



IN BRIEF: FINANCIAL CAPABILITY

The ability to make sound financial decisions is an essential life skill, enabling people to manage their day-to-day expenditure, cope with unforeseen emergencies and plan for their retirement. It is becoming even more important as the financial services market becomes more complex, consumer attitudes change and the emphasis on individuals to take personal responsibility for their financial welfare increases. Yet, many people lack these essential skills, often at great cost to their own financial well-being and the wider financial health of the nation.

Key facts

- Excluding debt and mortgage repayments, the average household spends £43.90 a week, nearly 10 per cent of their income, on financial products¹
- Total consumer debt in the UK stood at £1,363 billion at the end of August 2007, with the average household debt standing at £8,873 (excluding mortgages)²
- 70 per cent of people have made no provision for a drop in income, yet 28 per cent say they have experienced a large unexpected fall in income in the last three years and 21 per cent have faced a large unplanned expense³
- When purchasing financial products, 42 per cent of people rely only on product information and/or advice from family and friends; one in five do not seek any advice at all⁴
- While 81 per cent of people feel that the State Pension will not provide enough to live on in retirement, only 37 per cent of them have made any additional provision for later life⁵
- 40 per cent of people who own an equity ISA are not aware that its value fluctuates with stock market performance, while 15 per cent of people who own a cash ISA think its worth does vary in line with the stock market⁶
- A survey carried out by AXA found that 40 per cent of people have experienced stress or anxiety due to money worries, with 3.8 million people admitting to having taken time off work as a result⁷
- A poll for the Resolution Foundation found that nearly 70 per cent of parents worry about how their children will deal with the financial decisions they will face and almost 60 per cent of people believe that the average UK person is in a poor state of financial health
- Research for the Resolution Foundation showed that increased access to financial advice could leave people on low to moderate incomes up to £60,000 better off by the time they reach 60 years of age⁹
- The financial services industry spends around £1.5 billion a year on advertising and promotion¹⁰

Recent research and analysis has illustrated the scale of this problem, increasingly bringing it to the attention of policymakers. Although much of the policy and practice in this area is still relatively new, significant momentum has been built up in recent years and there are encouraging signs that improving 'financial capability' is becoming a political priority.

What is financial capability?

The term 'financial capability' has emerged relatively recently. For many years, policy-makers referred to 'financial literacy', which the National Foundation for Educational Research defined as 'the ability to make informed judgements and take effective decisions regarding the use and management of money'.¹¹

More recent thinking has emphasised people's ability to choose and utilise financial products, as well as their understanding of financial issues. This wider concept of financial capability was recently defined by the Treasury as:

"...... a broad concept, encompassing people's knowledge and skills to understand their own financial circumstances, along with the motivation to take action. Financially capable consumers plan ahead, find and use information, know when to seek advice and can understand and act on this advice, leading to greater participation in the financial services market." 12

The emergence of financial capability as a policy issue has mirrored the growing complexity of the financial services market, increasing personal responsibility placed on people to manage their finances and emergence of a 'live for today, pay later' culture:

- Young people now have to bear more of the cost of their education and routinely borrow far larger sums of money than previously
- As the number of 'defined benefit' pension schemes declines and the pattern of pension provision changes, people are having to take more responsibility for saving for their retirement
- An explosion in the number of debt, credit and other financial products creates a bewildering amount of choice, and often confusion, for consumers
- People face significant barriers in understanding financial products, due to an 'asymmetry of information' between providers and consumers, which is often exacerbated by confusing terminology and product information

In this challenging environment, the State has a crucial enabling role to play by working with the financial services industry and others to improve financial capability.

Levels of financial capability in the UK

As the financial services market has become more sophisticated and financial decisions increasingly complex, people's financial capability has failed to keep up. In March 2006, Rachel Lomax, Deputy Governor of the Bank of England, told the Treasury Select Committee that:

'People's understanding of financial matters has not kept pace with the opportunities on offer. People do not have the grasp of financial issues that is necessary to cope with the financial products available to them.' 13

In recent years, a number of surveys have highlighted low levels of financial capability in the UK. The overwhelming picture is of a nation that is poorly informed about financial issues and is failing, in particular, to save enough for retirement.

