

WWF Thematic Briefing

Channel effectiveness



**Financial
Capability**

Strategy for the UK

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Introduction

The What Works Fund (WWF) is one of the UK's biggest single investments in financial capability evidence, with £11.3 million awarded by the Money Advice Service (MAS) via 65 grants to non-profit organisations to test what works, for whom, under what circumstances.

This Thematic Briefing examines the evidence from 49 WWF studies that tested the effectiveness of four different channels to deliver financial capability support: face-to-face support (the most common channel), helplines, smartphone apps, and online learning.

Who should read this Thematic Briefing?

This Thematic Briefing is aimed at financial capability practitioners, to support the design, delivery and management of their interventions. Those who

commission financial capability programmes may also be interested in using this Briefing to inform their strategic and funding decisions¹.

Key highlights

1. Embedding financial capability into other face-to-face programmes and existing helplines is an effective way to reach people.
2. Combining one-to-one support with group sessions works better when people see the benefit of engaging with that one-to-one support.
3. Even if someone has a smartphone, there are often other barriers to overcome before they use apps to support their financial capability.
4. Designing online learning requires more than 'lifting and shifting' existing workshop content to an online platform.
5. Blending traditional and digital approaches gives people the skills and confidence they require to get online to improve their financial capability.

¹ Readers may also be interested in our other thematic briefings and overall WWF evidence analysis available here: fincap.org.uk/en/articles/learning-what-works-fund

What do we know already about channel effectiveness?

Evidence published on the Financial Capability Evidence Hub² and MAS website³ confirms that financial capability interventions are mainly delivered face-to-face, by financial capability trainers in group sessions, or professional staff/workers in one-to-one settings in local communities.

There is growing interest in using technology to improve people's financial capability at scale. Possibilities include online personal finance courses⁴; budget planners^{5, 6}; 'machine learning' to help people budget, understand their spending and spot opportunities to make savings⁷; and apps that enable people to 'impulse save' by moving unspent money into savings⁸. Although there is limited evidence

about the relative merits of these different technologies, it shows some promise. For example, users of an online budget planner on the MAS website became more motivated and empowered to experiment with alternative financial behaviours when they realised they had more money available to them⁹. The Shopper Stopper pilot enabled people with mental health problems to control their spending, by letting them set opening and closing times for online shops via an internet browser plugin¹⁰.

Overall, the WWF has expanded the evidence base about the effectiveness of different channels, through the number of studies it funded and the range of channels that projects tested (see Appendix for details).

2 http://www.fincap.org.uk/evidence_hub

3 <https://www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk/>

4 <http://www.open.ac.uk/business-school-research/pufin/sites/www.open.ac.uk.business-school-research.pufin/files/files/PUFin-White-Paper-online-personal-finance-learning%281%29.pdf>

5 <https://fincap.org.uk/en/evaluations/evaluation-of-mas-budget-planner-online-tool>

6 <https://fincap.org.uk/en/evaluations/looking-after-the-pennies>

7 <http://www.fincap.org.uk/thematic-review-encouraging-people-to-save>

8 https://masassets.blob.core.windows.net/cms/files/000/000/795/original/Savings_review_FINAL.pdf

9 <https://fincap.org.uk/en/evaluations/evaluation-of-mas-budget-planner-online-tool>

10 A plugin is a piece of software that gives the web browser additional functionality.

Key findings from the What Works Fund

Embedding financial capability into other face-to-face programmes and existing helplines is an effective way to reach people.

Getting people engaged in financial capability interventions is a common challenge. WWF projects highlighted reasons for this, including: people not recognising the need or value of financial capability support; thinking that it wasn't for 'people like them'; or not having enough time or motivation.

One way to address this challenge is to embed financial capability training, support or guidance into other programmes or existing helplines. The WWF has provided evidence, from 49 studies across different life stages, about effective ways of doing so – illustrated in the following examples.

