



# Real Life Advice 2025

A St. James's Place insight report

## Chapter 4: Advice Horizons

The nation's aspirations and  
concerns looking forward





# Understanding the research

## What do we mean by financial advice and financial guidance?

We have looked at the impact of all forms of financial advice and guidance. From professional advice received through a financial advice firm or individual including a wealth manager, an independent financial adviser (IFA), a qualified financial planner, and advice received through a bank and building society. We have also looked more broadly at understanding the impact of the help people receive through organisations such as Citizens Advice, Pension Wise, and others.

## Research methodology

On behalf of SJP Opinium surveyed 8,000 UK adults nationwide between 22nd July and 5th August 2025, and refreshed shorter surveys of a further 2,050 UK adults between 28th November and 6th December 2025. Quantitative data<sup>1</sup> referenced in this report is taken from these surveys. Quotas<sup>2</sup> and post-weighting<sup>3</sup> were applied to the samples to make the datasets representative of the UK adult population. Within these polls, the relevant sub-samples were (post-weighting):

- Those in receipt of some form of advice or guidance, n=3,324
- Those currently in receipt of ongoing financial advice through a financial advice firm or individual, n=778
- Those not in receipt of some form of advice or guidance, n=4,029
- Those with a full financial plan in place, n=3,341
- Those without a financial plan, n=2,547
- Those aged 18-34, n=2,211

- Those aged 35-54, n=2,654
- Those aged 55 and over, n=3,135
- Men, n=3,856
- Women, n=4,116
- Those with over £250,000, n=459
- Those with £100,000-£249,999, n=691
- Those with £50,000-£99,999, n=879
- Those with £10,000-£49,999, n=1,981
- Those with £10,999 and under, n=2,042
- Parents, n=4348
- Parents of children under the age of 18 years, n=4,348
- Parents of children over the age of 18 years, n=2,492
- Those in Scotland, n=424
- Those in Northern Ireland, n= 147
- Those in North East, n=172
- North West, n=500
- Those in Yorkshire and Humberside, n=339
- Those in East Midlands, n=324
- Those in West Midlands, n=387
- Those in Wales, n=196
- Those in East of England, n=356
- Those in London, n=561
- Those in South East, n=576
- Those in South West, n=368

<sup>1</sup> Quantitative data are data represented by numbers, including anything that can be counted, measured, or given a numerical value.

<sup>2</sup> Quota sampling is a method in which researchers create a sample based on individuals representing a population. Researchers choose these individuals according to specific traits or qualities.

<sup>3</sup> Weighting is the process of manipulating data through calculations in order to bring them in line with the population being studied.



**James Rainbow**  
Chief Executive Officer,  
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**Across the UK, people are trying to make sense of their financial lives in a world that feels increasingly uncertain. Rising living costs, shifts in the economy and the constant pull between today's demands and tomorrow's hopes mean many households are feeling stretched – both financially and emotionally. For many, planning ahead feels futile with the present feeling overwhelming.**

Against this backdrop, our latest Real Life Advice Report turns its focus to the nation's concerns and aspirations as they look ahead over the next one, five and ten years and explores how individuals are navigating this tension between present strain and future ambition.

The findings show a nation doing its best to steady itself, but one whose priorities have narrowed.

Saving more, reducing debt and managing everyday affordability are the concerns dominating the year ahead and even when people look further into the future, basic money matters continue to set the pace. Bigger life ambitions – buying a home, starting a family, changing careers – are still there, but for many they sit quietly in the background, waiting for the right moment.

Yet beneath these trends lies something more concerning. As the squeeze persists, a growing proportion of people say they have no plans or aspirations at all. Over the two waves of the research – in July and December 2025 – the number of people expressing this sentiment for both a year and five years ahead rose from around one in ten (13%) to one in five (21%), and from one in six (17%) to nearly

one in four (24%) when thinking about the decade ahead. This widening 'ambition gap' speaks to a deeper challenge: when financial pressure becomes the norm, confidence in the future erodes, making long-term planning feel less possible for many households.

Across regions and generations, the shape of people's goals may differ, but the underlying story is consistent. Short-term pressures are stretching far into the future, reshaping how people think about money, risk and opportunity. Meanwhile, uncertainty continues to influence behaviour in real time.

Despite these challenges, the report also highlights something hopeful – the difference the right support can make. Our report shows that advice does more than help people stay on track: it expands their horizon. People who receive financial advice feel more grounded, more prepared and more able to look ahead. As evidenced in previous chapters, advice offers clarity when things feel confusing, and reassurance when decisions carry weight. As we look at the forces shaping the future – from changes in policy to the rise of new technology – one message comes through strongly: people don't just need information, they need support they can trust.