- A survey for the Financial Services Consumer Panel in 2000 showed that only 45 per cent of people considered themselves financially literate and only 38 per cent were confident about making their own financial decisions¹⁴
- A survey of people in their 40s by Norwich Union in 2004 found that 81 per cent of people find some areas of finance complicated and 49 per cent said that this complexity put them off addressing their needs¹⁵
- 39 per cent of people say that they tend to live for today and let tomorrow take care of itself¹⁶

In March 2006, the Financial Services Authority (FSA) published the results of a national survey of over 5,000 people, commissioned from the Personal Finance Research Centre at Bristol University. This 'baseline survey' was the largest of its kind ever undertaken and its findings confirmed those of previous surveys:

- Many people are failing to save enough for their retirement and are not making provision for an unexpected expense or drop in their income
- People under the age of 40, and those aged 18-30 in particular, are less financially capable than those from older age groups
- Many people struggle to keep up with their financial commitments and, although it affects a relatively small proportion of the population, the impact of overindebtedness is often severe
- People do not take adequate steps in choosing financial products, for example often failing to shop around or to assess their insurance needs

The survey analysed people's financial capability in five areas: making ends meet, keeping track of their finances, planning ahead, choosing products and staying informed about financial matters. It found that 64 per cent of the population have at least one area of weakness, with just over a third of people having three or more weaknesses and one in five weak in at least four areas. It also showed that these problems apply across the income spectrum.

These findings led the FSA to express serious concerns about current levels of financial capability and identify 'a clear need for the FSA and others to take action, particularly to help people plan ahead more effectively and make better product choices.'17

Financial product holdings

Consumers have access to an ever-increasing choice of financial products. According to the baseline survey, 98 per cent of people hold at least one type of financial product.

- 89 per cent of people have a current account
- 69 per cent have a savings account, while 46 per cent hold at least one type of investment product
- 67 per cent of people have some kind of unsecured credit product, with 56 per cent possessing credit cards
- 66 per cent of people have contents insurance, 56 per cent have buildings insurance and 61 per cent have motor insurance
- 47 per cent have life assurance, while only 18 per cent have income protection insurance¹⁸

The Resolution Foundation's research showed that although people on low to moderate incomes tend to have the basic financial products they need, they are much less likely than those on higher incomes to be saving for their retirement or to have life assurance or income protection products.

- Only 53 per cent of people on low to moderate incomes are members of an available employer's pensions scheme compared to 81 per cent of those on high incomes¹⁹
- 17 per cent have personal pensions compared to 27 per cent of those on higher incomes²⁰
- Only 40 per cent have life insurance compared to 58 per cent of higher earners, while less than half as many have income protection products²¹

People who lack the basic financial products they need, including access to a bank account, are often described as being financially excluded. Typically on low incomes, financially excluded people are also often forced to rely on alternative forms of credit, such as doorstep lenders and loan sharks, and are more likely to become over-indebted.²²





The benefits of financial capability

The benefits of improved financial capability for consumers, the State and the financial services industry are clear. In the words of the FSA's former Chief Executive, John Tiner:

'If people know what they want and how to get it, the market for financial services becomes less one-sided and a lot more efficient. Consumers will demand better, cheaper and more appropriate financial services.'²³

For the consumer, improved financial capability leads to better product choices, saving them money in the short term and, in the long term, offering the opportunity to improve their income in retirement. By enabling them to purchase products that are appropriate to their needs, it reduces the likelihood that they will fall into debt, minimises the stress and anxiety associated with financial problems and ensures that they have the means to cope with unexpected events.