For **Children and Young People**, The Mix found that their existing helpline for young people was an effective vehicle to deliver money guidance alongside other types of help and advice¹¹. To begin with, they set up a separate money helpline, but found that it was largely unused because money issues for young people were so bound up with the other issues that they called about, such as homelessness or addiction. Young people did not necessarily label their issue 'a money issue', and therefore did not necessarily see that they needed that type of support. In response, The Mix trained volunteers on both its general helpline and money helpline to deal with both money issues and general enquiries, thereby reducing the chance of staff missing 'teachable moments' for financial capability support, and at the same time improving the uptake of that support.

For **Working Age** adults, Community Links built financial capability support into their existing employment and training programmes, ensuring that the financial capability sessions were delivered by specially-trained frontline staff¹². This approach worked particularly well in programmes where financial capability training was one of several required sessions – in programmes where the financial capability training was optional, only a few people chose to take part.

For **Older People in Retirement**, Advice NI's Building Resilience in Retirement programme¹³ used 'getting online' as an initial hook to engage older people in financial capability. It addressed participants' low online knowledge by first building their basic digital skills and confidence (for example by accessing online music), before encouraging them to think about the financial benefits of going online. However, the evaluation found that, while online skills sessions were a good 'hook', participants did not necessarily use their new online skills to manage money differently afterwards.

Combining one-to-one support with group sessions works better when people see the benefit of engaging with that one-to-one support.

The WWF portfolio indicates that combining financial capability group sessions with one-to-one support from a professional or mentor works best when people can see a clear added value in taking the time and effort to engage with that one-to-one support. This evidence is based on three WWF studies, two that combined group sessions with face-to-face one-to-one support; and one that combined group sessions with one-to-one support by telephone.

For **Working Age** adults, Advice NI's Managing Change programme¹⁴ ran a series of group sessions across four weeks, and offered longer-term one-to-one support from their Money Champions (financial capability-trained mental health workers and volunteers). This additional support gave participants ongoing access to further information and help within the mental health service – a clear added value – and helped to sustain positive financial behaviours by creating an environment where financial capability became part of day-to-day discussions.

11 <https://www.fincap.org.uk/en/evaluations/the-mix-money-helpline>

12 <https://www.fincap.org.uk/en/evaluations/independent-evaluation-of-the-community-links-what-works-project>

13 <https://www.fincap.org.uk/en/evaluations/evaluation-of-advice-ni-s-building-resilience-in-retirement-project>

14 <https://www.fincap.org.uk/en/evaluations/managing-change-what-works>

For **Older People In Retirement**, North Liverpool Citizens Advice's *It's All About Money* service¹⁵ offered face-to-face follow-up support for participants who wanted personalised help after they had attended a one-off group session. About one in five participants received this additional help, which centred on maximising income from benefits – a popular topic with the target audience, with the clear added value that it could improve their income and standard of living.

In contrast, Age Scotland's *Money Matters* service delivered one-off financial capability 'roadshows' with an optional telephone helpline for participants that wanted extra individual help¹⁶. Of approximately 1,000 older people who attended the roadshows, only 10 called the helpline. Feedback surveys found that this low uptake was due to older people anticipating problems with automated attendant telephone systems; and/or having no real reason for further help.

These contrasting interventions illustrate how the channel (face-to-face, phone, etc), accessibility and subject matter (specific or general) can all have a bearing on the likely take up and impact of one-to-one services operating alongside group sessions. These need careful consideration and testing in order to extract the maximum benefit from these types of intervention.

Even if someone has a smartphone, there are often other barriers to overcome before they use apps to support their financial capability.

Digital channels are potentially a cost-effective way to scale up financial capability support, but the evidence is not yet clear. One near-ubiquitous digital channel is the smartphone, which is the most popular internet-connected device, and used by 78% of UK adults¹⁷. The WWF shows that, even when someone has a smartphone, there are other barriers that can stop them using apps to support their financial capability,

such as lack of motivation, technical problems, or low confidence and skills. This evidence comes from two studies in the WWF portfolio that tested different types of smartphone app with **Working Age** people in **MAS's struggling and squeezed segments**.