## Chapter 4

# Nation losing sight of major life goals

At this time of year, people in the UK naturally approach the year ahead with longer-term life goals front of mind. But with rising living costs and affordability concerns continuing to dominate the nation's conversations, it is perhaps unsurprising that many people are focused on improving their financial foundations rather than thinking about bigger ticket purchases or planning life's major milestones.

With finances feeling strained, individuals describe feeling their focus as split between immediate and longer-term financial priorities, with life goals losing out – not because they don't matter, but because it feels harder to focus on them while daily pressures remain so high. Planning for the long-term is crucial and key to enabling major life goals, but attention is divided – a third (36%) say they try to balance both short and long-term goals, while the number who say they mostly focus on mainly short-term goals (18%) is similar to those who focus on mainly long-term goals (17%). More than a fifth (22%) have no plan at all.



## How people plan

- Only 36% balance both short and long-term goals
- 18% focus mainly on short-term goals
- 17% focus mainly on long-term goals
- 22% have no plan at all

# The nation's priorities over the near, mid and longer term

In the **next 12 months**, saving more tops the nation's ambitions (40%), with reducing debt (19%), getting control of everyday finances (18%) and simply being able to start saving money (15%) close behind. The only non-financial goal to break into the top five is travel (23%), while aspiring to take key life steps – be it getting on, or up, the housing ladder (4% and 3% respectively), marriage (2%), starting a family (2%) or career moves (5%) – rank far lower.



## The nation's aspirations for the next 12 months

1. Saving/saving more (40%)
2. Travelling more (23%)
3. Reducing debt (19%)
4. Getting on top of everyday finances (18%)
5. Being able to start saving money (15%)
6. Affording to go on more/more expensive holidays (12%)
7. Affording larger purchases (11%)
8. Building up adequate retirement funds (11%)
9. Supporting family or children financially (7%)
10. Paying off the mortgage

A slightly different balance of priorities emerges when people look further ahead to their **five- and ten-year goals**. Yet, worryingly, there is still little fundamental shift in several areas.

As the table opposite shows, direct money matters continue to dominate. Saving – or saving more – remains the number one priority across both time horizons, but the importance of paying off debt and getting on top of finances drops sharply, with figures roughly halving when people consider the decade ahead. Paying off a mortgage becomes more significant, rising from 6% over the next 12 months to 12% over ten years.

Beyond financial goals, travelling more remains a top aspiration for one in four people over five years (25%) and remains strong over a decade (22%). Priority levels for major purchases also remain broadly consistent at around one in ten across all timeframes.

However, aspirations around key life milestones – housing, marriage, children and career moves – see only modest increases and all stay well below the 10% mark.

Personal & financial aspirations	Next 12 months	Next 5 years	Next 10 years
Saving/saving more	40%	31%	22%
Travelling more	23%	25%	22%
Reducing debt	19%	13%	7%
Getting on top of everyday finances	18%	13%	9%
Being able to start saving money	15%	8%	5%
Affording to go on more/ more expensive holidays	12%	13%	14%
Affording larger purchases	11%	12%	10%
Building up adequate retirement funds	11%	13%	15%
Supporting family or children financially	7%	8%	11%
Paying off mortgage	6%	9%	12%

## A national warning on retirement saving

One of the most concerning findings is not just the persistently low priority given to building adequate retirement savings, but that it has declined even further over the past six months. In July, a small minority cited building a decent pension pot as a priority when looking one (11%), five (13%) and ten (15%) years ahead. This was already extremely low versus shorter-term financial priorities but, over six months, it has fallen even further down people's lists of priorities. In December, around one in ten said adequate retirement savings were a priority for them over one (9%), five (11%) and ten (9%) years.

This matters. Saving for a good standard of living in retirement is not something that can be deferred indefinitely without consequence. Most people underestimate how much they need to save for retirement, and that lack of awareness prevents even capable savers from taking the action required to meet their goals. It is now clear the action required to prepare for later life is increasingly being crowded out by short-term pressures and this disconnect suggests a growing risk of future financial vulnerability at a national level.



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# Cost-of-living concerns frame the future

Looking ahead, financial fundamentals remain firmly in focus. One in three people (39%) cite the cost of living as their biggest personal or financial concern for the next 12 months, followed by day-to-day affordability (20%) and having enough set aside for emergencies (16%).

