Developing a competency framework for financial capability practitioners

Report for the Money Advice Service

June 2017

Authors

Learning and Work Institute

www.learningandwork.org.uk

www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk
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About us

Money Advice Service

The Money Advice Service helps people manage their money. We do this directly through our own free and impartial advice service. We also work in partnership with other organisations to help people make the most of their money. We are an independent service, set up by government.

Learning and Work Institute

Learning and Work Institute (L&W) is independent policy and research organisation dedicated to lifelong learning, full employment and inclusion. We bring together over 90 years of combined history and heritage from the 'National Institute of Adult Continuing Education' (NIACE) and the 'Centre for Economic & Social Inclusion'.

Contents

Introduction

The report presents the findings from research activities conducted by Learning and Work Institute (L&W) as part of the What Works Fund Stream B consortium activity. The report provides an evidence base to support the rationale for and development of a competency framework for practitioners providing financial capability support to individuals.

In October 2015, the Money Advice Service (MAS) launched The Financial Capability Strategy for the UK. One of the main themes of the strategy was to focus the work of MAS on supporting other organisations who help the public to increase their understanding and capability to manage their personal finances.

Two initial strands of work were identified to take this forward, together making up the What Works Programme. The starting point for the first of these (Stream A) was to recognise the absence of any consistent approach to evaluating the effectiveness of the many financial capability interventions being delivered by many, very diverse organisations. In response MAS established the What Works Fund to provide funding to a selection of organisations delivering or looking to test innovative interventions designed to improve the public's financial capability. Funded organisations must evaluate their projects using a defined and consistence evaluation framework.

The Fund aims to encourage those organisations to build rigorous evaluation into their work as an essential component of all their financial capability programmes and to encourage an open exchange of the findings of these evaluations.

The second strand of the What Works Programme (Stream B) focuses on the needs of the organisations and individuals delivering those financial capability programmes, aiming to boost the confidence and competence of financial capability and money guidance practitioners. A consortium made up of leading organisations with an interest in financial capability was selected to identify the needs of practitioners and make recommendations for developing the practitioner base.

Context

The need to support the public's ability to manage their finances has become more apparent since the 1980s, when the deregulation of the banking and stockbroking sectors opened the door to many more companies marketing new and very different financial products and services to the public. This was accompanied by the Financial Services Act 1987, which introduced for the first time the regulation of the relationship between providers and the public. Financial intermediaries were required to declare whether they were selling to or acting on behalf of the public - a first step towards the greater professionalization of the financial advice sector that has continued over the intervening years most recently through the Financial Conduct Authority's Retail Distribution Review of 2012. Following the 2012 Review, regulated advisers must now have a higher level of formal qualification and are also prevented from taking payment for services to the public in the form of commissions paid by product providers.

Alongside these "supply-side" measures to safeguard the public, there has also been an increasing recognition that the members of the public could improve their own situations by improving their understanding of financial matters and skills in navigating their way through the financial world. The Financial Services and Markets Act of 2000 introduced a statutory responsibility for the then regulator, the Financial Services Authority, in "promoting public understanding of the financial system."

In the same year, the then Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett, called together representatives of a wide range of interested groups to discuss the issue of "adult financial literacy." This group was known as the Adult Financial Literacy Advisory Group (AdFLAG). Its report produced in December 2000, it made it quite clear that its work was related to the financial inclusion agenda, in a sense, being the other side of the coin:

> *"Use of and access to financial services raises questions of both supply and demand. There has been much work to begin to address the supply of appropriate products including the Social Exclusion Unit Policy Action Team 14 report. However, people need to be equipped with the skills, knowledge and confidence to ensure they make informed judgements and take effective decisions regarding their own financial circumstances."*[1]

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[1] Adult Financial Literacy Advisory Group: Report to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (2000) DfEE

AdFLAG noted that by 2000 a very large number of different programmes and initiatives of financial education had grown in schools but they lacked co-ordination or any form of quality control. The Personal Finance Education Group (Pfeg) aimed to respond to this and was established as a registered charity in 2000.[2] This group promoted financial education in schools and provided resources to help teachers with this work including written materials and lesson plans. Quality control was provided by means of the "Pfeg Quality Mark," a form of accreditation of teaching materials and resources.

The Quality Mark was awarded to resources that:

- were accurate and up-to-date;
- matched curriculum requirements;
- were easily available, adaptable and low cost;
- covered an appropriate range of financial topics; and
- had been developed in partnership with teachers and tested in schools.[3]

Pfeg was supported in its work by the publication in 2000 of guidance from the Department for Education and Employment regarding the teaching of financial education in schools.[4] The Government made it quite clear that financial education should be included in the Personal, Social & Health Education component of the new National Curriculum. This was not a compulsory element of the National Curriculum at that time and the emphasis on delivering financial education was through "embedding" or "contextualisation".

As part of this expanding range of activities, the Financial Services Authority began developing a strategic approach to financial capability, covering the entire United Kingdom, first displayed in its paper, Towards a Strategy for Financial Capability in 2004.

This was followed in 2006 by a large-scale survey of the nation's financial capability, which for the first time revealed how well the public were doing with their finances.[5] One of the key results of the FSA's research was to show that financial capability was not just an issue for the socially excluded. Many sections of British society were performing very badly at managing their finances. The challenge was more about how many people could be reached with the message that sound financial management was critically important. Programmes were developed that would reach large numbers of people, often at important times of change in their lives when their finances were likely to be subject to change as well.

The main themes taken up from the survey by the Financial Services Authority were:

- Schools – picking up on the Government's intention to have high quality personal finance learning in schools.
- Young adults – people under the age of 40 were generally found to be one of the groups facing most challenges – and not very successfully.
- Workplaces – this is the nearest approach for adults to that of using schools in reaching large groups at once.
- New parents – recognised as being one of the most financially challenging life changes.
- Consumer communications and online tools.
- Generic financial advice available to all who need it.

In advance of the reorganisation of the financial services regulation system in 2013, the work of its financial capability team was transferred to MAS. Since then, there has been a second financial capability survey, showing again that there is still much work to do.

In the years between the two surveys there have been many changes and innovations both in the economic landscape and in the way the public interacts with money, which have emphasised the need for increased financial capability,

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[2] **http://www.pfeg.org** viewed 15th November 2005

[3] **http://www.pfeg.org/teaching_resources/about_the_quality_mark/index.html** viewed 15th November 2005

[4] Financial Capability through Personal Financial Education - Guidance for Schools at Key Stages 1& 2 (2000) DfEE (**http://publications.dcsf.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/Financial_capabilty-KS1&2.pdf**) viewed 15th November 2009

[5] *Financial Capability in the UK: Establishing a Baseline*, (2006) FSA

including:

- The requirement for State welfare benefits to be paid into a bank account instead of being paid in cash.
- Increasing use of the internet for purchasing, with a growing number of electronic payment options.
- The growing need for digital skills to gain information about purchasing options and "best buys."
- A complete overhaul of the pensions system, affecting most adults in the country in one way or another.
- The impact of the financial crisis of 2008, leading to some households paying down borrowing but others increasing it.[6]

If the public have faced challenges in absorbing these changes and dealing with them, this has also been the case for those who provide guidance to the public. MAS has addressed this by reiterating the importance of all the many organisations that support the public to manage their money and by increasing the support for those organisations.

This increased support has come with a challenge: if the financial capability practitioners are to be the front-line delivery for MAS' statutory remit, everyone has an interest in ensuring that they are being the best they can be.

With its two-fold message that practitioners must demonstrate high levels of quality and impact through evaluation, and that practitioners themselves must reach for high levels of knowledge, skills and competence in their delivery, the What Works Programme aims to enhance the capacity and expertise of practitioners.

However, the sheer range of people who include some measure of personal finance support in their professional work has expanded considerably, now including housing providers, local authorities, community groups, charities, advice agencies, youth groups and educational institutions. For many of these, their involvement with financial capability may make up only a small part of their work. Indeed, some may even be unaware that the practice of financial capability exists as a "discipline".

This is the challenge that the Stream B consortium set out to tackle: how to create a framework of knowledge, skills and competence that would provide an appropriate professional goal for more committed practitioners without alienating those operating on the peripheries of conventional financial capability support.

Research aims and objectives

What Works Fund Stream B comprises two phases of activity. Phase 1 includes research, consultative activity and development work to gain a better understanding of practitioner learning needs and what activity can be undertaken to meet any gaps and enhance their capacity to deliver consistent and high quality guidance to individuals. Phase 2 will test the findings and outputs from the first phase, including a framework of common standards and outcomes that together articulate 'good practice'.

The Stream B consortium were brought together with L&W to meet the following objectives:

- Understand more clearly what generalist knowledge and learning needs money guidance/financial capability practitioners have, and identify gaps in meeting these needs.
- Determine appropriate platforms/methods for practitioners to share and benefit from professional learning related to money guidance/financial capability practice.
- Develop a framework of professional standards reflecting 'good practice' for all generalist practitioners (taking account of any existing professional standards), and how these should be implemented across the financial capability community in a collaborative and positive way.

MAS commissioned L&W as the research partner for Phase 1 of the Stream B programme to undertake research and draw together available key evidence and insights from practitioners in the field. This work aimed to gain a better understanding of practitioner learning needs and what activity can be undertaken to meet any gaps and enhance their capacity to deliver consistent and high quality guidance to individuals.

It is MAS' intention to review progress made on the competency framework during Phase 1 of the programme before

[6] Wealth and Assets Survey, Office for National Statistics

committing to progressing Phase 2.

Method

Three main activities have informed Phase 1 of the What Works Fund Stream B work: in-depth interviews with strategic and operational representatives from consortium organisations and other key stakeholders; a survey of practitioners providing financial capability support to individuals; and a consortium approach to reviewing findings from the research activities and developing a competency framework.

In-depth research with key stakeholders

In-depth interviews were conducted with representatives from the consortium and other key stakeholder organisations. The interviews explored: existing good practice and use of competency frameworks; likely use of a competency framework for financial capability practitioners; priorities and possible contents for a competency framework; and skills gaps and training for those providing financial capability support to the public.

L&W engaged with a wide range of organisations to ensure the research included the views of a suitably representative spread of organisations and individuals. This included ensuring suitable levels of engagement based on: geography and reach of the individuals they support; type of organisation (including those providing financial capability as a core part of their service and those who offer it as a wider element of their service e.g. housing associations); and whether the organisation provides frontline service to members of the public or provides support to practitioners.

A total of 30 representatives took part in the in-depth interviews from across 23 different organisations. Respondents included a combination of strategic and policy leads and operational leads from each organisation. This approach aimed to ensure the experience and different perspectives offered by policy leads and those responsible for service delivery would enhance the overall insights and understanding of the learning needs and objectives of the individual organisations.

Interviews were conducted using both 1-to-1 and paired approaches depending on the preference of the respondents. All interviews were audio-recorded with the respondent's permission, and were transcribed verbatim and analysed using a Framework approach.

Survey of practitioners

A survey of practitioners was designed and disseminated by L&W in consultation with the consortium and MAS which aimed to:

- Map the community of practitioners that offer any form of financial capability support as part of their service, including the service user groups they support and the range of services they offer.
- Take account of the skills and capabilities that practitioners use in their work and their views on the importance of the skills they use.
- Assess the training needs of individuals and organisations, including what they look for when selecting a training provider and where they would find support.

The final online survey was designed to be sufficiently concise that it would encourage responses from time constrained practitioners; the median completion time for the survey was 17 minutes to complete. The survey was disseminated via email to each consortium member's network of contacts and was open from the 23 February to 10 March 2017. The survey achieved 610 responses.

As the survey was disseminated via numerous routes and practitioners were encouraged to forward the survey link to colleagues if they believed it to be relevant to them, it is not possible to assess the response rate for the survey or assume that the survey is representative. Likewise, because the population of practitioners is an unknown (mapping the community of practitioners being a key aim for the survey itself) the results that are presented here are not weighted to a known population. The relatively high number of responses has allowed for the results to be analysed by comparing various sub groups. These were:

- Practitioner type – comparing service user facing volunteers; paid service user facing staff; or managers and above.
- Organisation type – comparing those from organisations that were staffed with volunteers, paid staff or a mixture of

both.

- Practitioner accreditation – respondents were asked if they had a formal accreditation "related to the provision of financial or money support".
- Organisation location – broken down by the four home nations. These related to where the practitioner was based rather than the location of their head office.
- Focus on financial capabilities – all respondents that agreed that "the main focus of my work is aimed at helping people to manage their money better".
- Satisfaction with resources – respondents were also asked if they agreed they had the "resources available to me to help my clients manage their money and finances better".
- Group v one-to-one support – this was used to assess any differences between crisis and preventative/ pro-active support.[7]

Where statistically significant differences have been highlighted through our analysis these have been included in our findings.

Consortium approach

A total of 5 meetings were held with the Stream B consortium (4 half day meetings and 1 full day meeting). Agendas for these were designed by the consortium Chair, MAS and L&W ahead of circulation. The meetings had the following overarching objectives:

- Meeting 1: Introductory meeting to discuss the overall project plan, set out terms of reference including roles and responsibilities for members and partners to the project, and an overview of the research approach.
- Meeting 2: Presented emerging finding from qualitative interviews with the consortium and wider practitioner group, which were used to discuss how the sector is operating and current gaps in professional learning and service provision and explore what constitutes good practice.
- Meeting 3: Focused on agreeing the design of the online survey, and established Task and Finish Groups to work outside of meetings on co-designing key outputs.
- Meeting 4: A full day workshop to share the findings from the different elements of the research and the Task and Finish Groups and agree final design approach.
- Meeting 5: This meeting was used to present and discuss the further refined outputs from the Task and Finish Groups.

Following discussions with MAS Task and Finish Groups were introduced during Meeting 3 to initiate ongoing consortium-led discussions to: co-design the competency framework and agree what good practice looks like; agree the parameters of who the framework would be for; and identify how the framework may be implemented in practice and the challenges this would have. These Task and Finish Groups were to draw on the findings from the research activities and the consortium member's expertise to help L&W shape the final consortium outputs.

Task and Finish Groups activities were coordinated and facilitated by L&W offering the use of a shared group portal, teleconferences, and email. It was found that telephone and email approaches were the preferred approach.