In a randomised control trial, Derry Credit Union tested the effects of purpose-built *Money Matters* smartphone apps¹⁸ on the financial capability of their members¹⁹. The evaluation showed that the apps had some positive effects on Mindset and Ability outcomes but not on Connection outcomes or Financial Behaviour, and explored the reasons behind participants' use of the apps. The study found that:

- The apps were most frequently used at the outset and following two 'reinforcement' exercises (a money skills workshop and competition);
- The cash calendar app was used the most, followed by the expenditure comparison app. The loan interest comparison app and debt management app were used less often;
- Credit union members gave the following reasons for not downloading the apps:
 - they didn't want to;
 - they couldn't download them;
 - the apps were not compatible with their phone.

In a different approach, A2 Dominion Housing developed its *Ask David* app to provide tenants with money saving tips and money guidance, and to complement the face-to-face support they received from financial capability professionals²⁰. However, of around 130 participants, only three regularly used the app. The study found that participants did not use *Ask David* because of:

- confusion about the purpose of the app;
- a lack of internet access or smartphone;
- a lack of IT skills and confidence;
- a lack of time or interest to engage in financial matters.

15 <https://www.fincap.org.uk/en/evaluations/its-all-about-money>

16 <https://www.fincap.org.uk/en/evaluations/money-matters-project-report>

17 <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/multi-sector-research/cmr/cmr-2018/summary>

18 There are four Money Matters apps: a loan interest comparison app, an expenditure comparison app, a cash calendar app, and a debt management app.

19 <https://www.fincap.org.uk/en/evaluations/money-matters-a-queens-university-study-into-the-effectiveness-of-smart-phone-apps-on-financial-capability>

20 <https://www.fincap.org.uk/en/evaluations/evaluation-of-the-dosh-financial-capability-programme>

Key findings from the What Works Fund continued

The evaluation concluded that, while *Ask David* appeared to add little value for participants, it might work better as part of a more holistic portfolio of financial capability and wellbeing interventions, and particularly for younger tenants who were more comfortable with technology.

Designing online learning requires more than 'lifting and shifting' existing workshop content to an online platform.

There is evidence from the WWF that simply 'lifting and shifting' existing face-to-face workshop content to an online platform does not work well: content needs to be developed with the mode of delivery in mind. This evidence comes from one WWF study in the **Working Age** portfolio.

Working with single parents, Gingerbread tested the content of its *Family Finance Project* as a one-day trainer-facilitated online course in local community settings that had computer labs, to give single parents the support they needed to complete the course²¹.

An existing face-to-face training programme was translated directly onto an online learning platform, and participant feedback indicated that the offline material did not translate well online, for example in terms of the volume of content or type of language used. Gingerbread's process evaluation highlighted the importance of factoring in sufficient time and budget to co-design, test, evolve and develop its digital financial capability training with single parents, with input from educational technology experts who understand how people learn online.

Blending traditional and digital approaches gives people the skills and confidence they require to get online to improve their financial capability.

A key learning from the WWF around digital channels is that a high penetration of technology (such as smartphones, tablets and PCs) across the population does not automatically translate into a natural inclination to access financial capability support through those channels. Interventions may be more effective if they combine traditional and digital approaches, which can give participants the skills and confidence they require to get online. For **Working Age** adults, there are two studies in the WWF portfolio that illustrate how this 'blended' model can work.

The Good Things Foundation conducted a randomised control trial²² to test the efficacy of an assisted digital transaction, in which a trainer supported participants to conduct a live online transaction, using their own money, as part of an eight-week financial capability programme including digital finance. The trial showed that participants who were supported to make the online digital transaction were 6.5 times more likely to transact again, compared with a control group that did not receive the trainer support.