However, as the time horizon widens, so too do people's anxieties. Over the next 10 years, worries shift to longer-term pressures: the cost of health or long-term care (14%), what retirement will truly require (11%), the ability to stop working at all (8%), and fears of outliving pension savings (7%) or becoming financially vulnerable (8%).

Fresh data collected immediately after the Autumn Budget also shows a rise in concern about government policy, with one in ten (12%) identifying policy changes as a major worry for the year ahead. Over a five-year horizon, job security and income stability (9%) grow in prominence, while over ten years, fears about day-to-day affordability (10%) and even the basic ability to save (8%) remain stubbornly present.

Together, these concerns paint a picture of a nation still grappling with the lingering effects of economic volatility and political uncertainty – one where the near-term squeeze is increasingly shaping how far into the future people feel able to look.

## The picture across the UK

Across the UK, cost-of-living pressures dominate short-term concerns, though the intensity varies markedly by region. Scotland (44%) and the South West (43%) report the highest sensitivity to rising living costs over the next 12 months. By contrast, London and the East of England (both 37%) show slightly lower levels – reflecting higher average incomes but also more complex financial pressures, particularly housing affordability, which is notably elevated in London (12%).

Concerns about day-to-day affordability are most acute in Wales (24%), the East Midlands (23%) and Northern Ireland (23%), highlighting how regions with lower average incomes feel the immediate squeeze more sharply. Northern Ireland (18%) and the North East (17%) also display heightened anxiety about being able to save at all or becoming financially vulnerable, suggesting deeper fragility beneath headline cost-of-living concerns.

Over longer time horizons, regional differences become even more pronounced. In the five- and ten-year outlook, worries about retirement affordability, long-term care costs and wider environmental uncertainty rise in London, the South East and the East of England – areas where both longevity and living costs tend to be higher. Meanwhile, Northern Ireland, the North East and

Yorkshire and the Humber report greater concern about financial vulnerability and job security, reflecting more volatile labour markets. High housing costs remain a consistent pressure point for Londoners across both timeframes, while the South West and Scotland register some of the strongest long-term concerns about health and care-related expenses.



# The financial futures of different generations

## Clear generational differences emerge across short and long-term aspirations.

Younger adults (18–34) tend to prioritise near-term goals such as starting to save and gaining control of their finances, as many take on financial independence for the first time and begin building wealth. Those aged 35–54 place more emphasis on retirement preparation and paying down debt, often juggling childcare, housing costs and support for ageing parents. Over-55s focus more on long-term security, including retirement funding and helping family.

### Aspirations over the next 12 months

- Saving or saving more is a top priority for half of Gen Z (50%), with over a quarter (27%) aiming simply to start saving money. This compares with 30% and 7% of Boomers respectively.
- Only 3% of Gen Z prioritise building adequate retirement savings, versus 16% of Gen X (44–59).
- Career change or starting a business is front of mind for one in ten Gen Z (9% and 10%).
- Meanwhile, supporting family or children financially rises to 9% among those aged 60+.

### ...in the next five years

- Gen Z remain the most focused on progressing in life: getting on (19%) or moving up the housing ladder (12%), making larger purchases such as a car (19%), or key milestones like marriage (17%) or career change (10%).
- Retirement saving gains importance for all groups over this mid-term horizon – particularly Gen X, where one in five (20%) say it is a key priority.
- Gen X are also the most focused compared to other generations on paying off debt (17%) and the most likely to aspire to stop working (10%) within five years.

### ...and the next decade

- Financially supporting family or children becomes more important across all groups, especially among younger generations – rising to 16% for Gen Z and 12% for Millennials.
- Retirement saving also strengthens as a long-term goal, with 12% of Gen Z and 21% of Millennials placing it at the top of their list.
- Understandably, the percentage of Gen X aiming to stop working doubles over this timeframe compared to the five-year horizon, reaching one in five (20%).



In terms of concerns, cost of living is unsurprisingly consistent across the generations. However, near-term worries and longer-term outlook reflect each group's financial reality.

#### Concerns over the next 12 months...

- ◆ Gen Z are mostly preoccupied with immediate pressures – rising cost of living (39%), day-to-day affordability (25%), job security (19%) and simply being able to save (20%).
- ◆ Millennials and Gen X feel the strongest cost-of-living squeeze (42%) alongside concerns about emergency savings (19% and 20% respectively).
- ◆ Gen X also balance short-term pressures (20% citing day-to-day affordability) with early planning for later life, including retirement affordability (10%) and income stability (11%).
- ◆ While the rising cost of living remains a key concern for over a third (35%) of Boomers, they report lower concern about daily costs (14%) but far higher sensitivity to policy changes (21%), health and long-term care costs (14%) and geopolitical uncertainty (12%).