This report and supporting outputs

This report presents the independent findings from the research activities conducted by L&W in their role as research partner to the What Works Fund Stream B consortium. It is one of three outputs from Stream B Phase 1 provided to MAS which also include:

- An outline **competency framework slide pack** co-designed by the consortium and L&W following discussions over the course of 5 meetings and a Task and Finish Group process. This competency framework design process was informed by the emerging research findings throughout the process. The outline framework was accepted by the Consortium

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[7] It was agreed with the consortium that group support could not be used to offer crisis support to clients, general group support offerings are aimed at informing and educating clients, so as to improve their financial capabilities and avoid crisis in the future.

as a 'straw man' on which future work could be built by MAS that would continue to build towards the original consortium aims.

- An **implementation plan** containing a review of the options available for taking the competency framework forward. This synthesises and combines recommendations made through the research and consortium process.

Following this introduction this report contains findings from the research activities, including: in-depth interviews with members of the consortium and other key stakeholders in the financial capability community; and the survey of practitioners. Findings provide a profile of the financial capability community, the needs and challenges for a competency framework for the community, and identify key skills and competencies with insight on current skills and training gaps. The report ends by presenting key conclusions and recommendations from the research activities, and next steps.

Terms of reference

At the first consortium meeting the following **Mission Statement** was agreed by the members:

> *Members of the Consortium share the goal of improving the financial capability of the people of the UK and are committed to building a highly effective financial capability community to help realise this goal.*
>
> *The Capacity Building Consortium will contribute to this vision by taking steps to enhance the capacity and expertise of those providing financial capability, money advice, and debt advice support to people, whether as the main part or a small part of their role.*
>
> *This will help ensure that there is a firm foundation on which to share insights, evidence and provide consistent and high-quality guidance to people.*

During the course of this research and development activity it has been agreed that the following terms of reference will be used when referring to those organisations and individuals working and volunteering to provide financial capability support to the public.

- Financial capability
- Financial capability community
- Practitioner
- Practitioner organisation's service users
- Practitioner competency framework

Profile of the financial capability community

The following chapter presents the findings from the mapping activity undertaken though the survey of practitioners to profile the financial capability community.

Limitations of the mapping activity

As discussed in the introduction, because the composition of the financial capability practitioner population was unknown in advance of the survey, questions were included to give an indication of the reach of this community.

It was expected that practitioners from a broad variety of organisations would respond to the survey as the aim was to reach those who had a stake, however small, in the financial capability agenda and may be impacted by the introduction of a PCF. Nine out of ten (90%) respondents said that their organisations provided support to improve people's financial capability and at an individual practitioner level, almost two thirds (63%) agreed that the main focus of their own work was helping service users manage their money.

It is important to note throughout this section that where we report findings about organisations, these are based on individual respondents within those organisations; as such, findings should be treated as indicative. Organisational findings may be skewed based on the volume of respondents from each who are subject to the same practices. Findings reported relating to organisation are based on the 61% of respondents who chose to answer these questions in addition to questions about their own experience as a practitioner.

Practitioner roles

The largest number of responses were received from service user facing practitioners in paid roles (66%) and there was good representation from service managers also (27%); however, there was a relatively low proportion of responses from volunteers (7%), which has been highlighted as a potential gap for the research.

Table 1: Which of the following describes your role?

	Overall	England	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales
Client / customer facing volunteer	7%	7%	14%	6%	7%
Client / customer facing paid employee	66%	62%	73%	71%	73%
A service manager	27%	31%	14%	24%	20%

Base: 610

Around half (52%) of the respondents to the survey said their organisations were staffed by a mixture of paid staff and volunteers further highlighting the potentially low level of volunteer representation. Therefore, why volunteers could not or chose not to engage in the survey requires consideration due to its potential implications for awareness and use of a PCF e.g. do they not have access to the same communication channels and information available to paid staff, or do they not self-identify as part of this community of practice?

Table 2: Tell us who works at your organisation?

	Overall
Our organisation is staffed by paid employees only	46%
Our organisation is staffed by volunteers only	3%
Our organisation is staffed by a mixture of volunteers and paid employees	52%

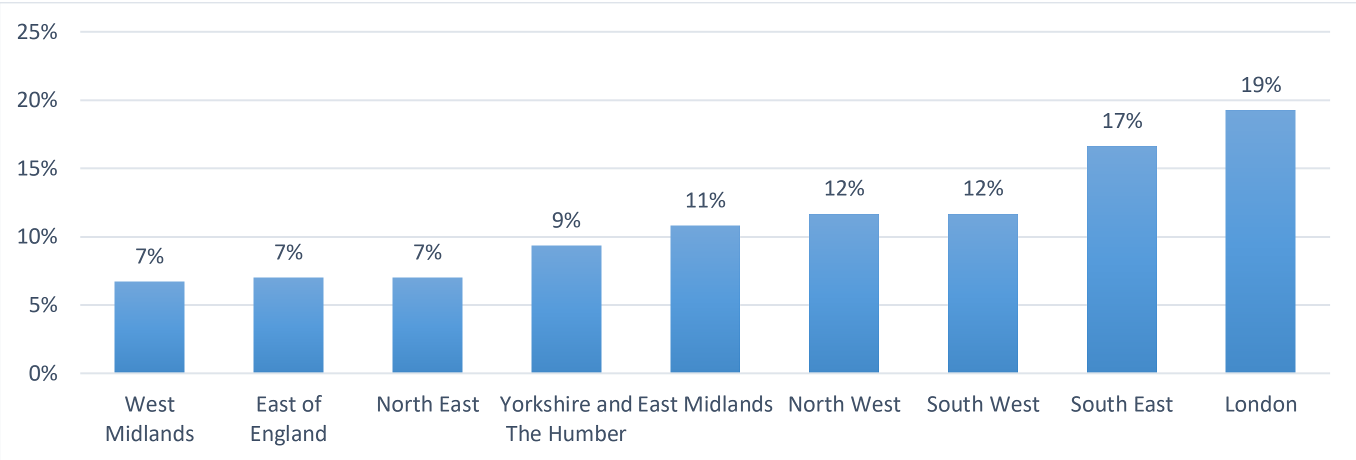
Base: 369

A review of the job titles provided by respondents to the survey illustrated the diversity within the community of practitioners that were reached by the survey; very few job titles were shared by respondents; suggesting a very individualistic approach to delivery from each organisation.

Location

More than half of the responses were received from practitioners in England (56%), followed by Scotland (24%), Wales (16%), and Northern Ireland (4%). Each English region was also represented, suggesting good geographical coverage for the survey as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Where in England are you based?

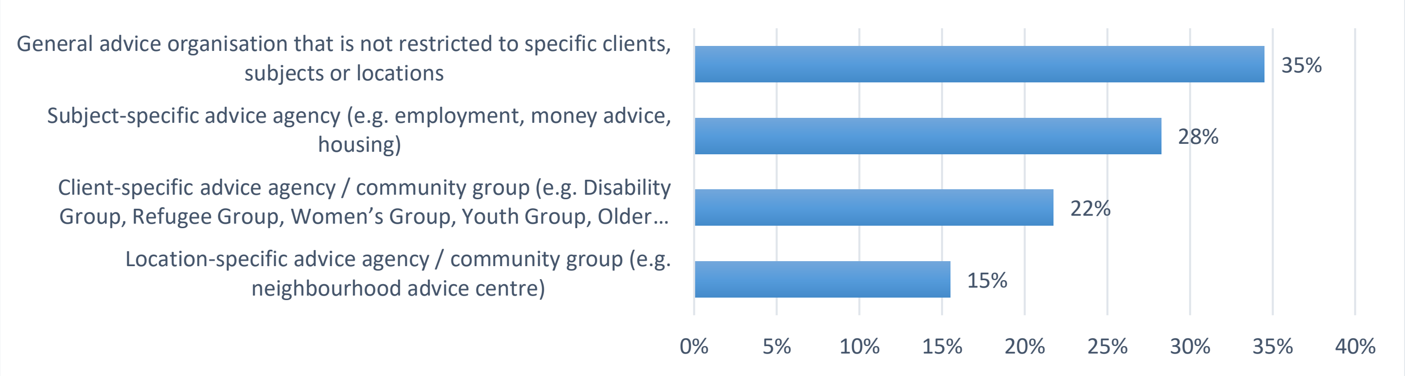


Base: 610

Organisational focus

The nature of the organisations that respondents were from varied, both in terms of their service and clients supported. The most frequently cited being generalist advice organisations (35%), followed by subject-specific organisations (28%), client-specific organisations (22%), and location-specific organisations (15%).

Figure 2: Organisational focus

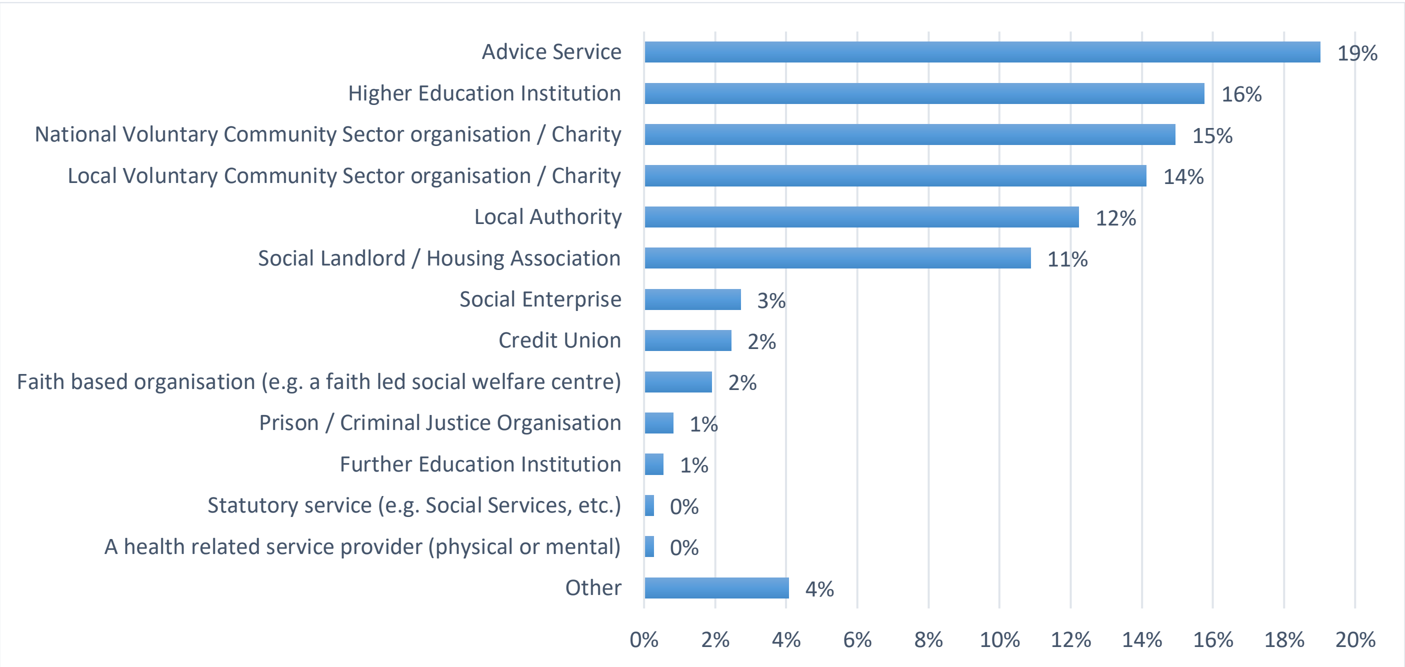


Base: 369

The specific types of organisations respondents were from also ranged considerably as shown in Figure 3; however, most respondents were from Advice Services (19%), Higher Education Institutions (16%), national voluntary community sector organisations and charities (15%), local voluntary community sector organisations and charities (15%), local authorities (12%), and housing associations (11%).

Volunteers worked in all of the groups shown in Figure 3, except prisons and statutory services. Further analysis shows that accredited staff were more likely to work in advice services than unaccredited (28% compared with 14%).

Figure 3: Type of organisation



Base: 369

The clear drop off from these main responding organisations shown in Figure 3 may simply reflect the current network of connections between different stakeholders to the financial capabilities agenda, for example, presently there are over 300 credit unions in the UK,[8] yet only a small number responded.

Over half (56%) of respondents said their organisations provided services to support the general public (not specific groups). However, supporting multiple groups was also common for the remainder. From a list of 24 service user types provided in the survey only a quarter of respondents said their organisations work with fewer than half of these. The

[8] http://www.abcul.org/media-and-research/facts-statistics

service user groups least likely to be supported specifically were children (11% of organisations offered support to children), Travellers (10%) and Armed Forces (10%).

Accreditation

Personal accreditation related to the provision of financial or money support was uncommon among the respondents to the survey – around two in five (37%) had some form of qualification. This is perhaps unsurprising as currently no specific financial capability qualification that a practitioner could acquire exists.

Interestingly, respondents from organisations that were staffed by a mix of paid employees and volunteers were more likely to have an accreditation than those from organisations staffed by paid employees only (47% compared with 30%).

There was also a low incidence of accreditation at respondents' organisational levels. Seven out of ten (69%) respondents said their organisation did not have (or they did not know if they had) an accreditation or "quality mark standards related to advice giving". For those that did, Citizens Advice memberships, AQS and IMA accreditation were the only options that registered a response higher than ten percent. Where respondent's organisations had quality marks they were significantly more likely to have a practitioner accreditation as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Top three quality marks held by organisations?

