serious cases or other people
- Fear of judgement that leads to hesitation
- Fear of judgement limits openness
- Partial disclosure leads to incomplete or misunderstanding of need
- Engagement is tentative and partial
- Services underestimate severity of impact on wellbeing
- Eligibility thresholds can exclude or deprioritise the group
- Advice is not emotionally informed, or creates pressure to act before the person is ready
- Limited follow-up means there is the "fall off a cliff" moment
- Advice and suggested actions are not considered realistic and so are not followed up on
- Ongoing emotional or mental health challenges, particularly anxiety and depression

## »» Early signs

- Anxiety and stress begin to affect everyday functioning
- Financial worries feel overwhelming but difficult to talk about
- Withdrawal from social life, including cancelling plans with friends
- Avoiding checking finances or discussing money
- Feelings of isolation linked to both money and mental health

## »» Realising the problem

- Often reach a breaking point with emotional or financial triggers that cause family or services to intervene
- This could be raised through interaction with existing mental health support or through banks.
- Conversations with friends, family or trusted people highlight the issue

## »» Finding help

- Initial help-seeking often happens informally – friends or family, university advisers or other trusted peers.
- Online support can feel quick and easy to access – but desire for a personal and human connection.
- Formal services feel distant or intimidating
- Crisis may mean that they are directed into help in a way they feel they can't turn down

## »» Engaging with support

- Hesitant to share the full extent of financial problems – finds it difficult to talk about
- May present with emotional or mental health issues before revealing financial ones
- Confidential routes can feel safer when engaging with support
- Worry about being judged or that it's their fault or that they won't be taken seriously

## »» Experience of services

- Marmite experiences of service use – some agree that it's helpful but lots of low scores for experience too. Services are inconsistent with the extent to which they are perceived to take mental health into account.
- Feelings of pressure to act before able and being overwhelmed by what is being asked

## »» Beyond support

- Rebuilding of confidence in managing money is gradual
- Continued need for reassurance and access to practical guidance
- Difficulty in separating financial difficulty from personal identity

## Current journey

- Raise awareness of common links between money and mental health amongst 18-25 year olds.
- Specifically promote early warning signs in campaigns and communications.
- Engage with common mental health support such as IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies), private therapy services and university offers.
- Test comms targeted to parents and family members
- Signpost support within environments young people already use
- Test ways of delivering online support with a personal touch
- Develop entry points to services with low barriers (e.g. anonymous chat or informal routes as a starting point)
- Identify opportunities to work in partnership with banks, lenders and other debt advice services
- Ensure advice is very focused on practical steps and planning.
- Design entry to services that allows for building of trust and gradual disclosure
- Ensure communication is relatable and empathetic in tone.
- Combine emotional reassurance with practical advice
- Ensure services are able to move at a pace that is manageable to the young person
- Train staff to recognise hidden or underreported distress
- Ensure advice is tailored and that actions are clear, manageable and agreed with the young person
- Test models of follow-up support that combine emotional reassurance and continued practical advice.
- Consider how routes back into support could be provided

## Opportunities

# The Plate Spinner

The Plate Spinner is actively managing their finances but remains under sustained pressure, often balancing budgeting, planning and self-management with ongoing stress. Recognition of the problem typically leads to further self-management rather than service engagement, as individuals may feel they “should” be able to cope. When support is sought, barriers such as unclear eligibility or generic advice can limit its usefulness. Although this group is engaged and proactive, support does not always translate into meaningful change, meaning they continue “plate spinning” with high effort and risk of burnout.

## Friction points

- High personal responsibility can mask severity with people thinking “I should be managing this”
- No clear point to engage with support as they appear to be managing
- Recognition happens, but most often results in self-management rather than service engagement
- Lack of clarity on what additional value services could provide
- Eligibility thresholds might exclude this group
- High effort required to find support that they are eligible for
- Available support is not sufficiently tailored or actionable for someone already active in their money management
- Advice can feel too generic or not tailored to their situation
- The burden remains on the individual to translate advice into action
- Services are unable to address wider societal issues (e.g. cost of living, student debt)
- Advice does not always translate into meaningful change
- No clear resolution point
- Responsibility continues to sit with the individual who is already giving high effort and attention to finances
- Risk of burnout