#### ...and the next five and ten years

Looking further ahead, the rising cost of living and day-to-day affordability continue to dominate. However, there are a couple of key generational trends:

- ◆ Gen Z's concerns crystallise around housing costs with approaching one in four noting this as a key concern over five and 10 years (24% and 22% respectively).

- ◆ Gen X show the strongest shift towards retirement-related worries. Over a five-year outlook, 14% are concerned around what retirement will truly cost – rising to nearly one in five (18%) when they look over the next ten years.
- ◆ Over a ten-year horizon, one in five Boomers are concerned around health and care costs (22%), and one in ten about outliving pension savings (11%).

Together, these patterns show how each generation's priorities are shaped not only by their stage of life but by the broader economic pressures facing the UK. The research highlights how these pressures increasingly stretch from the here-and-now, into the decade ahead.

## A growing ambition gap emerges across the UK

The research was conducted in two waves – July and December 2025 – to track whether the nation's aspirations and anxieties were shifting. While most trends held steady, one striking change emerged: a growing share of people reporting no personal or financial aspirations at all.

By December, this group had grown sharply. The proportion of adults with no ambitions for the year ahead rose from around one in ten (13%) to one in five (21%), with an identical jump for five-year goals. Even over a decade-long horizon, the picture was no more optimistic. The share of people with no personal or financial aspirations increased from one in eight (17%) in July to nearly one in four (24%) by the year end.

This growing ambition gap suggests the economic strain and uncertainty many households face is not only reshaping day-to-day decisions but also eroding confidence in the future, leaving a significant proportion of the population feeling unable to plan beyond the pressures of the present.

## How advice helps people see beyond today

Earlier chapters have shown how advice boosts confidence and helps people stay aligned with their financial plans and goals. The research also demonstrates another powerful effect: advice broadens horizons. It shifts people's focus from immediate pressures to longer-term planning earlier, helping to build resilience well before challenges arise.

Across the population, short-term priorities are dominated by financial stability – saving more (33%), paying off debt (13%) and managing day-to-day finances (12%). But the presence of ongoing advice influences this picture. Those receiving advice are more than twice as likely to include longer-term goals such as retirement funding in their 12-month horizon: one in six (15%) compared with just 8% of those without advice.

This reflects broader behavioural patterns. More than two-thirds (68%) of people with ongoing advice have a financial plan with clear goals and timelines – over twice the level seen among the unadvised (32%). As a result, advised individuals are also more than twice as likely to prioritise long-term goals overall (29% versus 12%) despite shorter-term demands.



In short, advice provides both the permission and the structure for people to look beyond immediate pressures and plan for their future with greater clarity and confidence.

# Future impacts: Economy, policy and technology

As people look further ahead, three forces stand out as major shapers of future financial behaviour: the economy, policy change and emerging technology.

## **Economy – the behavioural impact of Budget uncertainty**

Periods of policy speculation have a powerful effect on how people feel about their finances and, crucially, how they behave.