	Overall	Accredited staff	Unaccredited staff
Citizens Advice Membership Scheme	19%	32%	11%
Advice Quality Standard or AQS	18%	27%	12%
IMA accredited memberships (MIMA Cert)	14%	31%	4%

Base: 369

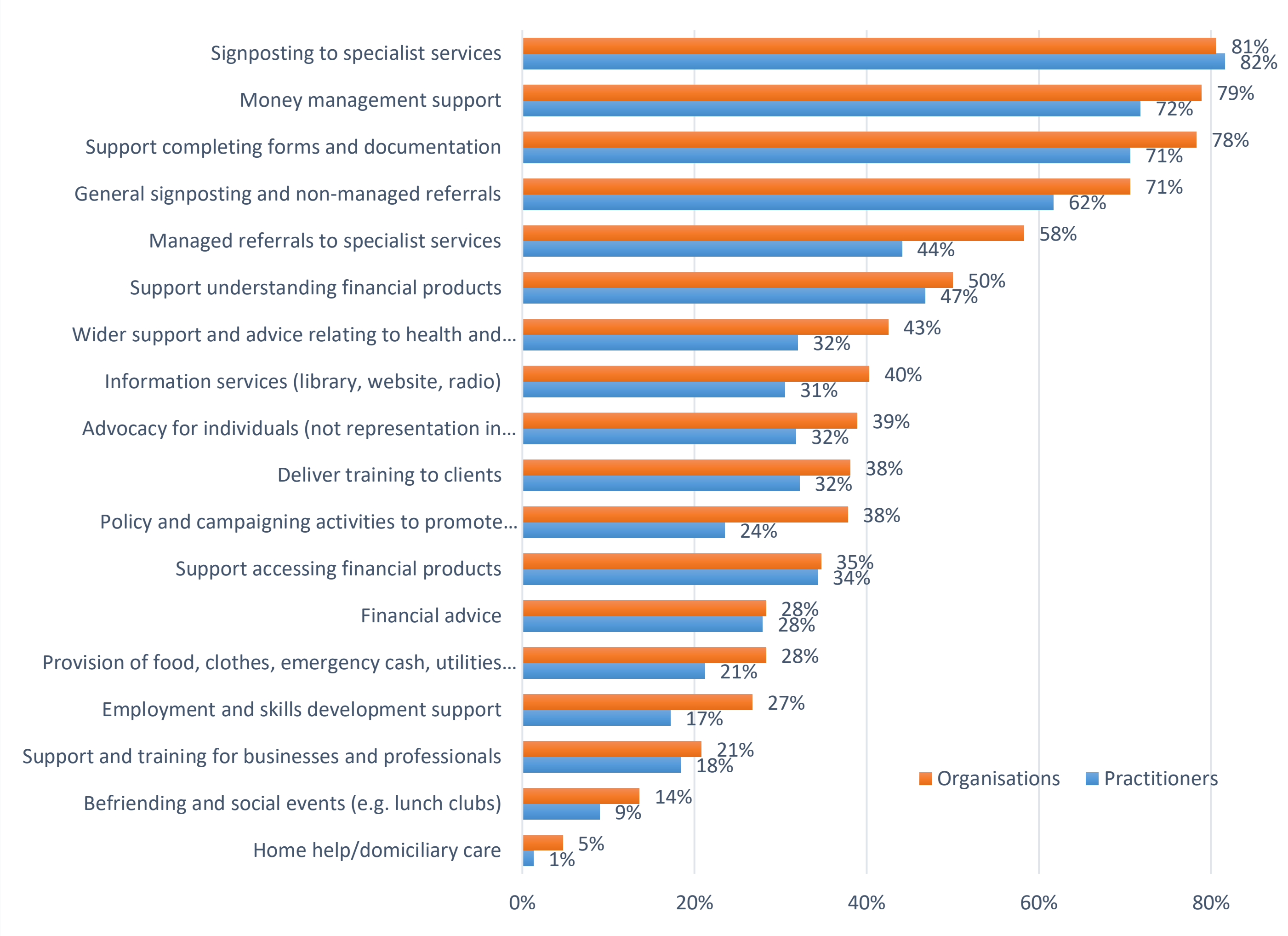
Respondents from client-specific organisations were less likely to be accredited practitioners (16% of accredited staff selected this option compared with 26% of unaccredited staff).

Services provided

Figure 4 shows the services that respondent's organisations provide compared with the services they personally provide.

The services offered by practitioners do not differ much from those of their organisations as a whole. Where the differences were greatest, such as for policy and campaigning; provision of food, clothes, etc.; employment skills; and managed referrals, these were the results of more senior level activity (e.g. service managers performing more policy and campaign work than service user facing practitioners).

Figure 4: Core services provided by individual practitioners and organisations

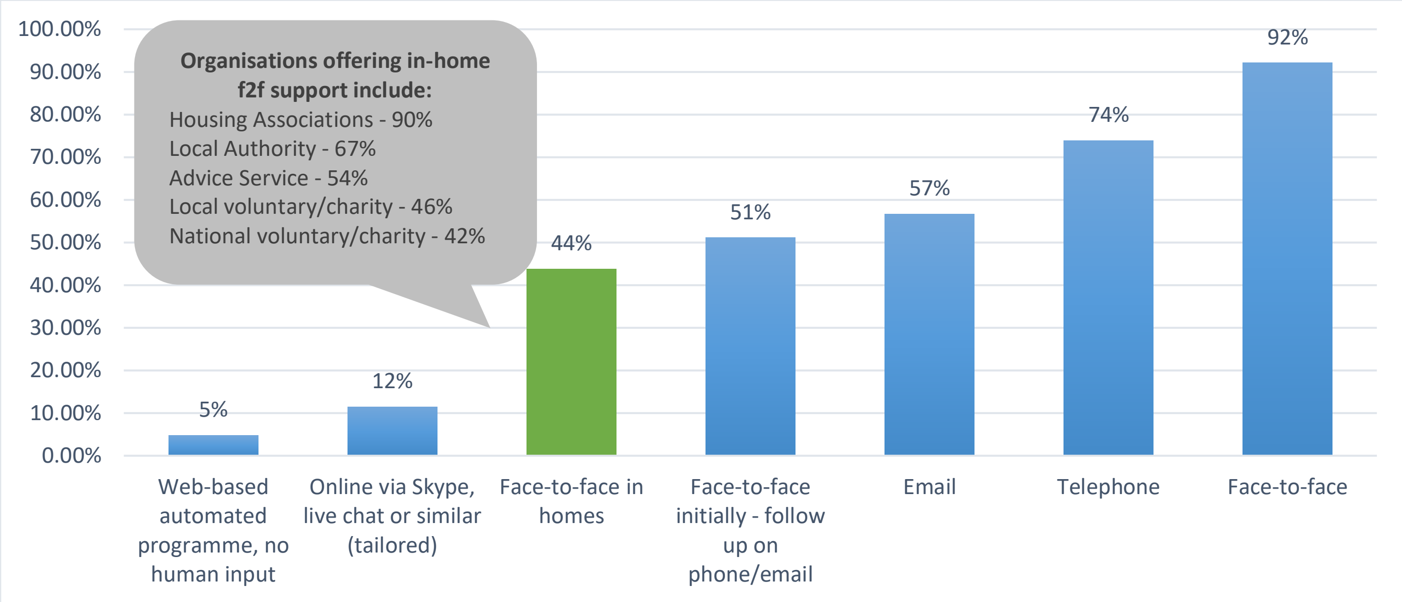


Base: practitioners 610; organisations 369

While it was clear from the mapping questions that the organisations responding to the survey were diverse, the methods of delivering support to service users was generally consistent regardless of organisation type. Almost all organisations (92%) offered face to face support as their main approach to delivering support to service users. Very few organisations offered a service that was not initiated or included some form of initial face to face interaction. Only 11 respondents were from organisations identified that did not provide any form of face-to-face support at all.

A significant proportion of respondents were from organisations that provided support to service users in their homes (44%). This service was offered by a range of organisation types, but were more likely to be offered by housing providers, local authorities, advice services and charities.

Figure 5: How are money services delivered



Base: 369

Finally, most respondents reported that their organisations provided support on a one-to-one basis (93%). Around half of the respondents reported that their organisations (45%) also provided group based support.

Practitioners whose organisations delivered group support were more likely to train businesses and professionals, deliver training to service users and offer employment support as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Key differences between one to one and group support providers

	Overall	One to one	Group support
Support and training for businesses and professionals	20%	20%	31%
Employment and skills development support	18%	17%	31%
Deliver training to clients	35%	34%	61%

Base: 369

The status of the financial capability community

A number of more subjective questions were used in order to understand practitioners' understanding and views on the financial capability community and the services provided.

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a number of statements about the work that they performed. Responses have been grouped for this analysis to highlight the broader trends.[9]

Understanding of financial capabilities

Several statements related specifically to their understanding and role in relation to financial capabilities. These statements generated some of the highest levels of agreement among practitioners that they clearly understood these as shown in Figure 6.

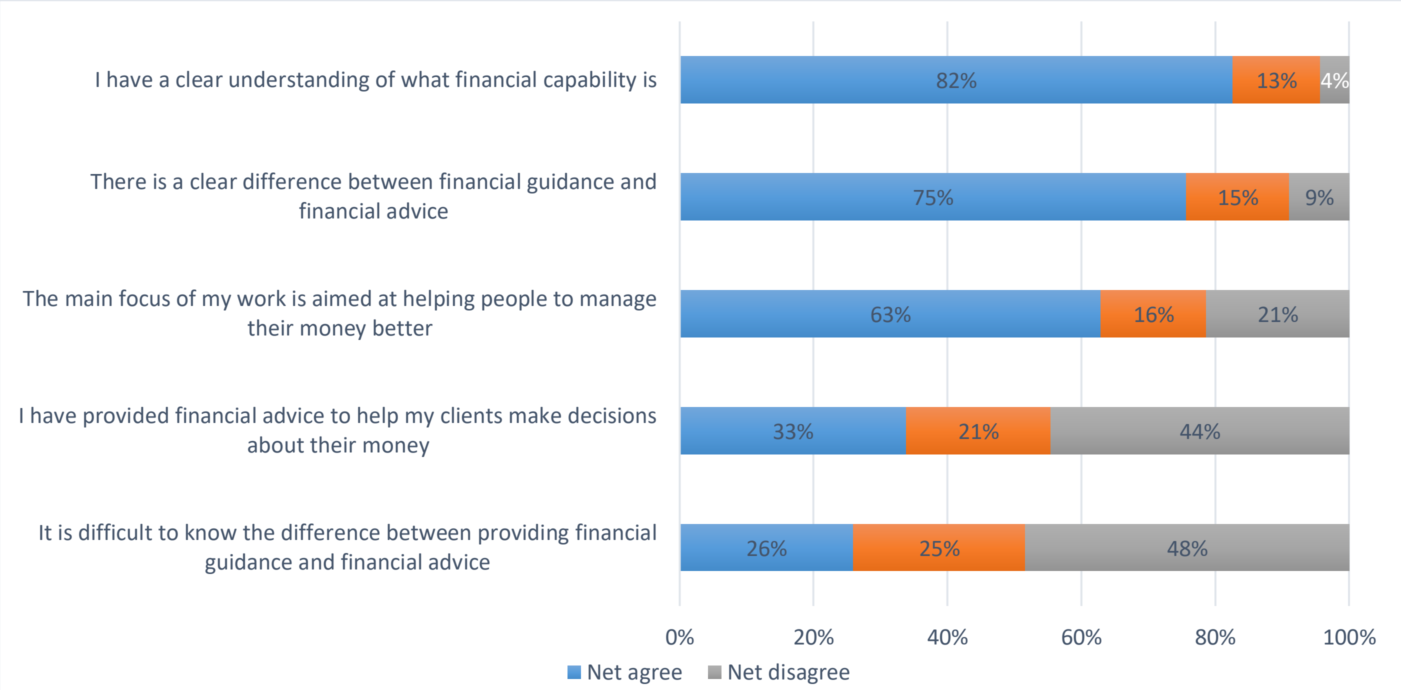
Regardless of a practitioner's role or accreditation, most were clear about the financial capability agenda with four in five

[9] Net agree includes 'strongly agree' and 'tend to agree'; net disagree includes 'strongly disagree' and 'tend to disagree. Both 'neither agree nor disagree' and 'don't know' have been grouped together; while these responses are conceptually different, they both indicate a level of uncertainty or neutrality to a statement.

(82%) agreeing they had a clear understanding of what financial capability is; most practitioners also felt there was a clear distinction between advice and support (75%). However, practitioners were less certain when asked if they agreed that it is difficult to know the difference between financial guidance and advice. Whilst nearly half (48%) disagreed with the statement, a high proportion (25%) were uncertain (responding either 'don't know' or 'neither agree nor disagree') and a quarter (26%) agreed it is difficult to know the difference. This underlines the complexity of the distinction between advice and support, and regulated and unregulated products or services. As discussed in the following chapter, these statements suggest that while the concept of financial capabilities is clear in the minds of most practitioners, in practice there may be other challenges in offering this sort of support to service users.

The importance of accreditation was also highlighted; accredited staff had greater focus on financial capabilities in their role with three quarters (75%) agreeing that the main focus of their work was aimed at helping people manage money, compared with over half (56%) of unaccredited practitioners.

Figure 6: To what extent do you agree or disagree… financial capability support



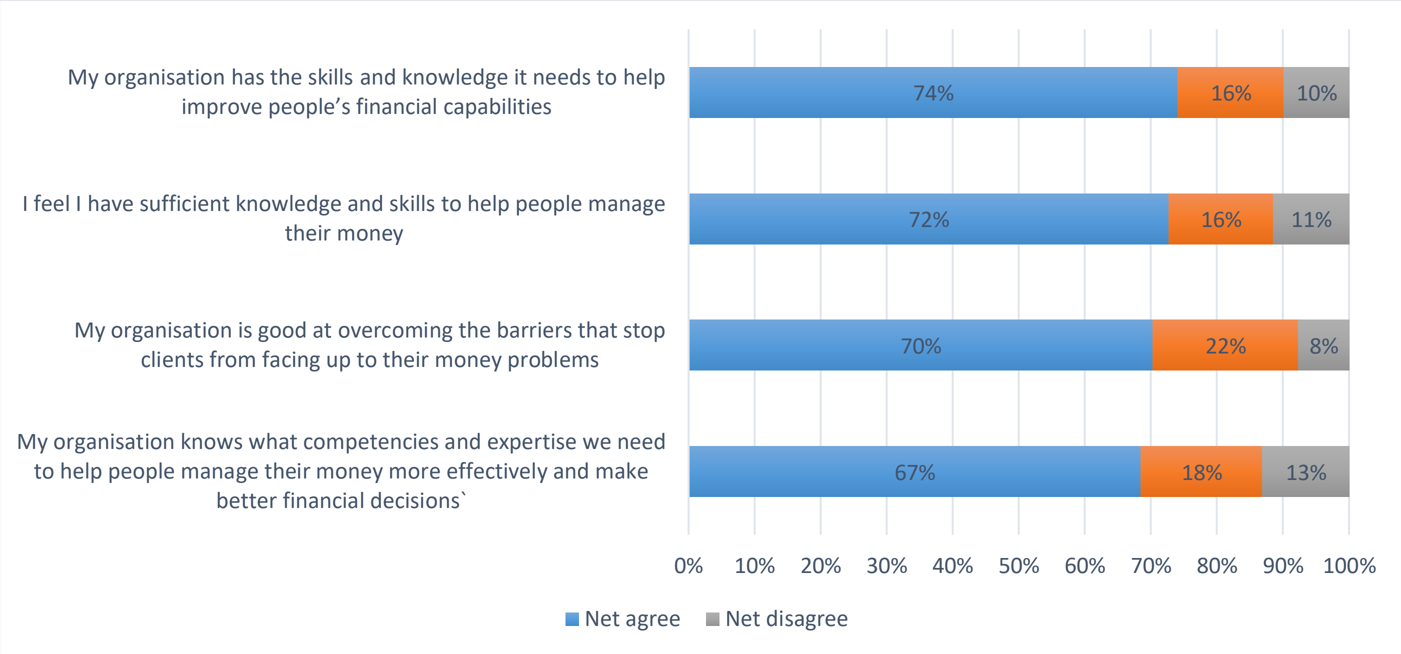
Base: 610

Organisational resources

Respondents were also asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements relating to the capabilities and resources of individuals and organisations. As shown in Figure 7, these generated consistently positive responses on the whole. At an organisational level and an individual practitioner level, respondents felt that they had the right skills and resources to support service users (74% and 72% respectively).