## »» Early signs

- Existing anxiety and stress is amplified by debt and money worries
- Constant checking of bank balances
- Conversations revolving around money
- Physical stress symptoms
- Mental fatigue
- Constant financial stretch despite solid planning and budgeting

## »» Realising the problem

- Social life and activities constrained by money
- Realising that financial commitments are hard to escape
- Awareness through conversations with peers / parents
- Speaking to formal or informal existing support e.g. therapists, friends and family

## »» Finding help

- Actions to self-manage tracking repayment schedules, budgeting carefully, researching online
- Seeking specific support through formal or informal existing support e.g. therapists, friends and family
- Seeking out services (e.g. university services, Citizens Advice)
- Often finding they aren't eligible for support.

## »» Engaging with support

- Articulate and able to share and describe what they want and need from support
- Desire for very practical and tailored advice
- Examples that relate to their specific experience – coping but feeling frustration and risk
- Clear guidance on what to do next helps build confidence
- Emotional relief where support enables action

## »» Experience of services

- Mixed feelings about services. Might feel that the services are warm and supportive but haven't provided the help that they feel they need.
- Frustration at the broad system that they are doing the right things and still experiencing high impact on their wellbeing.

## »» Beyond support

- Continues coping and plate spinning.
- Continued use of tools and possibly making use of tools recommended.
- Situation remains stressful

## Current journey

- Raise awareness of early signs through targeted communications
- Reframe messaging to show that seeking support is part of good financial management
- Target communications through tools they are already using (budgeting apps, banking etc.)

- Clearly articulate what support can provide beyond budgeting
- Provide examples of people like them benefiting from advice

- Identify sources of existing support (e.g. IAPT, private therapy services) and targeting communications / introducing them to routes to support
- Providing signposting resources to university financial support services, Citizens Advice branches and national Citizens Advice.

- Ensure advice is focused on practical steps and planning.
- Provide clear possible actions and not just information
- Ensure that criteria for accessing services are structured to enable this group to receive support – including considering those at-risk as a preventative measure.

- Work to ensure that there is a practical and tailored support offer to meet the needs of this group.
- Acknowledge the active role being taken in their financial management and planning and wider societal challenges.

- Test follow-up support
- Tracking of what people continue to use and do following any support offered to learn from young people and improve over time.

## Opportunities

# The Smooth-Seas Sailor

The Smooth-Seas Sailor appears financially stable, with money worries not yet dominating daily life, but underlying vulnerability remains largely unrecognised. Financial difficulties tend to emerge reactively, often triggered by life changes such as moving out or shifts in income. Help-seeking is primarily informal, with low awareness of services and a perception that support is only relevant in more serious situations. As a result, there is limited preventative engagement, leaving individuals unprepared when financial pressure increases.

## Friction points

- Lack of visible stress or in the moment financial trouble means there's little reflection or support seeking
- Lack of recognition that an external shock could result in crisis
- Low awareness of their underlying financial vulnerability
- Recognition happens late and reactively rather than proactively
- Lack of financial buffer means the impact can be a shock
- No clear pathway to understanding where and how to get help
- Assumption that services are for "more serious" situations and needs
- Low awareness of what services exist or how to find out about support
- Perception that help-seeking is not relevant to them
- Low motivation to engage without immediate need
- Lack of perceived relevance of services
- Lack of services focused on support broader preventative financial resilience rather than dealing with crises
- No preventative pathway
- Lack of skills increases long term vulnerability
- Support systems only engage after problems escalate.

## »» Early signs

- Financial situation appears stable and manageable at present
- Money worries do not dominate daily thinking
- Financial safety often comes from external supports
- Low financial resilience including low levels of savings and overall low income

## »» Realising the problem

- Financial vulnerability only becomes visible when circumstances change e.g. having to move out of parents' home, changes to family support or income / cost changes
- Often feels as though they are hit suddenly by a problem

## »» Finding help

- First instinct is to reach out to family, parents or close friends.
- Formal advice services are rarely the first point of contact.
- May assume support services are designed for others in more serious situations

## »» Engaging with support

- Accessing help may feel unnecessary unless a clear problem or change emerges
- Conversations about money are more likely to happen within trusted personal networks
- May have a negative perception of services prior to engagement

## »» Experience of services

- Limited experience of engaging with formal services
- Very variable experiences of services, with some very positive and also some very negative experiences of services if they have engaged.