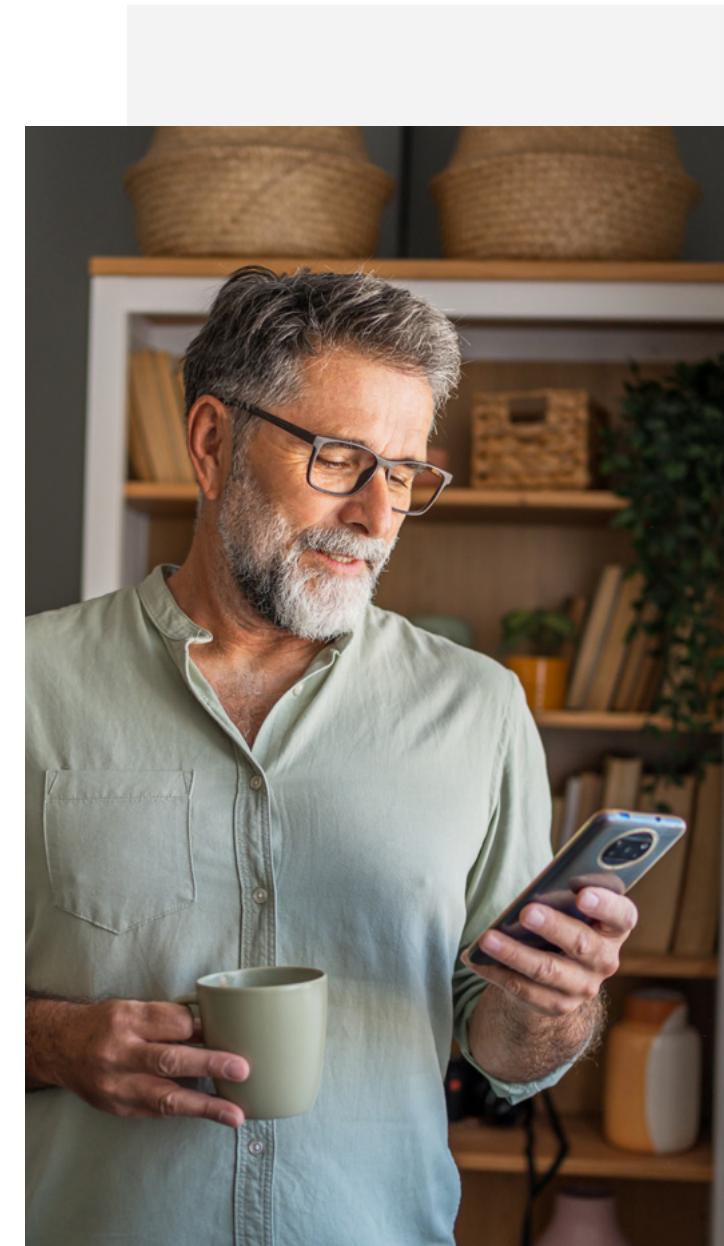
In an environment already strained by rising costs and competing short- and long-term priorities, the run-up to the Autumn Budget added further pressure. Faced with weeks of commentary on potential tax and pension changes, almost a quarter (23%) of UK adults took action before the Chancellor's statement, despite having no confirmed information. One in five (20%) of those who acted now regret doing so.

The data shows a clear behavioural pattern: when uncertainty rises, people gravitate towards short-term, reactive decisions at the expense of long-term planning. Almost half (48%) of those who acted adjusted investment portfolios – moving into cash, delaying contributions or shifting into perceived safe havens such as gold or premium bonds. Others made choices with longer-lasting implications.

A third (34%) changed their savings habits, and three in ten (30%) altered pension arrangements, including shifting risk profiles or withdrawing their tax-free lump sum early.

Regret was greatest among those who modified long-term products. Nearly one in five (19%) who changed pension arrangements now wish they had waited, as do one in six (15%) who altered investments. Even smaller adjustments created uncertainty: 10% of those who changed ISA arrangements and 7% who gifted money to family later regretted their decision.

This behaviour echoes a broader challenge – many people struggle to balance today's pressures with tomorrow's needs, and policy uncertainty intensifies this tension. Those who take ongoing financial advice respond differently: they are twice as likely to remain focused on long-term goals following the Budget (44% vs. 23% of those not receiving ongoing financial advice).



### Policy – targeted advice as a tool to reduce reactive decisions

At a time when economic events can quickly trigger short-term responses, clearer and more accessible routes to guidance and advice are essential. Helping people build stronger financial futures means discouraging premature decisions that may carry long-term consequences.

The development of Targeted Support – designed to bridge the gap between general information and full regulated advice – has the potential to play a critical role. By giving more people timely, personalised support at key decision points, it can help anchor individuals during periods of uncertainty and prevent reactive decision-making driven by speculation.

As people navigate shifting policy landscapes alongside concerns about affordability, retirement and long-term security, access to the right support at the right moment will become increasingly important in helping to keep financial plans on track.