Practitioners also felt their organisations were capable at overcoming the barriers that service users faced in dealing with their money problems; and organisations knew what competencies they required to help. Practitioners with some form of accreditation were more likely to strongly agree their organisation knew what competencies they required than those who were unaccredited (32% compared with 19%). Organisations staffed by paid employees were less likely to strongly agree their organisation was good at overcoming barriers that stop service users facing up to money problems (19% compared with 32% for organisations containing volunteers).

Figure 7: To what extent do you agree or disagree… skills and resources



Base: 610

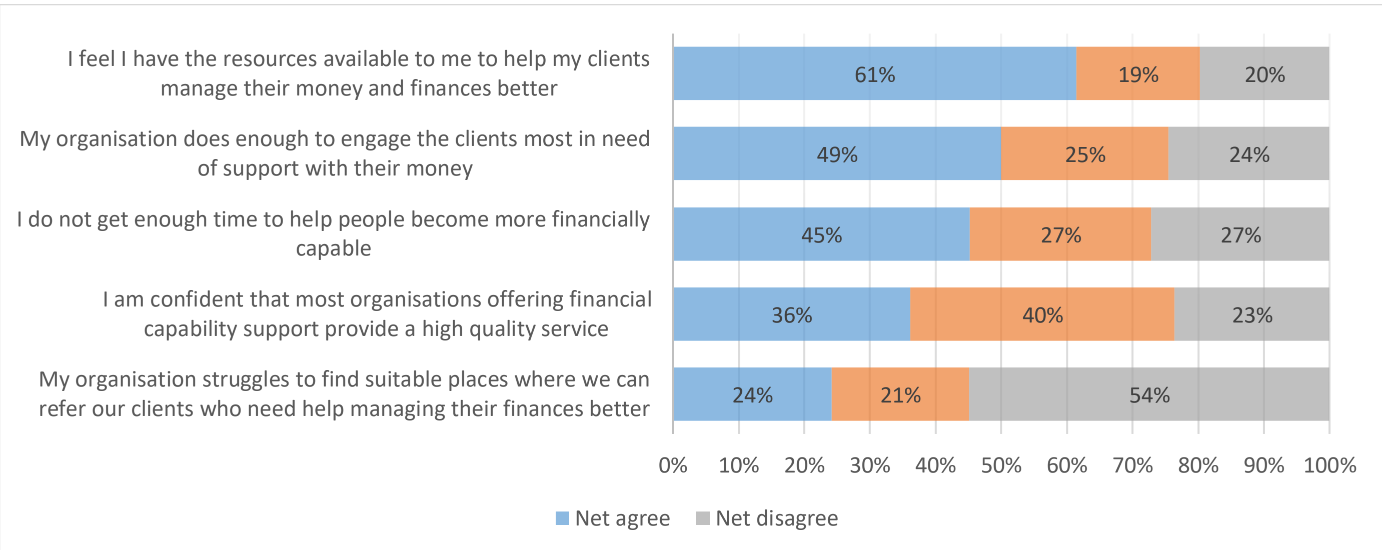
Delivering for service users

Respondents were also asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements relating to the services provided and whether they meet the needs of service users. As can be seen from Figure 8 these statements showed some of the lowest levels of agreement, and a high level of uncertainty.

On the whole, practitioners feel they have the resources available to them (61%), although this leaves a substantial proportion (39%) who disagree or are not sure. Only half of the respondents agree their organisation does enough to engage service users (49%) whilst the remainder either disagree (24%) or are unsure (27%).

Less than half (45%) of the practitioners felt they had enough time to help their service users; practitioners that felt they had enough time, also felt their organisation did enough to engage their service users.

Figure 8: To what extent do you agree or disagree… engagement and working with others



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Practitioners were not generally confident that organisations that offered financial capability support were offering a high quality service (only 36% agreed with this statement). The proportion saying they neither agreed nor disagreed was particularly high, with managers more likely to answer 'neither nor' than service user facing practitioners (38% compared with 29%). The last statement shows that despite this reported lack of confidence, only one quarter (24%) of practitioners struggle to find an organisation to refer to. This result is noteworthy also given that across the board, levels referrals and signposting to other services was high among these practitioners; likewise, those who did refer service users on were not notably more positive in relation to this statement. It suggests that practitioners regularly refer on service users to organisations that they do not feel will continue to provide a good service.

Defining the practitioner community

Using findings from the survey (and supported by the qualitative research findings) the consortium and L&W worked to develop a pragmatic practitioner typology.

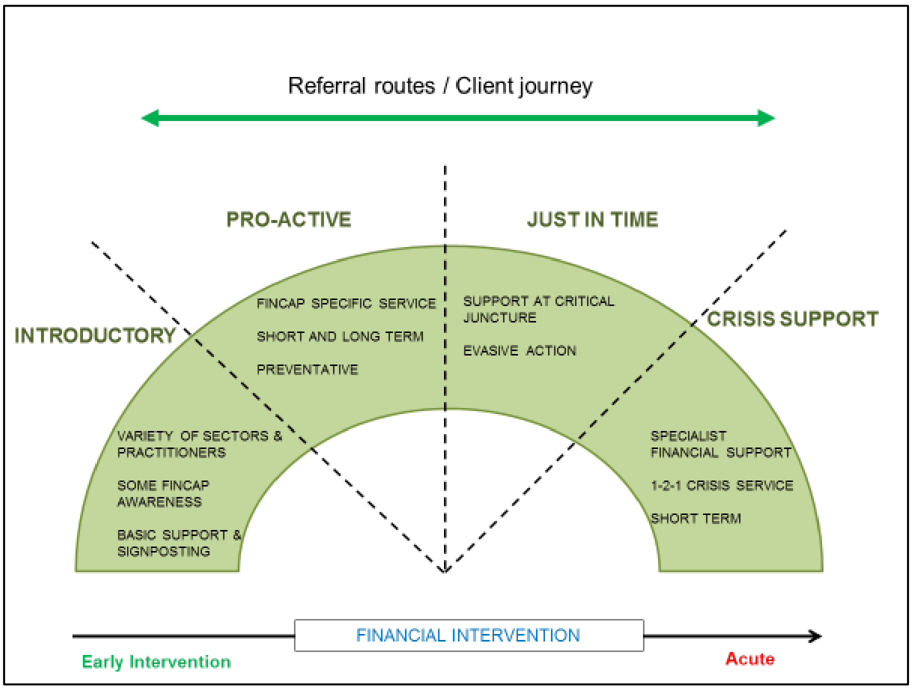
Due to the diversity of those providing support, the term 'sector' was rejected by the consortium as not being a suitable description within financial capability, and replaced by the term 'community' as a more inclusive and flexible term. It was also agreed that teachers would not be included in the definition of the financial capability community and practitioners.

Working alongside the Consortium, four broad intervention types were agreed which demonstrate when a practitioner may be able to benefit from the competency framework:

- Introductory: Delivered across a range of sectors by practitioners aware of money as a potential issue for their client group. Individuals access further support, via the provision of basic level support within these services or signposting to specialist services.
- Pro-Active: Services designed to address financial capability. They will focus on immediate needs (i.e. money management) and longer-term planning (i.e. retirement planning).
- Just in time/Pre-crisis: Interventions delivered at a critical point to avoid crisis in the future, e.g. To those who be transferred to Universal Credit or those about to take their pensions and needing to navigate the options presented by new pension rules.
- Crisis support: Specialist financial support in times of crisis, specifically money advice. Practitioners may or may not be financial capability. Longer term needs of individuals best met by 'pro-active' services.

Figure 9 shows a visual representation of how these interventions would work in practice on a continuum of support.

Figure 9: Intervention map



A financial capability competency framework

The following chapter explores the views of stakeholders interviewed in-depth about the demand, feasibility, and likely challenges of establishing a competency framework for financial capability practitioners.

Defining financial capability support

In order to define which organisations and practitioners comprise the financial capability community, it is important to first understand what respondents viewed as financial capability support.

Most respondents accepted that beyond its broad characterisation as ‘giving people the skills they need to make financial decisions’, or ‘being confident with money’, the definition of financial capability support is ‘variable’ and ‘tricky’.

Interviewees focused on the different locations of and therefore approaches to financial capability support: in an emergency (often within the context of debt advice), the ‘sticking plaster’; and more ‘preventative’, ‘proactive’, ‘upstream’ work which keeps a service user debt free in the longer term:

> *“Financial capability helps you to manage and use the resources you have available to you in the most effective way for the short, medium and long term.”*

Whilst financial capability support is clearly distinguished from debt advice in terms of its legal status, and ‘the clearly-defined boundaries of what you can and can’t do’, several respondents believed that in practice financial capability is often ‘rolled up with or is ‘an intrinsic part’ of debt advice, not least because service users fail to make any distinction between the two. Neither did service users differentiate between financial capability and benefit management or other forms of money advice, particularly when they are in a one-to-one session with a financial capability practitioner, rather than on a course or in a group session:

> *“I think we would collapse it all into one. We would say it’s about somebody’s relationship with money.”*

> *“We don't have an in-house definition of fincap support… We just have this general understanding that the financial capability work is what we do at the end of the crisis intervention to ensure that it doesn’t happen*

again."

Some respondents emphasised the way in which financial capability support should change service users' behaviour and perceptions over time, concentrating on 'the longer term and the bigger picture' because there are 'rarely any quick fixes' in this type of work. Some stressed the importance of more 'holistic', 'softer', one-to-one support which supports behavioural change to make better use of money and resources. Others target a shorter timeframe, focusing more on specific life events and particular risks for particular groups (e.g. marriage, bereavement, a new baby, job loss) which can impact significantly on a person's financial resilience.

In terms of what constitutes financial capability support, respondents identified interventions as diverse as 'setting up a basic bank account or doing their first budget themselves' to 'signposting issues and sensitising them to issues' or 'presenting choices and building knowledge and confidence, rather than giving advice'. However, even those organisations with apparently clearer cut definition of financial capability support acknowledged that this often expands rapidly when dealing with individual service users with multiple barriers that are impacting on their financial resilience.

Finally, when addressing the definition of financial capability support, a few respondents were keen to stress that this type of support is not capable of solving the financial problems of those who simply do not have enough money coming in, many of whom are 'exceptionally good at managing their money'. Financial capability support 'is not a solution to poverty'.

Experience and support for a practitioner competency framework

The quality of the support provided by their staff and volunteers is crucial for the organisations interviewed in depth, whether this relates to financial capability or other services they offer. All reported that they carefully monitor and audit the competence of their practitioners.

Most, in particular larger organisations with paid staff, were familiar with or have used practitioner competency frameworks (PCFs) to deliver different elements of their services, although not necessarily financial capability activities. Smaller organisations were more likely to informal monitor their teams. Several respondents stressed the importance of obtaining service user's feedback about the value and impact of the services they have received in order to monitor performance.

Most respondents had experience of PCFs, either through MAS, the Financial Services Authority (FSA) or the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA); others had used the Advice Quality Standard and also Picasso, Matrix for IAG and various national occupational standards (e.g. for teaching and youth work). Most of those who had used PCFs specifically in the financial sector (particularly but not exclusively for debt advice) were in favour of a PCF for financial capability, feeling that PCFs added structure and rigour. One suggested that the PCF should sit alongside or use the same principles as the debt advice competency framework because this would help practitioners to understand where financial capability sits on a spectrum of support and would give them the freedom to move between both disciplines.

However, it should be noted that a few respondents who had used PCFs in the financial sector were strongly opposed to developing one specifically for financial capability work.

Main purposes of a PCF

Overall, most respondents to the in-depth interviews believed a competency framework for practitioners in the financial capability community would be a good thing, although the form it would take and how it would be applied was not universally agreed. Those who support a PCF for the financial capability community believed that above all, it will ensure consistency, or alternatively that it will address the inconsistencies that many feel currently affect the financial capability community: 'it's a quality assurance thing'. These respondents want to see far more consistency in terms of staff training and competency assessment, such that service users are assured of receiving the same quality of customer experience across the piece. Some stress that vulnerable service users, for whom financial capability support can have very real world consequences, need to be safeguarded against receiving poor service. One respondent also felt that a PCF would be useful in safeguarding financial capability practitioners, some of whom, through ignorance, can stray into the provision of financial and debt advice.

Some respondents, in particular those who provide support and resources for practitioners, focused on the fact that having a set of core competencies will enable measurement (not just on outcomes, but on quality of the content of financial capability delivery), which should then give the all-important standardisation and measurement tool which is currently lacking in the financial capability community:

> *"Currently there is no cohesive framework that we can all measure ourselves against."*

This type of benchmarking would also make it easier to reassure staff that they are doing a good job, a key theme for some interviewees:

> *"When I speak to people, particularly who are delivering frontline services, I think there's always that fear that they're not effective, that everything that they're doing is, kind of, not leading to any long term or sustainable change. So, I think that a competency framework would at least give people a way to benchmark themselves."*

Some believed that a PCF could help to formalise financial capability work as a profession and act, more broadly, as 'an advocate for financial competence work', and 'raise its profile and give it more legitimacy'.

It is also suggested that a PCF could help to 'coordinate the sector' in terms of helping organisations to share best practice both locally and nationally (rather than trying to develop their own materials, frameworks and solutions to issues) and more generally 'make practitioners feel part of a bigger whole'. With this in mind, a small number of respondents stressed that the PCF should be more than 'a list of capabilities' but rather a 'repository of knowledge and signposting'. Accreditation of resources would make for more consistent and higher quality training materials, which again would help to even out what some see as the current variability in training across the financial capability community.