## »» Beyond support

- Building financial independence becomes increasingly important as external supports change

## Current journey

- Encourage awareness of the importance of financial independence and resilience.

- Raise awareness of how transitions in life (moving out etc.) can create financial challenges and the need for proactive financial planning

- Identify sources of existing support (e.g. IAPT, private therapy services) and targeting communications / introducing them to routes to support
- Reframe services as relevant prior to crisis (where they are).
- Encourage engagement through low barrier ways of accessing (e.g. anonymous chat) as a starting point

- Highlight that financial advice is not only for crisis situations but can be preventative
- Use peer examples of changes in circumstances to highlight risk and how services can help

- Ensure practical, preventative advice tailored around key life transitions in this age group.
- Tailor messaging to future focused needs.

- Provide tools that support future planning and financial independence.

## Opportunities

# The Tightrope Walker

The Tightrope Walker is not currently in debt but is living in a financially fragile position, with little capacity to absorb unexpected costs or changes in income. Stability is maintained through careful management and external support, but vulnerability becomes visible when a financial shock occurs. Despite this, individuals often do not see themselves as eligible for support and are unlikely to engage with formal services. This creates a gap in provision, where those at risk are not supported early, increasing the likelihood of progression into more severe financial difficulty over time.

The journey maps illustrate common pathways through which young people move towards support or disengage from it, highlighting emotional responses, decision points and friction points.



## Friction points

- Stability can depend on external support
- System does not identify them as needing support
- Limited ability to build financial buffer
- Limited ability to respond to shocks or changes in circumstance
- Perception that support is not for them
- Lack of knowledge about where to go for help
- Not qualifying for services that they can find
- Perceived by the system as low need.
- Support may not explore their underlying vulnerability
- Services are unable to help as they don't fit criteria
- Discourages future support seeking
- Continued precarious financial position
- Low income and external pressures from cost of living persist

## »» Early signs    »» Realising the problem    »» Finding help    »» Engaging with support    »» Experience of services    »» Beyond support



## Current journey

- Coping on a low income
- Living arrangements currently absorb financial shocks
- Avoidance of formal credit
- Managing on a very tight but controlled budget
- Social activity sometimes limited by money
- Awareness of risk of changes exposing financial vulnerability
- A sudden financial shock highlights how little financial buffer exists
- First instinct is to reach out to family, parents or close friends.
- Formal advice services are rarely the first point of contact.
- Unlikely to seek out support and likely believes they won't be eligible.
- May find that they are not eligible for support as it currently stands as they are not in debt, even though budgets are very tight
- Services feel like they aren't designed for them and they may feel dismissed or deprioritized.
- May feel that there is no place for them to seek support.
- Continued need to build financial resilience over time
- Risk of transition to silent strugglers or plate spinners



## Opportunities

- Reframe support so that it can respond to those who are in insecure positions but do not yet have debt
- Ensure an offer is available for those at risk with little financial resilience.
- Increase awareness that support exists before financial crisis
- Potentially a major gap in existing service offerings
- Develop a preventative support offer targeted at those not yet in crisis.
- Encourage forward looking conversations regarding risk and resilience
- Ensure services acknowledge concerns and the importance of acting to prevent debt
- Treat as a preventative intervention point
- Ensure that there are clear routes back into support
- Provide tools to support ongoing financial resilience

# Implications for Debt Advice Services

**The findings from this research highlight several opportunities for debt advice services to improve engagement with young adults experiencing financial stress. While financial pressures are widespread, the research suggests that low awareness of services, emotional barriers and existing help seeking habits often delay engagement with professional support. Addressing these factors may help services reach young people earlier and in ways that feel more relevant and accessible.**

## Reduce stigma in messaging

Young people are more likely to engage when financial stress is presented as a common and understandable experience rather than a sign of poor judgement or failure. Messaging should avoid implying irresponsibility and instead reflect the reality that many young adults are balancing rising costs, unstable income and limited financial buffers. In practice, this may mean leading with everyday financial strain rather than crisis debt, using reassuring and non-judgemental language, and framing support as something that helps people regain clarity and control.