### Technology – AI and the future of financial support

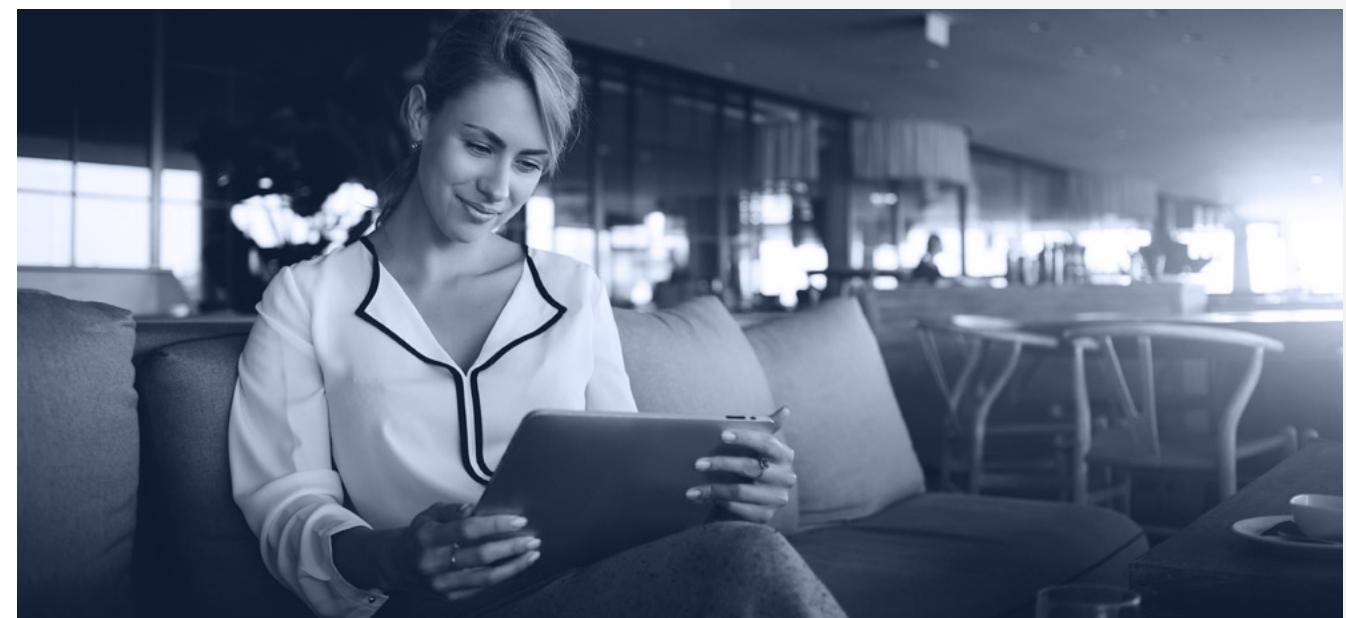
Technology, and AI in particular, is reshaping how people access financial information, even as trust remains a central concern. Two in five UK adults (41%) believe AI could make advice more accessible, and many see digital tools as a way to save time or reduce costs (44%).

Yet reservations are widespread. Most adults doubt that AI is robust or accurate enough to provide meaningful advice (61%), and concerns about privacy and data security are even higher (71%). Although AI-driven tools are already used for budgeting and spending management, most people are not ready to rely on AI alone: 85% still want a human involved when making important financial decisions.

Looking ahead, a hybrid model – pairing AI's efficiency with human judgement – appears to be the balance consumers prefer. Technology can widen access and streamline processes, but reassurance, personal understanding and contextual decision-making remain firmly rooted in human expertise.

### AI and the future of financial support

- People welcome tech where it saves time or reduces costs (44%)
- But 85% still want a human involved for important decisions
- Privacy, security and trust remain key concerns around AI and financial advice (71%)



# Conclusion: Looking ahead together

Across all four chapters of this year's Real Life Advice Report, a consistent message has emerged: when people have clarity about their plan for the future and support to get there, they feel more confident navigating their financial lives.

In Chapter 1, we saw how instability influences behaviour and how advice helps people remain steady, avoid reactive decisions and stay focused on long-term goals. In Chapter 2, we explored how the next generation learns about money, and how parents and advisers together play a vital role in building financial confidence early. In Chapter 3, we saw the power of purpose and how shared goals and clear plans can transform people's ability to save, invest and remain motivated.

However, this final chapter has shown that too many are held back by uncertainty, short-term pressures or a lack of support to think beyond the immediate and plan across different time horizons.

Taken together, these insights reinforce an opportunity for the entire industry. The development of Targeted Support and simplified advice offers a meaningful chance to help more people gain access to the right help, at the right time. Technology has the ability to widen access further but only when it is trusted, safe and used in ways that complement advice rather than compete with it.

At St. James's Place, we believe that financial advice should help people focus on what matters most – providing clarity when decisions feel complex, structure when goals feel distant, and reassurance when life changes unexpectedly. As we look further into 2026 and beyond, our commitment is to help more individuals and families build the financial confidence to plan ahead, stay on track and achieve the aspirations that matter to them.





# SJP



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