A small number of respondents also suggested that adherence to a PCF should help to provide leverage when working with funders if it shows a certain level of practice.

Those who oppose a PCF for financial capability focus particularly on what they anticipate will be the costs of the framework (i.e. staff time, effort and administrative burden) for what they envisage will be negligible and even negative results in terms of improved experiences and outcomes for service users:

> *"The Financial Conduct Authority has [already] put so much on us that, as managers, we're spending a good eighth of our time on management that we weren't having to do before, that we're not seeing clients. Yet the need is going up and it's, 'You've got to see more clients.'"*

Particularly for those organisations where financial capability is not the main focus of their service, a PCF would be acceptable only if it could broadly 'overlay our existing frameworks' or 'incorporate something very specific around financial capability in our existing case review process'.

One respondent felt strongly that a PCF would prove to be 'too rigid' and 'fail to allow for the intersectionality of people,' referring to deeply personalised nature of support which is often at the heart of organisation's work. Another felt that they had already successfully built the required quality management standards into their work.

Adapting the PCF to fit various types of staff

The overwhelming response to the issue of delivering a PCF which is relevant for staff across the financial capability community is that it needs to be accessible, easy to use and not off-putting in its complexity. It was almost universally envisaged that the PCF should be modular or unit based, allowing differentiation between specialist staff and volunteers or peer support workers; between those who are undertaking financial capability work for the first time and those who are refreshing and updating their skills; and between those who whilst they may be specialist paid staff, spend only a small amount of time on financial capability work (e.g. youth workers).

The consensus emerged that a core set of common competencies, 'a structure of commonalities and clear descriptors of what would enhance practice', or minimum service levels should be defined for volunteers and specialist practitioners alike, but then paid, specialist staff would build further on this. One respondent referenced the modular structure of Wiseradviser for debt advice, with its three different levels of practice.

Respondents stressed that the PCF needs to be sufficiently flexible to ensure that practitioners can work at different levels and still have applicable guidance, but that the various levels do not become overcomplicated. Some expressed concern that if it becomes too elaborate or rigid, the PCF will deliver 'a kind of two tier system where you have a few organisations with very highly paid staff who have got the organisational whack behind them to be able to manage a process like that', with the rest opting out. Some were concerned that as with the accreditation of debt advisers, financial capability volunteers will stop delivering this vital work; others worried that if PCF is too tightly defined, a person who is only at a certain skill level, but is able to manage an issue requiring a higher level in the PCF, will not be able to do the work. Throughout, respondents stressed that any PCF has to keep the service user and their access to good financial capability support absolutely central.

Most believed that whilst the PCF can be 'prescriptive' with paid staff, or could have specialist skills built into certain modules, its application needs to be considerable more 'flexible' with volunteers; others described this as a 'two stage' approach with the emphasis being on stopping it being 'onerous' on volunteers. Particular emphasis was placed on the need for the PCF to be appropriate for volunteers, on whom some of the financial capability community is increasingly reliant and who are often undertaking this volunteering on a short-term basis between periods of employment.

Some also suggested that the content of the PCF also needs to reflect the different status quo (in terms of extent and style of financial capability delivery) in the devolved nations.

More generally, a few respondents were concerned that there is a lack of clarity around 'who are the practitioners', e.g. those intermediaries 'who don't think they're involved [in delivering financial capability] but they are', and question how any PCF will impact on them.

Qualifications and accreditation

Respondents were almost unanimously in favour of some form of accreditation for financial capability practitioners, although their degree of enthusiasm differs markedly, from those who believed that it would help to ensure and demonstrate staff competence and professionalism, to others who feel that it would amount to little more than a 'rubber stamp', 'a kind of shorthand way of saying this is a good organisation'. There was agreement that a qualification or accreditation will help to act as a 'seal of approval' to help to safeguard (often vulnerable) clients, as well as providing assurance for other stakeholders, particularly funders and donors.

Respondents were similarly agreed that accreditation or a qualification would help to give credibility, respect and professional status to the financial capability practitioners and the work they do; some feel that this difficult work is currently undervalued and accreditation would help to address this.

In turn, many feel that a qualification, like that available for IAG, would help to give practitioners professional confidence, allowing them to 'feel skilled and qualified to deliver'. Some feel that because of the sometimes amorphous nature of their work, practitioners can lack confidence; a qualification or accreditation could provide them with 'validation that they know what they're doing', 'I've got this and I am an expert'. Furthermore, for those who are interested in CPD, accreditation could feed into this process. However, a small number of respondents voiced concerns that some form of (low cost, preferably on-line) revalidation process will also be required if practitioners, both paid staff and volunteers, are to be kept up to date and engaged with new information and learning: 'you don't want it to be a tick box, you've done it, 'I'm done, I'll now show it to my employer'.

Finally, it is important to note that some respondents, especially in organisation reliant on volunteers, and in sectors where financial capability is not their primary interest, voiced concerns that accreditation could be intimidating or act as a barrier for some staff, especially if it takes the form of 'a pass or fail situation'. Organisations often relying on older volunteers feel that qualifications would not be 'a priority' for these staff. Another organisation suggested introducing accreditation or a qualification would need to wait until practitioners were used to working at the required standard.

Quality mark

Respondents held widely differing views on the extent to which a quality mark for resources for the training and delivery of practitioner competencies in the financial capability community will add value, with many seeing both the pros and the cons.

The key benefits of a quality mark are thought to be that this would help to give (particularly smaller) organisations reputable status, give assurance of a certain level of quality, and would again improve advisor confidence that they were 'doing it to the industry standard'. A few of the organisations believe that a quality mark would be valuable to them because it would mean that their resources had been 'double ticked' and that someone other than their own managers had found staff to be performing well:

> *"Did we do a brilliant job? ...We have no validation of that other than my voice."*

Some organisations felt a quality mark would help them to commoditise and sell their resources throughout the financial capability community; others suggested that this would be a positive step for advisors who, with accredited training would be able to move easier from organisation to organisation, which would be good for both them and service users.

However, even amongst those that are broadly in favour of a quality mark, there were concerns about the way in which this might work in practice. Again, interviewees wondered how a quality mark could factor in that the financial capability community, and therefore the standards, is constantly changing; given that ‘every single resource is constantly evolving and being updated’, some felt that the only meaningful approach would be to quality assure ‘the general ethos e.g. robustness, extent to which it is updated and maintained’, rather than ‘every piece of content’. Questions were raised about how any quality mark could ensure delivery skills (soft, interpersonal skills) as well as content. It was also suggested that organisations tend to like to take training courses/materials and 'make them their own', making it more difficult for them to be quality marked.

Other respondents voiced concerns about the level at which organisations and individuals would be quality managed and suggested that the approach would again need to be flexible and inclusive. This might mean that organisations would need to agree the entry level at which they were quality managed with further progression accessible to varying types of practitioners. Some were concerned about any approach which meant a practitioner was ‘passed’ or ‘failed’.

A few respondents believe that any form of quality or kite mark would be a waste of time and effort because, based on past experience, they see little or no correlation between quality marks and practitioners giving good advice, rather much of what comes with a quality mark is ‘over the top’ and ‘an exercise in conforming with a structure’ rather than really thinking about what would be useful for the service user.

When asked who should quality mark training or delivery resources, MAS is the organisation mentioned most frequently, although there are concerns about the impact on this body of forthcoming changes; FCA and IMA are also suggested. However, most respondents are unsure who should fulfil this role, other than it should variously be ‘government based’, ‘high profile’, and staffed by people who ‘really understand practitioners and the work they do.

Defining success

Respondents define success in a wide range of ways, from those who feel that ‘agreeing what financial capability is and what it does’ would of itself constitute a success, to those who would like to see a suite of training resources which focus not only on the information required but the development of crucial interpersonal and delivery skills.

Some of the national organisations which provide generalist advice are concerned the timetable is so compressed that all that can be hoped for is a framework as a starting point on which to build in the longer term. A range of other organisations believe that ‘having structured conversations’ would amount to a sort-term success, as would moving towards a consensus on what constitutes an intervention, the skills and strategies for delivering the work and the types of topic which would be covered to develop these skills. They feel that ‘it takes time to build these things up’ and a ‘trickle’ rather than ‘mandating a tick box approach’ will be the best way to ensure success.

Others focused more on the impact that the PCF should have on the status and confidence of the practitioners who are delivering financial capability work on the front line; success for them would be ‘debunking some of the mystery around having good money conversations with people’ and giving staff more confidence that they are doing this important work correctly and well. They also hope that it will create greater staff interest in training to undertake financial capability work which will, in turn, make it easier to recruit money confident coaches:

> *“The job description says, ‘Well, you need to be person centred, and you need to know about money’, and people go, ‘What the heck is all that about?’... But if you could say to workers, ‘Well, actually, there’s this web resource available.'”*

A number of organisations see success as a set of ‘lessons plans’ or other detailed resources which would save them time and effort in terms of developing their own individual resources and creating structures to audit the strengths and weaknesses of their teams. A small number of respondents gauged success as ‘a kite mark and a qualification we can take all of our staff through’.

More generally, defining ‘a body of knowledge’ and a corresponding structure that ‘measures outcomes for service users’ will, many feel, help to ‘prove the worth of the sector’ and help to increase its credibility.

Some of those respondents who are working with specialist audiences where financial capability is not at the heart of their work felt that a measure of success would be that a PCF would ultimately mean that financial capability support would be more widely available, as it moved out of the financial capability specialist organisations and took root in the wider world, ‘helping to empower people to have these conversations who are not specialists’ including, e.g. Universal Credit advisers.

Ultimately, many interviewees focused on the way in which a PCF should improve and streamline provision, make for more consistent delivery and allow the financial capability community ‘to do more and to meet the needs of the service users thoroughly rather than cursorily'.

Whilst 'easy to use', 'almost at the press of a button' are key for some organisations, so that 'staff will use it every day', others who rely heavily on volunteers also focus on the need for the PCF to be low cost or free and for it to place no extra pressure on advisers and organisations who area already facing huge time and resource pressures. Above all, they stress that regulation must not become so onerous that organisations stop delivering financial capability support or outlets close.

Finally, it is important to note that a few respondents believe that the successes of the PCF will be very limited indeed. Some felt that nothing in their delivery would change as a result of a new PCF whilst others were concerned that there would be no demonstrable correlation between a PCF a better services and outcomes for service users.

Main priorities

There is a consensus that the main priorities when developing the PCF should be to keep it simple, flexible and easy to use: this will be the only way to ensure practitioner buy in.

Many envisage a framework which has clearly defined minimum standards, principles, areas of coverage (e.g. the four areas of MAS defined financial capability - skills, attitudes, motivations, and knowledge), or key outcomes and descriptors that stick in practitioners' minds (like Every Child Matters), but that is then flexible and does not stipulate how delivery should take place (e.g. like the National Occupational Standards):

> *"[PCF needs to be] more aspirational rather than a standard to measure others by… more a carrot than a stick… a target to aspire to."*

> *"[PCF needs to be] a common language and understanding… a MAS framework for the interaction between two people when they talk about money… detailed in terms of outlining the boundaries of the conversation, 'you can talk about this but don't verge onto that'…. It has to be flexible enough to cope with the fact that all organisations and their staff are very different, so it's more about outlining good process… like the principles that guide counsellors in therapy organisations."*

For a number of reasons, any more definition than this is thought to be unworkable: the financial capability community itself is not clearly defined, service users and their support needs vary so widely, the short timeframe for the project, and the fact that the consortium and wider stakeholders are 'not in the same space', all mean that this stage can inevitably only be 'a foundation, a stepping stone'.

Most respondents appear to envisage a flexible, 'multi-level', 'modular', 'pick and mix', 'light touch' approach for the PCF such that it is applicable to practitioners of all levels and competencies within different types of organisations. However, it is stressed that this should not become 'overcomplicated', or 'unwieldy' but rather that:

> *"It should be linked to a programme of change and focus on realistic implementation and improvement as the fincap sector is currently under regulated."*

Respondents believe that a PCF needs be simple but offer great signposting options and advice for more advanced users. It is also stressed that the PCF must be 'grounded in reality of practitioners' work', with the practical at the foreground and the strategic in the background because 'that is the way for it to get acceptance'. Some respondents emphasise that buy in will be assisted if the PCF, its structure and skills requirement is strongly evidence based:

> *"[PCF needs to say] To do x activity, you need y competency. The reason that you need y competency to do x activity is because we've understood through research, observation, analysis, testing and learning, that to do x activity well you actually need this level of skill. So, it's not arbitrary."*

It is believed that flexibility and avoiding a 'stifling tick-box approach' will also leave practitioners free to deliver a message in their own way, allowing them to decide how best to engage with their particular service user group and an individual service user. It is stressed that any PCF needs to 'keep the soft element' of financial capability work and 'not make it as processy and tickbox as much of the rest of finance work'. Similarly, some respondents are anxious that the PCF doesn't 'come down too hard on practitioners' and amount to 'a big club, show me your paperwork!'; rather it needs to be designed to build a trusting relationship to make sure practitioners are doing their best work.

Respondents across all organisations stressed that the content of the PCF needs to be accessible and to stick in practitioners' minds, 'so that it is engrained and embedded in their practice'; this view was particularly pronounced amongst those who were working with specific audiences on a broad range of issues. What respondents don't want to see is 'more control documentation or procedural specifications that people must go through'; it is stressed that the PCF has to be tailored to the charitable sector, including all of its smaller organisations, rather than 'large multi-tiered, multi-function organisation where they have a reasonable sized head office with a finance function, an audit function and a good field team'. Again, many respondents emphasised that it must be low cost.

Main challenges

Across the spectrum, from high profile, national, generalist organisations, to smaller regional ones that focus more specifically on financial capability, the main concern was that any PCF must not represent 'a massive undertaking', particularly at the current time when many, particularly smaller, local, financial capability providers are already stretched and under-resourced.

There is concern that the additional time and effort involved, on top of the 'extra cost burden on organisations already struggling with funding' (costs of training, as well as potential accreditation and annual enrolment fees) will stop some from delivering financial capability work and thereby 'stop important work from happening'. The challenge will therefore be to make the PCF 'accessible, inclusive and cheap', removing barriers that could potentially stop people using the PCF:

> *"We've just had the debt advice framework brought in… That's mandatory for us… but it's very, very prescriptive now on who we can use, because before we used volunteers to do debt advice, who were trained and did courses… we can't afford that for volunteers, because you have all the outlay before they do anything… So, that has severely restricted us."*

More broadly, 'ensuring real buy in across the sector' and 'ensuring that everyone is on board' is regarded as another significant challenge for any PCF, particularly given the range of different stakeholders. There is concern amongst some organisations that with 'so little time to do what we already need to do', the framework will become 'just another tick box exercise with us not doing the job any better'. Some respondents suggest that there will be particular resistance from organisations who think that they are already doing everything they need to do, as well as those who are 'frameworked out' by their experience of PCFs in the debt sector.