- Research by the FSA showed that the typical consumer can save between £70 and £710 a year by making better financial product choices²⁴
- The Resolution Foundation's research showed that increased access to financial advice could boost retirement income among low to moderate earners by up to £1,500 a year²⁵
- 48 per cent of clients of a national credit counselling service in the United States reported that their health improved after they received financial counselling²⁶

Improved financial capability would deliver significant benefits to the State by helping to promote personal responsibility, reduce welfare dependency and support policies to promote financial inclusion, reduce overindebtedness and encourage people to save for their retirement.

- With over 7 million people currently under-saving for retirement, financial capability has a crucial role in supporting the Government's pension reforms²⁷
- Evidence from the United States suggests that receiving financial education as a child can result in people being up to £32,000 better off between the ages of 35-49²⁸
- The Resolution Foundation identified potential savings of up to £100 million a year within 10 years of establishing a generic financial advice resource, as better financial decision-making lifts people clear of the threshold for receiving Pension Credit²⁹

By creating more informed and confident consumers, driving competition and promoting more efficient financial services markets, improved financial capability would also deliver benefits to the financial services industry:

- Reductions in the high 'distribution' costs currently incurred by the industry and stronger 'persistency'; for example, it is estimated that the life assurance industry spends £5 billion a year on commission to intermediaries³⁰
- A more sustainable retail financial products market; research for the Resolution Foundation showed that increased access to financial advice would increase take up of savings and insurance products and reduce levels of credit and debt³¹
- Reputational benefits as a more effective interface with consumers increases trust in the industry and reduces the number of complaints, potentially leading to reduced regulation in the long term

Key developments

The Government, the FSA and other agencies are playing a stronger role in promoting financial capability, reflecting growing concern and policy interest in the issue. The financial services industry also plays a prominent role by funding the FSA's work, supporting the Personal Finance Education Group (pfeg)³² and promoting a range of financial capability initiatives.

The FSA

The FSA has a statutory duty to promote public understanding of the financial system. In 2003, it announced the creation of a Financial Capability Steering Group to oversee the development of a new National Strategy for Financial Capability. The strategy was outlined in a consultation document published in November that year³³ and in May 2004, a number of working groups were established to take forward the key themes.³⁴ In March 2006, alongside the baseline survey, the FSA published *Delivering change* which updated the National Strategy.³⁵

The National Strategy for Financial Capability consists of a seven point programme:

- Promoting financial education through the National Curriculum, with a target of reaching 1.8 million children in 4,000 schools by 2010/11
- Working with partner organisations to promote financial education among young people, with the aim of reaching 2.3 million students and 1.1 million young people not in education, employment or training by 2010/11

- Rolling out a programme of work-based seminars which aim to provide financial education to over 4 million adults by 2010/11
- Improving the FSA's range of information materials and launching a new *Moneymadeclear* website to provide basic financial information to as many people as possible
- Promoting the *Financial healthcheck* and *Debt test* online tools to help people understand their financial situation and take appropriate action
- Providing a *Parent's guide to money*, with the aim of reaching over 1.5 million new parents by 2010/11
- Continuing to explore the most appropriate options for delivering generic financial advice

From 2007/08, the annual budget for the FSA's financial capability work, which is funded by a general levy on regulated financial services companies, will increase to £17 million. In addition to its financial capability programmes, the FSA also oversees a £200,000 *Financial Capability Innovation Fund* to support innovative projects run by voluntary organisations.

The Treasury Select Committee

The Treasury Select Committee touched on financial capability as part of its wide-ranging inquiry into financial inclusion in 2006. Welcoming the progress made through the National Strategy, the Committee concluded that improving financial capability will be a long term challenge and made a number of recommendations including:

- A lead department should be established to improve co-ordination within government
- The FSA should do more to address financial capability among financially excluded people
- The FSA should give a higher priority to developing a strategy for attracting additional funding to support its financial capability work³⁶

The Treasury

In January 2007, the Treasury published a strategy document setting out the Government's ambitions for improving financial capability.³⁷ Highlighting the complexity of financial decisions and the significant difficulties currently faced by consumers in engaging in the financial services market, it outlined the Government's long term aspirations to ensure that:

 All adults in the UK have access to high-quality generic financial advice to help them engage with their financial affairs and make effective decisions about their money