Survey evidence strongly supports this need. Half of respondents said they would worry about being judged for their spending or financial choices, and 56% said contacting a debt advice service would be stressful or emotionally draining.

## Clarify who services are for

Many young people remain unsure whether debt advice services are intended for people in their position. Services may need to communicate more clearly that support is relevant not only in crisis, but also when someone is worried, falling behind, unsure what to do, or trying to prevent things from getting worse. In practice, this may mean using examples of earlier-stage situations, clarifying eligibility in plain language, and explicitly stating that people do not need to be in severe debt before seeking help.

Clearer communication about who services are for, what support is available and when it may be useful could help challenge this perception. This is particularly important given that only 33% said debt or money advice services are for people like them, and 37% believed they would need to be unable to pay their debts before a service could help.



## Improve digital discoverability

Young people often begin by searching online or informally exploring questions before considering professional advice. This means digital visibility is crucial.

Because help seeking often begins with private searching and sense-checking, digital visibility is critical. Services should ensure that information is easy to find through the kinds of questions young people are likely to ask, and that online content reflects the language they actually use. In practice, this may mean organising webpages around common worries, producing plain-language content about what help involves, and making clear where to start for those who are unsure whether they need advice.

## Reduce friction at first contact

Even when a young person becomes aware of a service, uncertainty about how to make contact can discourage engagement. Complicated websites, unclear forms or ambiguous language can add friction at the very point where confidence may already be low.

The point of first contact is a critical stage in the help-seeking journey. If websites, forms or referral routes feel too complex, confidence can quickly drop away. In practice, reducing friction may involve simplifying forms, clearly explaining what happens next, offering more than one route into support, and allowing young people to explore information before fully committing to contact.



## Design for emotional accessibility

The research suggests that accessibility is not only about channel or format. It is also about the emotional experience of seeking help. Many young people expect contact with a service to be stressful, fear they may be judged, or worry that their mental health and wider circumstances will not be taken into account. Among those who had not accessed support, 57% said accessing a service feels too stressful or complicated, 54% worried decisions would focus only on money and not how they were coping, and 51% worried their situation would not be taken seriously.

Among those who had accessed support, experiences were mixed. Many said the service helped them understand their situation better (61%) and offered realistic advice (60%), but 49% felt overwhelmed by what was being asked of them and 48% felt pressure to act before they felt able.

## Support earlier and more preventative help seeking

The findings suggest that there is value in positioning advice as a preventative resource rather than only a response to acute difficulty. Earlier-stage support may be especially important for young people whose financial situations are fragile but not yet visible as debt. In practice, this may mean developing entry points for those who are worried but not yet in crisis, embedding advice within broader wellbeing or life-transition messaging, and ensuring that support feels relevant before problems become unmanageable.

Services may therefore benefit from positioning advice as a preventative resource as well as a crisis response. This includes making clear that support is available to those who are worried, unsure or at risk, not only those already unable to cope. This is especially important for groups such as the Tighrope Walker and the Smooth-Seas Sailor, whose needs may not be visible within traditional crisis-based service models.

## Implications for commissioners and partners

The findings also have implications beyond frontline service delivery. Commissioners, funders and partner organisations should consider whether service models, referral pathways and eligibility framing support earlier engagement or unintentionally reinforce crisis thresholds. There is likely to be value in partnership approaches that place advice in settings and channels young people already trust, including youth services, community organisations, educational settings and digital spaces where early help-seeking begins. Improving access for young adults may therefore depend not only on individual service design, but on how support is positioned across the wider system.

### Summary

Improving engagement with young adults requires services to respond not only to financial need, but also to the emotional and behavioural realities that shape help seeking. By reducing stigma, clarifying relevance, improving digital visibility, reducing friction and supporting earlier engagement, debt advice organisations can create more accessible pathways for young people experiencing financial stress.