All respondents believed that a key challenge will be to make the PCF valuable, rather than 'just another piece of bureaucracy', 'another hoop to jump through'. In the longer term, a few interviewees wondered whether practitioners would have the time or inclination really to 'stay up to scratch' and 'critique own practice'. For all of these reasons, some suggest that the way the PCF is 'messaged' ('the sector is currently unregulated and there needs to be some quality assurance because the work you do is meaningful and has a big impact on people's lives') will be crucial to its success. Some suggest that 'supporting so that they can see the benefits, rather than enforcing' is the best way to address these issues; however, one respondent, citing the lack of success in teaching financial capability skills in school, looked to 'compulsion' as the only way forward if the PCF is not 'to fall by the wayside'.

Some respondents suggested that 'industry big hitters' need to be drafted in to help with sustaining interest in the PCF, whilst others focused on the value of offering intensive support to organisations and individual practitioners such that they realise the potential value of the PCF for both staff and service users.

The impact of the PCF on volunteers was a particular source of anxiety for interviewees, in both organisations that are dependent on volunteers or deliver financial capability, but also those who use only specialist paid staff. Anxieties focus on the way in which the PCF could be perceived by these volunteers as the financial capability community 'moving up a gear' in such that only particular people with a particular skillset are seen as capable of delivering this work and many volunteers will be 'driven away'. In addition to this, some respondents highlighted the fact that with less funding and more dependence on volunteers, who use this as work experience and therefore 'churn', the training would need to be constant.

The other key theme of the challenges identified was the difficulty in delivering 'something specific but not too detailed', which 'speaks to all the people but is still relevant'. As suggested above, many see the success of this undertaking as being the delivery of a framework that fits all types of organisations but remains relevant and useful. A few organisations also raised what they saw as the significant challenges in keeping resources up-to-date and relevant.

The need for any PCF to address the important coaching element involved in financial capability work, and the interpersonal skills required was also raised as a significant challenge. A small number of respondents suggested that for this reason, the National Occupational Standards for teaching could represent a better starting point that for example, the PCF on debt advice. Another respondent was concerned that the PCF would be not geared too tightly around the delivery of group financial capability support, but rather was tailored to the one-to-one coaching environment.

At a more basic level, a number of respondents suggested that just finding a consensus about the definition of financial capability and the elements that the PCF should contain, would in itself, represent a significant undertaking, given the perceived variation in the financial capability community (compared with e.g. debt advice).

Other challenges raised by small numbers of participants included the perceived short timescale in which the PCF was being introduced and the concern that MAS needed to consult wider, 'beyond the usual suspects', as well as the need to ensure continuity in the programme given the question mark over MAS's future.

More broadly, a few respondents felt that the PCF would have difficulty addressing the key issues of how successfully to engage service users (or intermediaries) in financial capability work, given that many people only want debt relief or are already competent money managers but with inadequate income:

> *"[Practitioners are] ticking the boxes, because they can't get their funding without doing it, but most of the clients don't want to engage with it. I think this is the problem with the practitioner competency thing, the clients don't engage with it. Most don't. They come because they want their debt sorted. They don't come because they want to be told how to resolve their money. They don't want to be told how to manage their money."*

Finally, a small number of respondents felt that 'policing' the framework, 'who does it and how' would also represent a significant challenge, particularly given that tick box and paper audits (as opposed to observations of service user/adviser interaction) 'don't tell you about real compliance'.

Skills and training needs

The following chapter explores the skills needs and training requirements and preferences of practitioners. It details and brings together the results of the survey of practitioners and the findings from the in-depth interviews conducted with stakeholders.

Skills and services provided by practitioners

Questions were included in the survey to explore the priorities of practitioners regarding the skills they use to support service users. A list of likely skills and activities for inclusion was agreed with the consortium and MAS; however, it was accepted that this could not be exhaustive in a survey of this nature.

Skills priorities

Respondents were asked to rank the importance of ten different skills and knowledge areas a practitioner should have if they are to be effective at helping people improve how they manage their money, where 1 was the most important and 10 was the least important.

Table 5 is sorted in order of most popular first choice. The average score denotes the average priority given to each of the ten proposed skills. This shows the top ranking options were focused on softer skills, or delivery for the service user, and less so on technical skills.

Table 5: Prioritising skills for practitioners to be effective in helping clients manage their money

	Ave score (1 – 10)	% 1st choice
Neutrality or non-judgemental approach	1.9	59%
Ability to build trust so that a client will open up about their money problems	1.9	59%
Understanding of fraud prevention and online security	4.5	42%
Customer service / communication style	2.7	39%
Caseload management	4.3	22%
Knowledge of financial products and services	3.9	21%
Teaching / delivery approach	4.1	20%
Understanding of planning and budgeting skills and tools	2.5	19%

Research skills - to help increase a client's options (and effective signposting)	3.8	18%
Computer skills - for making use of online offers and comparison sites	4.4	14%

Base: 610

As shown in Table 5, interpersonal skills such as 'neutrality or non-judgemental approach' and 'ability to build trust' were most frequently seen as the top priorities, with customer service and communications skills also rating highly. Similarly, in the in-depth interviews, most respondents were in agreement that interpersonal and communication skills are the most important requirement for financial capability practitioners. Practitioners must be able to connect with different service users, recognise what kind of approach each service user will respond to and engage with, and then adapt their message accordingly. They need to be able to convey knowledge in a helpful and meaningful way, offering support in different formats to make it to accessible to people with different levels of education or different learning styles. One organisation who deliver support principally by telephone felt that their staff, who must draw service users out over the telephone, require even greater skills than those who are delivering financial capability support face-to-face in groups or one-to-one.

Across the board, the importance of emotional intelligence was singled out as being of paramount importance. A 'passion and compassion for people' is essential, as practitioners need to listen to and help service users deal with the emotional issues which are sometimes at the root of financial problems. Empathy and the ability to give non-judgemental advice is singled out, with practitioners needing to support vulnerable service users as well as those 'in crisis'.

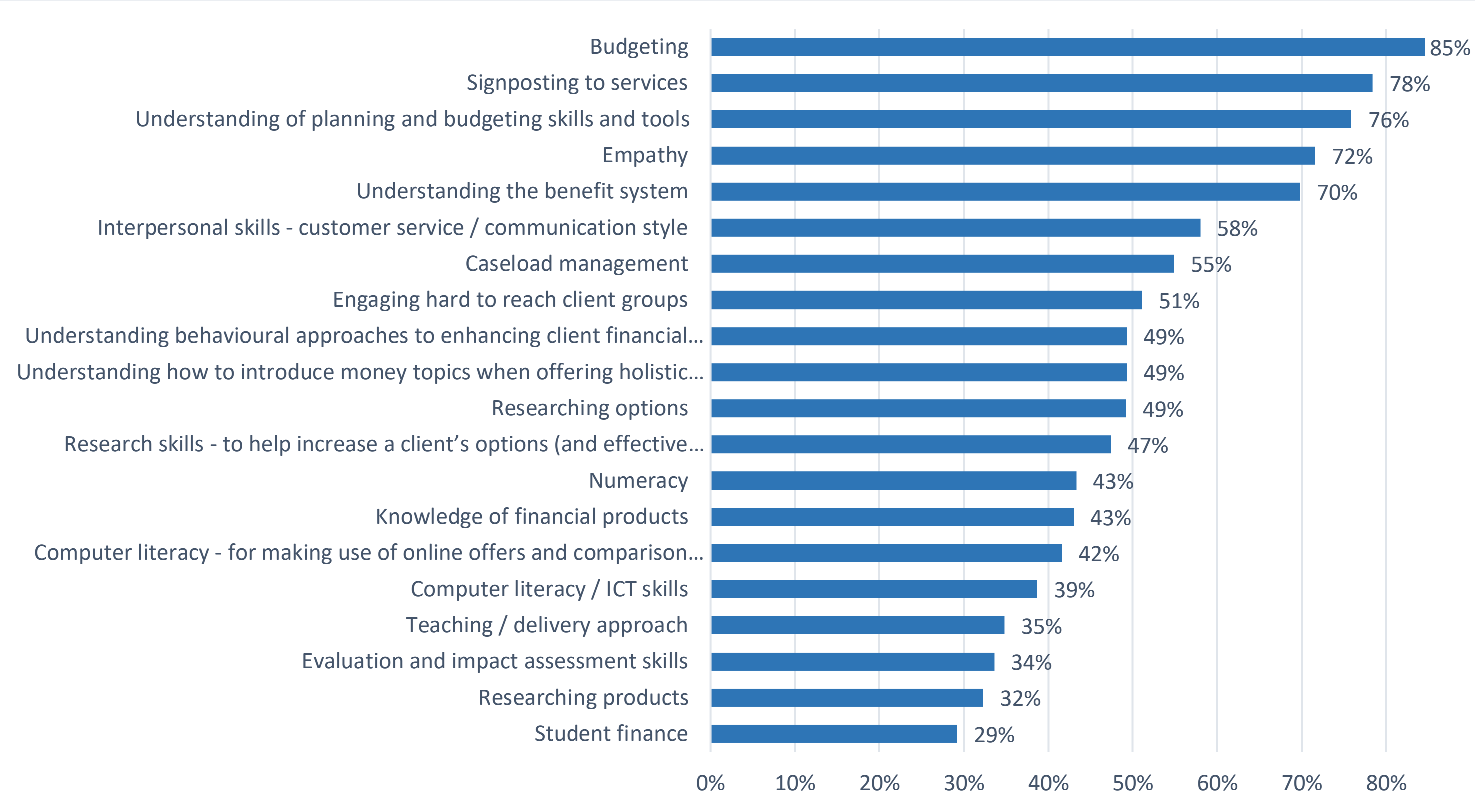
Some in-depth respondents focused on the importance of being able to instil and bolster confidence amongst their service users to help them grow to self-sufficiency. Here, as elsewhere in the in-depth interviews, there was also an emphasis on the need to instil real behavioural change, helping the service user move from goal setting to action. Organisations involved in the youth sector, in particular, spoke about the importance of recognising the psychological element needed to influence meaningful change.

Some of the stakeholders interviewed stated their organisation recruits for interpersonal skills above all else, believing that numeracy and computer skills can be taught to and trained up in their staff, whilst communication and listening skills are innate.

Skills most used when practicing

Practitioners were also asked what skills and knowledge they use in their daily work with service users. As shown in Figure 10 practitioners tended to select more technical skills such as budgeting (85%), signposting (78%) and knowledge of tools (76%). This is interesting when compared with the types of skills respondents prioritise in Table 5, which were more focused on interpersonal skills.

Figure 10: Which skills or knowledge areas do you use to help people with their money matters?



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In the in-depth interviews, signposting to suitable resources and a familiarity with available financial services were seen as more important than specific and in-depth knowledge. Some respondents placed particular importance on practitioners' willingness to keep expanding knowledge as the financial capability community develops and changes. Because of legislation prohibiting the provision of advice, others (particularly those who use only paid staff) believe that signposting to specialist organisations is particularly important to ensure practitioners stay within legal boundaries.

Awareness of available tools (e.g. comparison websites, budgeting apps) was viewed as important, although, because the financial capability community is constantly changing and 'knowledge goes out of date', many think that adaptability and ability to research and acquire knowledge is more useful, and a 'better use of the resource' for the service user group. Research skills also help practitioners to increase service user options.

However, most in-depth respondents also believed that good practitioners need to have a broad awareness and understanding of financial products and jargon, as well an understanding of planning and budgeting skills, with a few saying that practitioners need to be able to identify service user types to know which debt solutions are viable for individuals. However, one organisation spoke of the importance of practitioners having specific knowledge of pensions and scam awareness, as well as the computer literacy that many of their service users may lack.

A number of interviewees suggested that whilst 'soft skills' are important for the majority of their practitioners, some staff will require and possess more specialist knowledge. For this reason, some organisations would like the PCF to comprise different competencies for different staff levels, such that those with lower numeracy and literacy skills are not excluded, but higher up the PCF the skill is taken into account.

Interestingly, less than half (43%) of survey respondents had used numeracy skills to help people with managing their money. In-depth respondents disagreed on the importance of numeracy amongst their practitioners. Some thought that basic numeracy skills were required for financial capability advisers, with one only recruiting staff with English and Maths GCSEs. However, others were of the opinion that requiring a Maths GCSE as a prerequisite would rule out a lot of excellent practitioners who were able to connect with and successfully help service users. Some said that they recruited staff on the basis of their interpersonal skills rather than their abilities in Maths and Literacy, which they believed could be learned. One organisation thought that one person in a team needed to be able to do basic Maths, but the other team members could excel without. Another thought most of its practitioners already have the basic numeracy skills required.

Only a few organisations thought that a degree of computer literacy was important amongst practitioners (a skill only 39% of survey respondents said they used to help people manage their money), as it is often required to access useful documentation and resources online. One organisation said they offered special training for volunteer practitioners who struggle with computers.

Caseload management was something 55% of practitioners surveyed used to help clients manage their money. However, interestingly, the skills required in managing caseload were interpreted by in-depth respondents in a range of ways: some took this broadly to mean practitioners managing the administrative aspects of their work; others focused on its emotional toll.

Some believe that it is important that staff show they can deliver, which requires them to record all outcomes and mark them against KPIs, coupling support with evaluation of results. One respondent thought that a PCF should measure practitioners' ability to turn resources into an effective 'lesson plan'. Others thought that a key KPI was launching service users into independence. Another said that practitioners need to manage cases insofar as knowing when they didn't have the skill set to help a service user, who they should instead refer to someone qualified to give advice.

A few respondents defined caseload management as being an assessment of and decision about which cases advisers should take up, with one for example, suggesting that organisations should identify people who could benefit from financial capability, otherwise advisers are not using their time effectively. Another only sees service users who return with the same problems if no other service users need to be seen.