- All children and young people have access to a planned and coherent programme of personal finance education, so that they leave school with the skills and confidence to manage their money well
- A range of Government programmes are focused on improving financial capability, particularly to help those who are most vulnerable to the consequences of poor financial decisions

Placing these aspirations in the context of demographic and other long term changes, it identified a number of particular challenges for the financial services sector:

- The roll out of the Child Trust Fund which will give more financial responsibility to young people who are increasingly coming into contact with financial services at a younger age than previous generations
- The need for young people to plan for longer and more diverse working lives and, with the decline in 'defined benefit' pension schemes, to be more engaged in planning for their retirement
- Changes to the pensions system, in particular the implementation of personal accounts, which will place more onus on the individual to take responsibility for planning their retirement income
- Increased life expectancy and levels of home ownership, which bring more people into contact with 'decumulation' products such as annuities and equity release to generate their retirement income

To achieve its aspirations, the document anticipates a more active role for the Government in promoting financial capability. It is therefore reviewing a range of policies and programmes with a role to play in this. The document identified three ways in which the financial capability agenda will be taken forward in the short term:

- An independent feasibility study, led by Otto Thoresen, Chief Executive of AEGON UK, will research and design a national approach to generic financial advice
- A ministerial group, chaired by the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, will be established to develop, oversee and co-ordinate a cross-cutting approach to financial capability across government
- An action plan will be published setting out how financial capability will be integrated into existing services, particularly for those most vulnerable to the consequences of poor financial skills (the 2007 Pre-Budget Report indicated that this will be published in spring 2008, following the final report of the Thoresen Review)





Initiatives

A large number of initiatives have been developed to promote financial capability, many of them led by voluntary sector organisations and supported by the financial services industry.

- Barclays are working with Help the Aged to provide money management and debt advice to older people through the Your money matters programme
- With over 900 participating schools, HSBC's Schoolbranch initiative helps children to understand financial management by setting up 'bank branches' in schools
- Citizens Advice is planning to extend a successful pilot project in which independent financial advisers provided financial advice on a pro bono basis to clients in citizens advice bureaux

Key policy themes

The National Strategy for Financial Capability and other efforts to improve financial capability have tended to focus on the linked themes of financial education, information and advice. The need to improve financial capability is also closely linked to pension reform and financial exclusion.

Financial education

Financial education has a critical role to play in improving financial capability across the lifecycle.

- 66 per cent of teenagers think about money every day and 90 per cent worry about their money and spending³⁸
- 48 per cent of primary schools and 91 per cent of secondary schools currently say they are delivering personal finance education, although in over 70 per cent of cases, this only takes the form of occasional lessons³⁹
- Research in the United States showed that median savings rates increased by around 20 per cent among people whose employers provide financial education⁴⁰

The National Strategy includes programmes to provide financial education among children in schools, young people and adults.

• Schools: the FSA works with pfeg to promote financial education in schools through the *Learning money matters* programme. From September 2008, 'economic well-being and financial capability' will be included in the secondary school curriculum. In September 2007, the Government also announced an £11.5 million funding boost for financial education in schools.

- Young people: the baseline survey of financial capability identified particularly low levels of financial capability among 18-30 year olds. The FSA is working with a wide range of agencies to deliver financial education to young people, especially among students in higher education and those not in employment, education or training.
- Adults: in addition to the FSA's work-based seminar programme, the Basic Skills Agency is developing ways of using financial literacy to teach basic literacy, language and numeracy skills, and has produced a range of resources aimed at advisers, teachers and trainers. The National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) has also developed online resources to promote adult financial learning and a Level 2 qualification in partnership with ifs School of Finance.⁴¹

Following the publication of the Treasury's strategy document, the Government is exploring how initiatives such as the Child Trust Fund and Sure Start can do more to promote financial education.