# Engagement Playbook

**Alongside the report findings, the project produced a standalone engagement playbook to help debt advice services translate the research into practice. The playbook is intended as a practical tool for organisations seeking to improve how they communicate with, reach and support young adults experiencing money worries or debt.**

It draws directly on the evidence generated through the interviews, survey, co-production workshops and persona development, and focuses on the factors that most strongly shape whether

young adults recognise support as relevant, feel able to approach services, and remain engaged once contact has been made.

Rather than prescribing a single model, the playbook offers a flexible framework that organisations can adapt to their own context. It is designed to support reflection on messaging, accessibility, service pathways and emotional experience, helping organisations consider not only whether support exists, but whether it feels clear, relevant and manageable to the young adults they are trying to reach.

## Engagement Summary

### How services can better engage young people experiencing money worries and debt

Young people's engagement with financial support is shaped by more than need alone. It depends on how financial pressure is experienced, whether individuals recognise their situation as something support can help with, and whether services feel relevant and accessible at the point they are needed.

The research highlights a clear gap between need and access. Financial stress is widespread and often has a significant emotional impact, yet many young people delay seeking help or do not access support at all. This is not simply an issue of availability. It reflects a combination of low awareness, uncertainty about eligibility, and concerns about how services will feel to use.

Only a third of respondents said debt advice services are for people like them, and fewer than half had accessed support. At the same time, the majority reported that money worries affect their mental health and day-to-day life. Together, this suggests that improving engagement requires a broader understanding of how young people experience financial pressure and how they move towards, or away from, support.



## What shapes engagement

Two factors are particularly important in shaping how young people respond to financial pressure:

- The extent to which money worries affect their wellbeing
- Their confidence and ability to navigate support

These factors help explain why some young people actively seek help while others delay or avoid it, even when facing similar challenges.

Access to support is not a single decision. It is a process in which young people must recognise a problem, decide whether support is relevant, find appropriate services and feel able to engage. At each stage, there are points where people may disengage, particularly where services feel complex, unclear or not designed for them.

### Core principles for engagement

The research identifies a consistent set of principles that support more effective engagement.

#### Start with emotional reality

Financial stress is closely linked to anxiety, confidence and day-to-day wellbeing. Services that acknowledge this are more likely to feel relevant and approachable.

#### Normalise financial difficulty

Many young people see money problems as personal failure, despite clear structural drivers such as the cost of living and income insecurity. Positioning financial stress as common can reduce stigma and make support feel more appropriate.

#### Meet young people where they are

Help seeking typically begins with informal networks and online exploration rather than formal services. Engagement strategies need to reflect these behaviours and ensure services are visible earlier in the journey.

#### Focus on practical next steps

Clear, simple guidance about what to do and what to expect reduces uncertainty and makes it easier to engage.

#### Reduce perceived judgement

Concerns about stigma and how situations will be viewed are a significant barrier. Tone and language should emphasise support, not correction.

#### Make access straightforward

Even where services exist, unclear pathways and complexity can discourage engagement. Simplifying entry points and offering flexible routes into support is critical.

## What this means for services

The findings suggest three key shifts.

1. Services need to engage earlier, before financial pressure reaches crisis point.
2. Support should reflect both the practical and emotional aspects of financial difficulty.
3. Services need to communicate more clearly who they are for and how they can help.

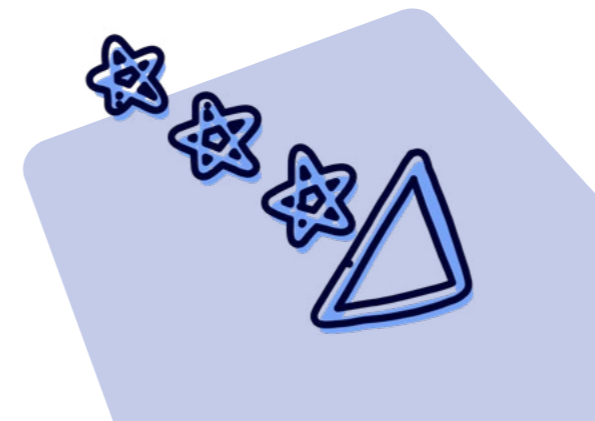
## Using personas to support engagement

Young people's experiences of financial stress and help seeking vary significantly. The personas developed through this research provide a practical way to understand these differences and tailor approaches accordingly.