However, other respondents were more concerned with managing the emotional side of the cases. Some feel strongly that large caseloads can make significant emotional demands on practitioners, who require commensurate reserves of emotional resilience. It is generally agreed by respondents who raised this issue that it should be the responsibility of the organisation to manage individual practitioner’s caseloads, because successful financial capability work often requires significant periods of time spent with service users. One organisation suggested that the importance of caseload management varied in different departments, as phone workers only needed to offer short interventions compared with those who mentor face-to-face and over long duration.

Interestingly, some respondents did not think caseload management was important, as most of those who volunteer as advisers in their organisations have sufficient time to put into the job to do it very thoroughly, and one organisation only sees service users for a maximum of three sessions before the input ends.

In the survey, some differences existed between service managers and service user facing staff. Managers were more likely to understand how to introduce money topics into holistic support (57% compared with 48% for paid practitioners); teaching delivery approaches (42% compared with 32%); and evaluation and impact assessment (46% compared with 29%). Conversely, practitioners were more likely to use empathy (75% compared with 64% of managers).

More pronounced were the differences between accredited and unaccredited staff. Accredited staff were more likely to use most of the skills listed when compared with an unaccredited practitioner (excluding, ICT, comparing online, student finance, signposting, and interpersonal skills.

Finally, there were also pronounced differences between organisations that did and did not provide group support to service users. Group providers used knowledge of products more; both financial products (60% for group support providers compared with 50% for one to one only organisations) and researching products generally (52% compared with 38%). Unsurprisingly teaching approach was also more frequently selected by group support providers (59% compared with 39% for one to one). While one-to-one providers were more likely to use caseload management (62% compared with 50%) and understanding the benefit system (76% compared with 63%).

How well does the financial capability community currently address these capabilities?

Many in-depth respondents believe that practitioners have high levels of emotional intelligence and are good communicators, capable of offering valuable support to vulnerable service users. Practitioners are widely held to be passionate about their work and able to adapt delivery to connect with individuals and build rapport. A few suggested that their practitioners had recently made improvements in this area as more emphasis was placed on emotional aspects of problems and how interpersonal skills impact on successful outcomes.

However, a number of respondents think there are gaps in training and insufficient knowledge on available financial products and skills, especially amongst volunteers. Some spoke of difficulties in coordinating available tools and signposting service users to the most useful resources for their situation.

Some focused on the way in which time constraints and a lack of funding meant that they were unable to spend sufficient time with service users. This lack of funding meant that smaller organisations were more reliant on volunteers, and had less money to spend on training, leaving some advisers lacking in confidence in their knowledge. One highlighted the importance of striking a balance between generalist knowledge and specialist knowledge that could be signposted.

A few respondents also thought that tight management is required to ensure that guidance and signposting does not overstep legal boundaries, and a distinction is maintained between financial guidance and advice.

Several respondents, particularly those who use paid staff, also suggested that the financial capability community lacks consistency in its practices, creating confusion for service users as well as advisors who move between organisations. Some put this inconsistency down to financial capability providers having their own priorities and giving out biased advice, a particular problem when service users failed to realising the advice was biased.

Training needs and provisions

The main skills issue identified by those interviewed in-depth is a lack of consistency, both across the financial capability community as a whole and within individual organisations. Different agencies have different emphases and resources available to them with some groups better catered for and some organisations much better connected, and therefore better able to signpost.

There is widespread concern that because different practitioners have such different backgrounds and qualification, some may lack the breadth of knowledge about available help. There is a worry that different practitioners have different specialisms and the guidance a service user receives is very largely dependent on the adviser they speak to. Some therefore feel that there needs to be a balancing of skills across practitioners to 'level the playing field' between financial capability specialists who may have more specific knowledge, and volunteers who may have exceptional interpersonal skills.

The survey also explored the training needs of practitioners and where they would be able to source training from. Practitioners were asked to identify what skills they needed more training in and were also asked to assess the training needs of their colleagues. It is important to note that an assessment of other practitioners' skills is highly subjective; however, this question was designed to highlight the concern practitioners may have about the capabilities of practitioners within their organisation.

Training needs of practitioners and colleagues

Overall the three most reported skills training needs were understanding the benefit system (36% for themselves and 44% for colleagues), understanding behavioural approaches (33% for themselves and 40% for colleagues), and knowledge of financial products (39% for themselves and 31% for colleagues). Consistently, practitioners saw the training needs of others as greater than their own. Interestingly, as these training needs relate to knowledge, information and understanding, the in-depth interviews identified that the quantity of resources in existence may lead to some uncertainty about 'what is out there' where to look and what may be useful to a service user. Some also feel that volunteers are not always sufficiently aware of other local and national organisations to be able to signpost as effectively as they should:

> *"Signposting is not being done necessarily right across the board, or to the standard that we would like it to be done. Partly because volunteers are really, really busy sometimes... They need to be aware of what's available locally, and nationally... We need to find good ways of being able to give volunteers a good snapshot of what is available, locally, and how to engage with that help."*

Figures 11 and 12 present the results of reported training needs split based on the skills showing the lowest and highest amount of divergence between the reported needs of the practitioner and their views on the needs of colleagues.

Again, personal accreditation was a factor in determining individual need, for each skill accredited practitioners reported a lower personal need overall (although a minority were significantly so); there was little affect from seniority of role overall. Organisations with paid staff only were more likely to report needing training around the benefit system than organisations with a mixture of paid and voluntary staff.

Figure 11: Which skills do you/ others in your organisation need further training in? – low divergence

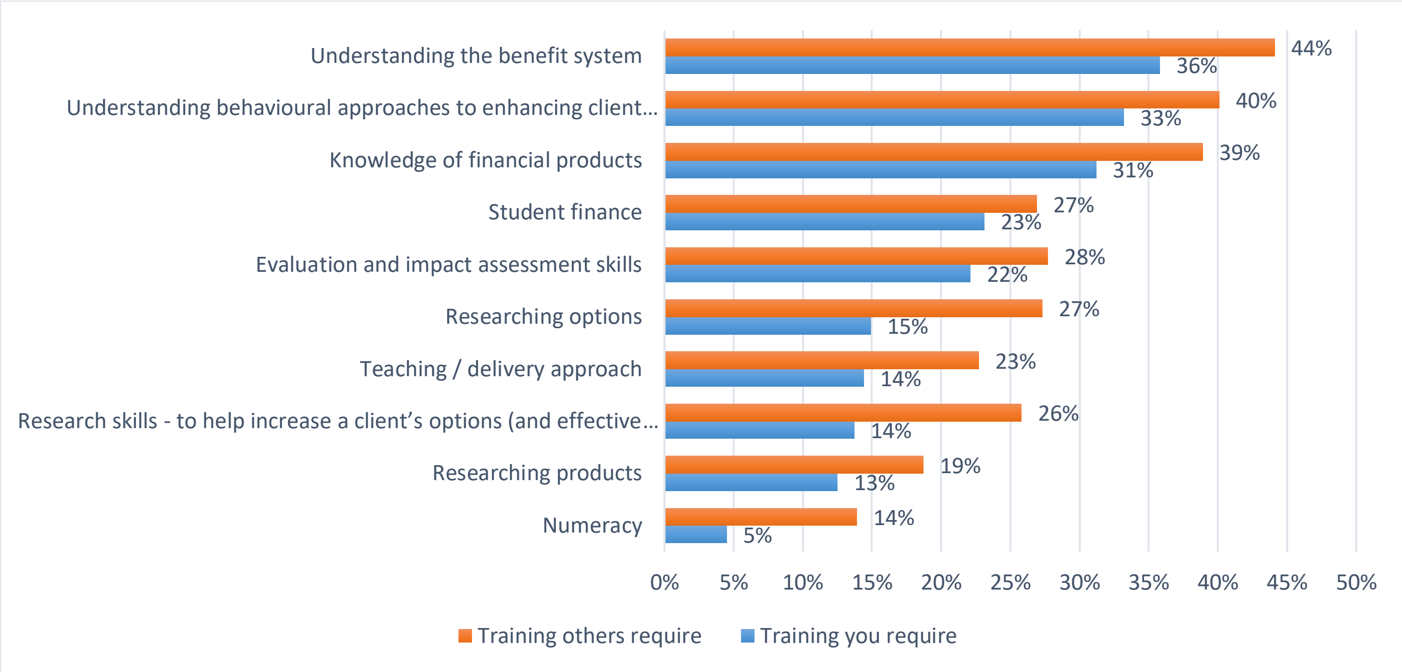

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Figure 12 shows a higher level of divergence between the training needs of practitioners and the perceived needs of their colleagues. Perhaps most surprising is that the greatest level of divergence exists with some of the most commonly used skills. **Budgeting** (23 percentage point difference), **introducing money topics** (20 percentage point difference) **interpersonal skills** (19 percentage point difference), **signposting to services** (17 percentage point difference) and **empathy** (16 percentage point difference) are some of the most commonly used skills by practitioners.

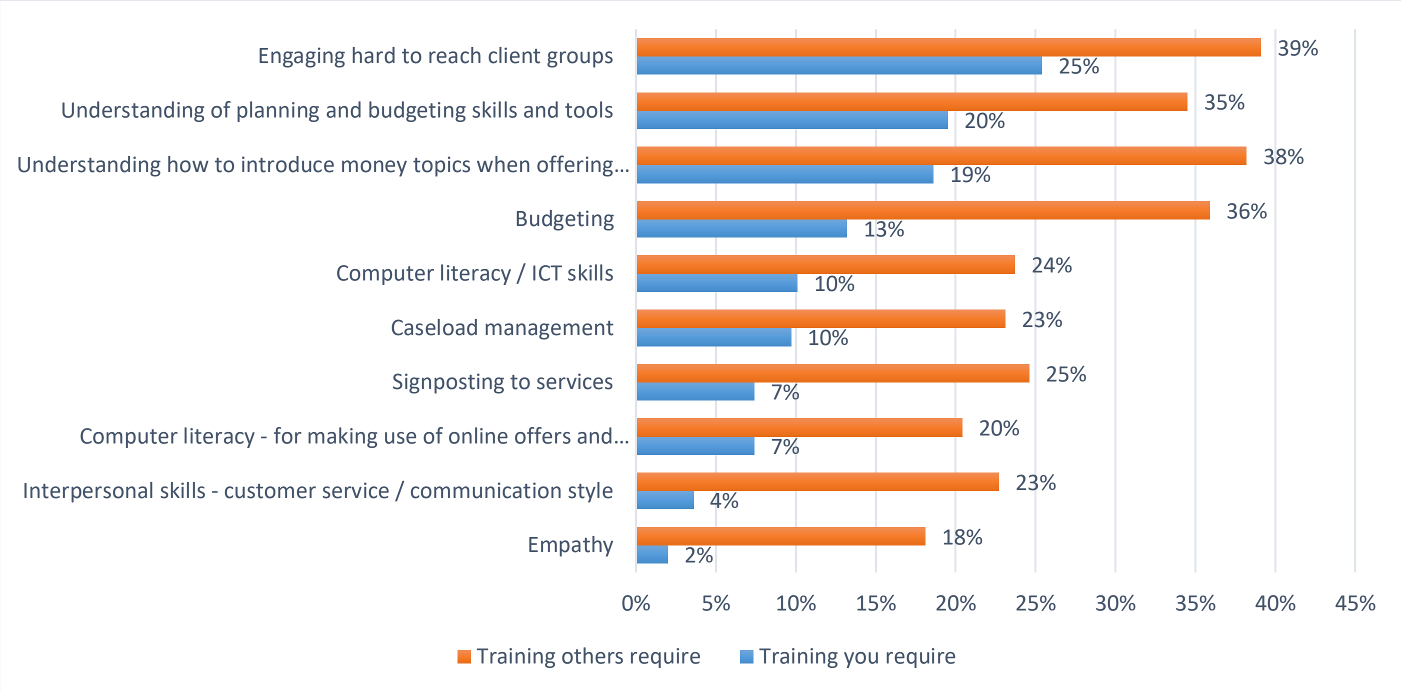
Like the survey, the in-depth interviews did identify areas where respondents were concerned about other practitioner and organisations skills and how they were working in practice. A gap in numerical and digital skills was also identified by some respondents, such that some organisations are less able to access online help or use digital budgeting tools.

> *"I was struck by how few people had been introduced to digital money management tools like mobile banking apps, budgeting apps, spending diaries and all those sorts of things that you can get on your phone."*

In addition, understanding of the distinction between advice and guidance was raised, as many were worried about the blurring of the distinction – *'people stray without realising they're crossing the line'.*

Some worry that the financial capability community's lack of professional status means that there is a gap in terms of professionalising standards, with many practitioners not reviewing and evaluating cases.

Figure 12: Which skills do you/ others in your organisation need further training in? – high divergence



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Sources of training and existing resources

A number of the organisations interviewed in-depth have produced their own training resources which they have disseminated nationally to both paid staff and volunteers; some of these are MAS accredited. Some of the organisations dealing with particular service user groups have developed specialist resources, e.g. pensions tool kits and materials targeting young people; they believe that personalising both content and delivery of resources (e.g. online, social media for young people) and engaging the audiences themselves in the creation of these materials, is key to their ultimate success.

Most organisations have been developing their resources over a number of years, with some creating them as part of a particular project or funding stream.

Most resources are available as e-learning modules (for both internal and external consumption); some are also available as written packs and workbooks; a few have more informal registers or guidelines of what staff need to talk to service users about. Several respondents stressed the importance of on-line availability, in a modular format in order to save time and money, but also so that resources are accessible for volunteer staff.

The view amongst those that have used them is that the CAB financial capability resources are particularly good; the fact that they are constantly updated and expanded is valuable, as is the availability of training which helps advisors to use and integrate the various materials to fit a service user's needs, rather than seeing them as individual silos. This reflects a wider view that resources need to move away from the classic written training courses for delivery to groups and more towards a more flexible integrated advice model tailored to the individual. Respondents are also using resources or taking information to build into their own resources from organisations as varied as local authorities, housing associations, ACCA, Pfeg and various adult learning frameworks.

However, one organisation pointed out that, 'now that the UK is fully in the austerity age', some resources are now disappearing; they also noted that whilst they had in the past used CAB resources online, these have now gone and they get re-directed to Gov.co.uk which are 'a little too dumbed down for practitioners'.

Other problems that respondents found with their resources included the they were 'too generalist' to help practitioners deal with the detail of individual cases; and that in their focus on practitioners' knowledge base, resources failed adequately to address their interpersonal skills which requires one-to-one, face-to-face training.