Financial education initiatives

- The Face2Face with Finance programme, which is funded by RBS, helps teachers to provide activities aimed at improving understanding of financial issues, reaching over 750,000 secondary school pupils since 1994
- Moneydoctors, which was developed by the FSA, provides students in higher education with advice and information about financial issues via drop-in sessions and workshops
- Citizens Advice Frontline training provides training sessions for public and voluntary sector staff so that they can deliver financial education to young adults
- Kikass, a youth charity, runs a Thrifty squid challenge every year to enable financially excluded young people to improve their financial skills by designing responses to the financial issues faced by them and their communities
- The Basic Skills Agency is working with voluntary sector organisations to deliver financial education to hard to reach groups including lone parents, refugees, asylum seekers and prisoners
- The Pensions Education Fund supports a range of projects working through employers to improve understanding about pensions, particularly among sections of the population that are currently undersaving for their retirement

Information

Consumers obtain financial information from a wide range of sources including newspapers and other media, marketing and communications materials produced by the financial service industry and a growing number of websites providing product comparisons. In October 2007, the Resolution Foundation published a report calling for a new voluntary code of practice for sites comparing financial products.⁴²

People often find this information difficult to understand, exacerbating the complexity and confusion they are already faced with. In its report on financial inclusion, the Treasury Select Committee criticised the 'disclosure regime' that applies to the provision of product-related information by financial services companies. The Committee recommended that the FSA and the financial services industry do more to improve its marketing and communication materials.⁴³

The FSA has acknowledged that the current regime is too complex. It has proposed a significant reduction in the number of disclosure documents companies are required to provide and is working on improvements to the user-friendliness of 'key features' documents.

The FSA delivers a range of information programmes under the National Strategy including its *Moneymadeclear* website, *Financial healthcheck* and *Debt test* online tools, and *Parent's guide to money* pack for new parents. The Department for Work and Pensions also provide individual pensions forecasts, giving people information about their projected State Pension entitlement in retirement.

Financial advice

Broadly speaking, there are three types of financial advice:

- Regulated advice: advice relating to specific products or providers falls under the FSA's regulatory regime. It is provided through the market by financial services companies, independent financial advisers or other intermediaries (these arrangements are currently being examined by the FSA's Retail Distribution Review).
- Debt advice: also known as 'money advice', a number of organisations including Citizens Advice, National Debtline and the Consumer Credit Counselling Service provide specialist advice for people with debt problems.
- Generic advice: advice and guidance given in light of people's individual circumstances which helps them understand their financial needs, identify their options and take appropriate action. As it stops short of making recommendations about particular products or providers, generic advice does not fall under the FSA's regulatory regime.

Consumer advice services such as Consumer Direct, local authorities and specialist providers, such as The Pensions Advisory Service, also provide a range of financial advice services.

The Resolution Foundation's research found that people on low to moderate incomes find it particularly difficult to access the financial advice they need. The Foundation published proposals for a national advice resource to provide generic financial advice, targeted at this income group. It estimates that such a service, delivered via a multichannel approach providing telephone, web-based and face-to-face advice, could be delivered for an annual cost of approximately $\mathfrak{L}50$ million. 44

In November 2006, the Treasury Select Committee endorsed these proposals.⁴⁵ Amid growing consensus, the Government agreed that that there is 'a gap in the market' and 'a clear case for developing a national approach to generic advice'.⁴⁶ In January 2007, it set up a review led by Otto Thoresen, Chief Executive of AEGON UK, to explore how to develop this advice on a national basis.

The Thoresen Review published an interim report in October 2007. This confirmed the benefits and feasibility of developing such a service, suggesting that advice should be delivered through a variety of channels and that it should be funded jointly by the Government and the financial services industry. The Review is currently carrying out pilot schemes to test the most effective ways of delivering the advice. Its final report will be published in early 2008.

Pension reform

Poor financial capability is one of the reasons why many people are not saving enough for their retirement. To combat this, and to ensure that people take personal responsibility for their pensions, the Government plans to introduce a national system of personal accounts from 2012. The aim is to provide a simple, low cost way of saving for people on low to moderate incomes, who will be automatically enrolled into the scheme, if they do not have access to a suitable occupational pension through their employer.