Gingerbread's experience also highlights the value of blended online/offline support, where one-to-one support from a financial capability professional trainer was key to getting single parents involved in financial capability²³. When Gingerbread originally trialled its online learning Family Finance Project as a distance/home learning course, only one of 52 parents who signed up, went on to complete it. Gingerbread modified the course for delivery as a one-day trainer-led online course in local community settings with computers, giving parents the support they needed to complete it – to much greater effect, with 104 single parents completing.

21 <https://www.fincap.org.uk/en/evaluations/family-finance-project-ffp-evaluation>

22 <https://www.fincap.org.uk/en/evaluations/changing-behaviour-around-online-transactions>

23 <https://www.fincap.org.uk/en/evaluations/family-finance-project-ffp-evaluation>

Practical implications for practitioners

What are the trade-offs when financial capability is embedded into other face-to-face programmes or helplines?

The WWF evidence shows that embedding financial capability in wider programmes is an effective way to reach target audiences. However, programme designers and practitioners need to consider the trade-offs involved in doing so:

- Where financial capability is one topic among several, it might have less impact if participants are more interested in the other topics;
- In these cases, practitioners may need to consider follow-up activities to reinforce financial capability messages and increase the chances of positive changes in mindset, ability and behaviour outcomes;
- Where embedded financial capability is delivered by non-specialists, such as frontline workers or volunteers, financial capability training is crucial.

How can practitioners make sure there is added-value in combined group and one-to-one services?

The WWF evidence shows that a strong rationale for offering one-to-one support alongside group sessions is necessary, to demonstrate its value for participants. To build this rationale, practitioners should consider:

- Is there a clear purpose for offering a combination of group sessions and one-to-one support for the target audience? If not, is this the right model?
- Is one-to-one support offered via the most appropriate channel (or channels) for the target audience?
- Is one-to-one support easy for the target audience to access (for example, because it's provided in familiar surroundings or can be offered in the home)?
- Are there processes in place to monitor take-up and quickly spot and understand any barriers that prevent people making use of one-to-one support?
- Is there flexibility to re-focus or re-structure support if take-up is low?

How can tech be designed to support financial capability?

The WWF evidence highlights the importance of online and digital intervention design²⁴. For practitioners who design and deliver interventions this means:

- Building an understanding of user needs, preferences, and motivations;
- Designing resources and programmes specifically for digital channels (not transferring content wholesale from face-to-face programmes);
- Bringing user experience in to the design and testing process – and being prepared to go back to the drawing board if necessary;
- Potentially getting input from educational technology experts, who understand how people use technology to learn;
- Considering 'human' support to help people engage with, and become more confident using, technology.

²⁴A notable gap in the WWF evidence on channel effectiveness is the use of digital interventions to support financial capability among children and young people.

Appendix: The WWF evidence base for channel effectiveness

The WWF included interventions that used four types of channel: face-to-face, tested by 49 studies in the WWF Evidence Analysis²⁵; helplines, tested by two studies²⁶; smartphone apps, with two studies; and online learning/guidance with three studies. The evidence is mostly good quality, as shown in Table 1, below.

Table 1 Strength of evidence for WWF channel types

QUALITY	CHANNEL			
	FACE-TO-FACE	HELPLINE	SMARTPHONE APPS	ONLINE LEARNING/ GUIDANCE
High	●	—	●	●
Medium	●	●	●	●
Low	●	—	—	●



Table 2 breaks down channel type by target audience, and shows that digital approaches were only tested with Working Age adults.

Table 2 Channel type by target audience

TARGET AUDIENCE	CHANNEL			
	FACE-TO-FACE	HELPLINE	SMARTPHONE APPS	ONLINE LEARNING/ GUIDANCE
Children & Young People	●	●	—	—
Young Adults	●	—	—	—
Working Age	●	—	●	●
Older People in Retirement	●	—	—	—



²⁵ <https://fincap.org.uk/en/articles/what-works-fund>

²⁶ One of these grantees tested a helpline in combination with face-to-face support

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February 2019

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