They can be used to design more accessible services, adapt communication and identify where disengagement is most likely to occur.

Further detail is provided in the full engagement playbook.

Improving engagement with young adults requires services to respond not only to financial need, but to the wider context in which help seeking takes place. Where support is clear, relevant and easy to access, young people are more likely to engage earlier and more effectively.





# Conclusion

**This research highlights the complex ways in which young adults experience financial stress and navigate support when facing money worries. For many, financial pressure develops gradually rather than emerging as a sudden crisis. Rising living costs, insecure income and limited financial buffers mean that money worries can become a persistent feature of everyday life long before a young person considers seeking professional advice.**

The research also shows that financial stress is not experienced only as a practical financial issue. It is closely tied to anxiety, shame, self-blame and uncertainty about what support is available. Survey findings underline the scale of this impact, with **81%** saying money problems made them feel anxious or on edge and **77%** saying their mental health or wellbeing had been affected.

Young people's help seeking journeys often look different from those assumed by services. Informal conversations with friends or family and private online exploration are typically the first steps in making sense of financial problems. Professional advice services tend to appear later, often once pressure has already intensified. At the same time, awareness and trust remain limited, and many young people expect support to be stressful, judgemental or not designed for people like them.

The findings suggest that improving engagement with young adults requires a broader understanding of how financial stress develops and how help seeking unfolds in practice. Services need to respond not only to financial circumstances, but also to the emotional, behavioural and informational barriers that shape access to support.

The personas, journey maps and engagement playbook developed through this project provide practical tools to support this shift. They offer a way for organisations to better understand the realities of young people's financial experiences and to design services that feel more accessible, relevant and timely.

Improving engagement with young adults means reaching people earlier and more effectively in their financial journeys. Services that reduce stigma, communicate clearly and offer accessible, non-judgemental pathways into support are more likely to make a meaningful difference before financial pressures escalate into crisis. Financial stress often develops long before young people see it as something support can help with.

Taken together, the findings suggest that improving access for young adults is not simply a matter of making debt advice available. It is also about making support visible earlier, framing it in ways that feel relevant to everyday financial strain, and designing pathways that young people can approach without feeling judged or overwhelmed. Where services respond to the emotional as well as practical realities of financial stress, there is greater opportunity to engage young adults before financial pressure deepens into crisis.

# About Us

## About this project

This discovery project was developed through collaboration between teams with expertise in youth engagement, money and mental health, and applied research and evaluation. It combines practical sector insight with lived experience-informed design to support more effective engagement with young adults experiencing money worries and debt.

## About the contributing teams

The project drew on expertise in mental health and money advice, youth programmes, and evidence and impact, alongside external evaluators. Together, these perspectives helped ensure that the research captured both the emotional realities of financial stress and the practical challenges young adults face when navigating support.



## About Mental Health UK

Mental Health UK exists to support people at school, home, and work to build a thriving UK where good mental health is prioritised. We challenge the systems and situations that hold people back, and equip them with tools and advice to unlock their full potential.

We unite the strength of four mental health charities in England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, combining deep local knowledge with UK-wide impact to shape a better future for us all. Together, we champion the UK's mental health.

The **Mental Health & Money Advice Service (MHMA)** provides life-changing support for anyone experiencing both a mental health problem and money difficulties. We are currently exploring how to embed the recommendations into our service delivery model to strengthen the support we offer to younger clients. If you would like to know more about MHMA, please contact **Charlene Marks, Head of MHMA**, at [charlene.marks@mentalhealth-uk.org](mailto:charlene.marks@mentalhealth-uk.org).

Mental Health UK's Young People's programmes provide early-intervention support to thousands of 14–18-year-olds each year through practical, skills-based approaches that strengthen resilience and emotional wellbeing. We work with schools and community organisations to deliver evidence-based, co-produced programmes, addressing key pressures affecting young people, including financial stress. Our Me & Money programme goes beyond financial literacy skills to explore the complex relationship between our minds and money and what a healthy psychological relationship with money looks like.





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**Mental  
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