The regulated advice that must accompany the sale of personal pension products will not be provided alongside personal accounts. Three separate select committee reports have recommended that the Government should therefore provide generic financial advice to support personal accounts, ⁴⁷ an issue now being considered by the Thoresen Review.

Financial exclusion48

Financial capability is closely linked to financial exclusion – where people, typically on low incomes, lack the financial products they need. In its report on financial inclusion, the Treasury Select Committee criticised the National Strategy for Financial Capability for not reaching financially excluded people and called for it to be more closely co-ordinated with the work of the Financial Inclusion Taskforce, which monitors progress in tackling financial exclusion.⁴⁹

In March 2007, the Treasury published a strategy document setting out the Government's plans for tackling financial exclusion in the period 2008-11.⁵⁰ A ministerial working group will oversee an action plan which is due to be published later in 2007. With the Government's action plan on financial capability also due to be published later in the year, it will be important for these agendas to be closely co-ordinated.





Sources of further information

 Basic Skills Agency www.basic-skills.co.uk

Citizens Advice
www.citizensadvice.org.uk

• Department for Work and Pensions www.dwp.gov.uk

• Financial Services Authority www.fsa.gov.uk/financial_capability/index.html

• HM Treasury www.hm-treasury.gov.uk

 Personal Finance Research Centre, University of Bristol www.pfrc.bris.ac.uk

 Personal Finance Education Group www.pfeg.org

• The Resolution Foundation www.resolutionfoundation.org

Thoresen Review
 www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/independent_reviews/thoresen_
 review/thoresnreview_index.cfm

• Transact www.transact.org.uk

• Treasury Select Committee www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/treasury



Footnotes

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- ¹² Financial capability: the Government's long term approach, HM Treasury, 2007
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- ¹⁶ Financial capability in the UK: establishing a baseline; FSA, 2006
- 17 Ibid
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- ²⁸ ippr press release, 23 August 2006
- ²⁹ A national dividend: the economic impact of financial advice; Resolution Foundation, 2006
- The advice gain: the impact of generic financial advice on the financial services industry; Resolution Foundation, 2007
- 31 Ibid
- ³² pfeg is an education charity whose mission is for all young people to leave school with the confidence, skills and knowledge they need in financial matters so that they can participate fully in society
- Towards a national strategy for financial capability; FSA, 2003
- The seven working groups were schools, young adults, work, families, borrowing, retirement and advice
- ³⁵ Financial capability in the UK: delivering change; FSA, 2006
- ³⁶ Financial inclusion: the role of the Government and the FSA, and financial capability; Treasury Select Committee, First Report of 2006-07
- ³⁷ Financial capability: the Government's long term approach, HM Treasury, 2007
- ³⁸ pfeg press release, 13 February 2007
- 39 Financial capability in the UK: creating a step change in schools; FSA, 2006
- Bernheim, B and Garrett, D (2003); The effects of financial education in the workplace: evidence from a survey of households; Journal of Public Economics 87
- ifs School of Finance provides financial education to financial services professionals and consumers
- ¹² Compare and contrast: How the UK comparison website market is serving financial consumers; Resolution Foundation, 2007
- ⁴³ Financial inclusion: the role of the Government and the FSA, and financial capability; Treasury Select Committee, First Report of 2006-07
- Closing the advice gap: providing financial advice to people on low incomes; Resolution Foundation, 2006
- Financial inclusion: credit, savings, advice and insurance; Treasury Select Committee, 2006
- Financial capability: the Government's long term approach, HM Treasury, 2007
- ⁴⁷ The design of the National Pensions Savings Scheme and the role of financial regulation; Treasury Select Committee, 2006; Pension reform; Work and Pensions Select Committee, 2007
- ⁴⁸ See separate Resolution Foundation briefing
- ⁴⁹ Financial inclusion: credit, savings, advice and insurance; Treasury Select Committee, 2006
- ⁵⁰ Financial inclusion: the way forward; HM Treasury, 2007