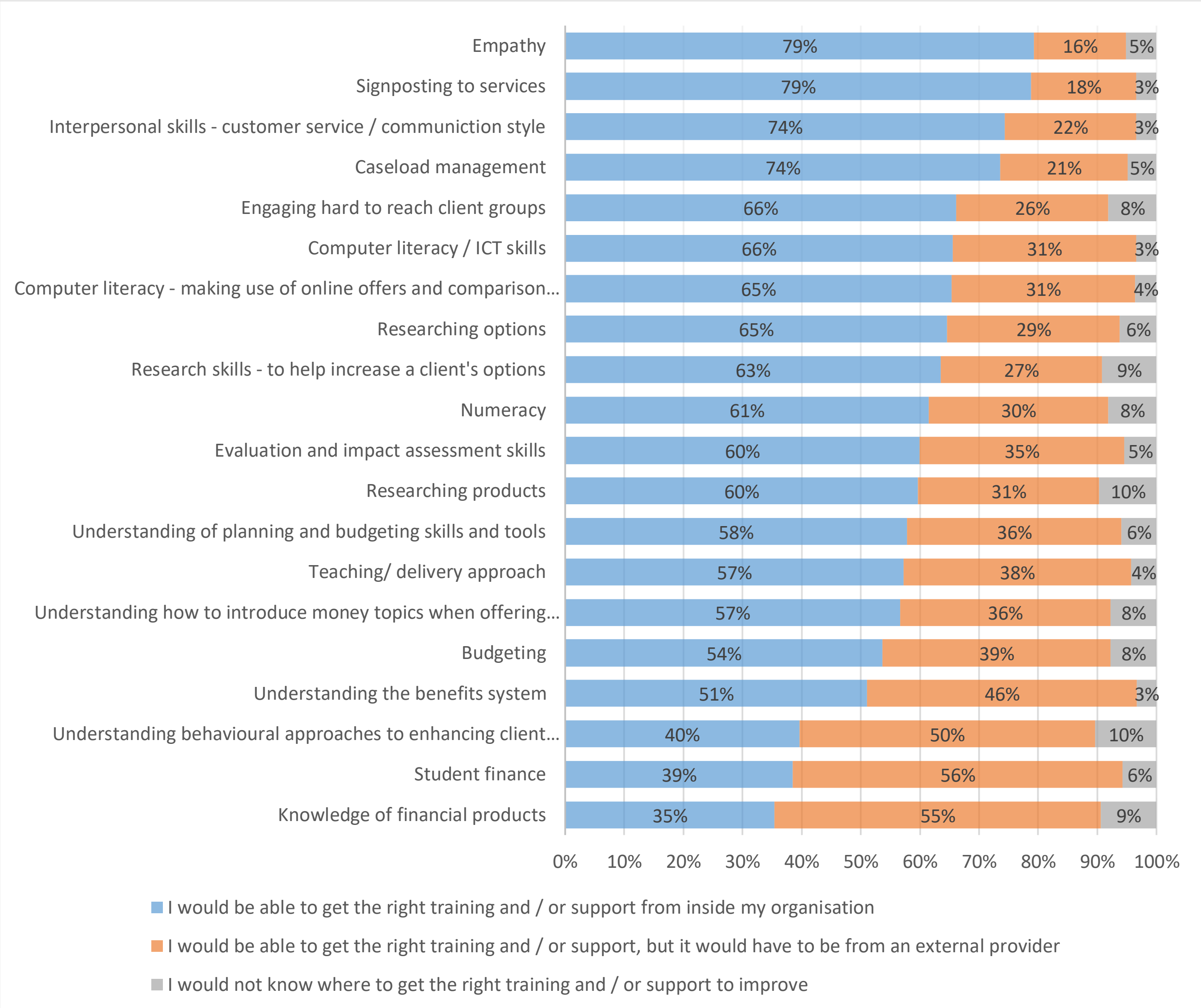
Some respondents would also like to see more emphasis on on-going support and training, in training events, short courses, a tutorial approach or through interactive web sessions, not just to keep practitioners' knowledge up-to-date, but to sustain their engagement and provide a forum for them to ask questions arising from their casework. One respondent was particularly keen that any web content should be as engaging and interactive as possible, to appeal to as broad a range of learning styles as possible.

Practitioners surveyed were asked where they would go for training on the skills they selected in the survey.

The most notable trend here is that the most commonly used skills are generally those that are also most likely to be supported by internal training resources. Across all the skills listed, three in five (60%) practitioners would source training internally, around a third (34%) would seek support from an external provider. Only a small proportion (6%) would not know where to go for training. It should be noted, however, that in some specific subject areas a great deal of training for practitioners would need to be sourced externally e.g. student finance (56%), knowledge of financial products (55%), and understanding behavioural approaches (50%).

While there was no clear difference between staff and managers when thinking about sources of training, accreditation did make a difference to how practitioners answered here, with those with accreditation typically being more likely to know where to access training.

Figure 13: Where would you get training to capabilities in these areas?



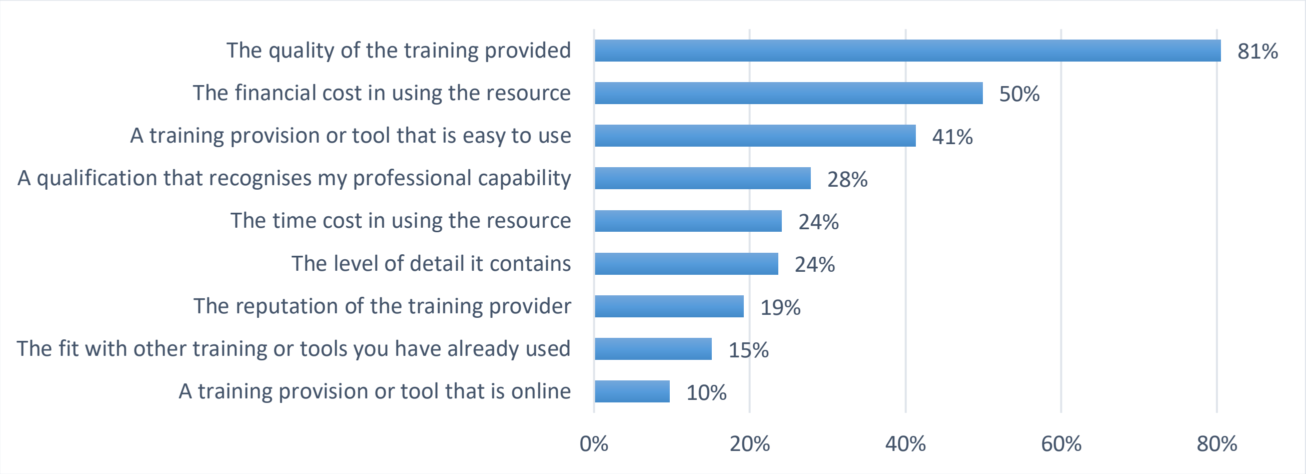
Base: Varied depending on the number of Respondents who selected a skill in preceding questions

Important factors when choosing training

Figure 14 shows the priorities organisations have when selecting a source of training. Quality is by far the key component for most practitioners (81%), followed by cost (50%). Least important was the availability of a tool that can be accessed online (10%).

There were some differences with respect to seniority of role. Service managers were more concerned with the fit of a provision with existing tools (23% compared with only 13% for paid practitioners) and the financial cost (62% compared with 46%). Volunteers were more concerned about the time cost of provision compared with all other paid staff.

Figure 14: Which are the most important to you when selecting training?



Base: 369

Accreditation also had an impact on training preferences. Accredited practitioners were more concerned with having a qualification that recognised professional capability (38% compared with 22% of unaccredited staff); they were less concerned with ease of use of a provision (35% compared with 45% for unaccredited staff).

Conclusions and recommendations

The following section provides a summary of the key findings and presents conclusions and recommendations based on the qualitative and quantitative findings reported. The chapter ends by outlining the next steps to progress the framework.

Summary of key findings messages agreed by the Consortium

Emerging findings from the in-depth and survey activities were presented to the consortium through the workshops and the various task and finish groups to identify key conclusions. Through this process a number of key findings emerged that that Consortium agreed should be relayed to all stakeholders, including MAS. These are:

- **No prevailing 'type' of or 'typical' financial capability organisation or practitioner:** Research findings support the view that the financial capability community is complex and diverse in terms of the organisations involved, the practitioners, the service users, and what support is being delivered.
- **The framework should be inclusive of all types of practitioners to enable all to benefit:** The research found the prevailing view amongst stakeholders to be that the contribution and potential impact of different practitioners (irrespective of frequency or type of support being deliver) are all recognised as important, particularly in terms of engagement and signposting.
- **Consistency of understanding of financial capability:** Practitioners are mostly united in their understanding of what they are trying to achieve and in their understanding of what financial capability support means - that the aim of the community is to help their organisation's service users with money matters. BUT uncertainty exists about how consistently different organisations and practitioners are approaching delivering this support and its quality.
- **Competency framework needs to be flexible, progression focused, and not burdensome:** research found that the preferred model of a framework would be something practitioners 'could dip in and out of' to support consistency of practice and support progression. BUT it should not be so detailed as to be burdensome/off-putting.
- **At least one of the key competency areas (interpersonal skills, subject specific knowledge, and technical skills) are used to some degree by most practitioners:** All of the key competencies that were explored in the survey of practitioners were used to some degree and those using them were doing so at different levels.
- **There are some key areas where additional training is required, but gaps vary depending on the section of the financial capability community:** Particular areas where skills gaps were identified included budgeting, introducing money topics with service users, interpersonal skills and empathy. Most organisations and practitioners felt they were delivering their particular elements of support well, but they had some concerns about how other organisations supported similar service users if it was not their specialty.
- **Additional training would be of benefit to practitioners to ensure consistency:** Low level of accreditation among respondents suggests that training has the potential to increase the capabilities of practitioners currently working in the community and increase consistency of practice.

Understanding the financial capability community

Both the qualitative and quantitative research findings support the view that the financial capability community is complex and diverse both in terms of the organisations involved, the practitioners, the service users, and what support is being delivered. The research shows that there is no prevailing 'type' of or 'typical' financial capability organisation or professional. Whilst some organisations and practitioners are recognised to have less frequent or consistent engagement on financial capability matters, their contribution and potential impact on service users are nevertheless still recognised as important, particularly in terms of engagement and signposting.

Organisations range in terms of their overall purpose and service users – from client focused, subject focused, location-focused and more generalist support. Within these organisations there is a varying combination of paid staff and volunteers. Perhaps the most important result is that accreditation (whether at an individual or organisational level) is both uncommon but important in determining the services organisation provide.

As such, the term 'sector' has been rejected by the consortium as not being a suitable description within financial capability, and replaced by the term 'community' with is a more inclusive and flexible term.

Despite the variety shown, approaches for certain aspects of service delivery appears to be broadly consistent (for example, identifying financial capability need, and demonstrating empathy to engender trust and engagement).. Therefore, is it possible that common competencies to deliver such activities can be identified.

It is apparent from the survey data that the financial capability community are mostly united in their understanding of what they are trying to achieve and in their understanding of what financial capability support means, specifically that the aim of the community is to help their organisation's service users with money matters. However, as shown in the survey and in-depth interviews there is a level of uncertainty amongst the community about how consistently different organisations and practitioners are approaching delivering this support and its quality.

It is this sense of uncertainty and a desire for more consistency that primarily drives the perceived need and support for the implementation of a PCF from stakeholders. It is felt by most that a PCF would provide a clear way for practitioners and their organisations to understand the competencies they need and benchmark their practice.

Recommendation: That design and development of a PCF be continued to meet a perceived gap in understanding and monitoring of service delivery quality and consistency.

Recommendation: That the proposed 'windscreen' of financial capability practitioners, designed and agreed by the consortium following consideration of the emerging research findings, is implemented alongside any PCF. This will enable the wide range of practitioners and practitioner organisations to clearly identify themselves as part of this community and therefore a potential user/beneficiary of the PCF. This tool could be used as a way to promote and engage practitioners more widely.

Preferences for a practitioner competency framework

In-depth interviews with key stakeholders showed mostly consistent ambitions for a PCF and what it might achieve. The main priority for this was that it needed to be suitably flexible and inclusive of the diverse financial capability community, whilst not becoming to diluted that is was not specifically financial capability focused. It was also stressed it was important it did not duplicate, but rather, complement other existing professional frameworks that practitioners may work within.

It was also recognised that a framework needs to clearly show development and progression opportunities for practitioners so it is aspirational for them, showing different levels of competency e.g. minimum, good practice, aspirational. This would also allow practitioners and their managers to benchmark and monitor their competencies.

Stakeholders acknowledged; however, that it was important a competency framework was not seen as so burdensome it would be off-putting to practitioners.

Balancing the various priorities whilst still meeting the needs of a diverse community is seen as a key challenge for the development of a PCF. The input from key stakeholders will be crucial to ensuring it is fit for purpose through ongoing development and refinement supported by extensive testing.

Recommendation: A modular and progression focused competency framework should be taken forward as the core values in a template for ongoing development. This should be appropriate for those with varying roles and levels of engagement in financial capability.

Recommendation: Continued careful consideration of the options developed by the consortium for a PCF structure (following consideration of the research's emerging findings) is required to ensure the PCF meets the needs of the maximum amount of potential users. This should also recognise the possibility that a PCF may not be a 100% fit for all and how this may be addressed when agreeing the approach and developing the content further.

Recommendation: Secure the engagement of the consortium in ongoing feedback on future iterations of the competency framework – potentially utilising a Delphi approach.

Key skills and competencies for the practitioner competency framework

Practitioners frequently use a combination of interpersonal skills, subject-specific knowledge, and technical skills in order to deliver support to their organisations' service users. Findings from the survey and in-depth interviews show that all these areas are important to varying degrees to different practitioners and to the client journey overall.

In addition, the research shows that those delivering different types of activities at different levels use these skills differently and at different levels.

As such a truly inclusive and flexible PCF would include coverage of all of these showing different levels of competency within each.

Recommendation: The modules included on the PCF should include coverage based on delivery skills and technical knowledge and skills. These should show the different activities these may apply to and the progressive levels of service a practitioner may offer.

Recommendation: That a proposed 'windscreen' of financial capability practitioners, designed and agreed by the consortium following consideration of the emerging research findings, is used alongside the PCF to support practitioners and practitioner organisations to clearly identify which elements of the PCF will be most appropriate for them.

Skills gaps and training needs

The research has found that both key stakeholders and practitioners believe that some of the core competencies needed for supporting service users with their financial capabilities may be lacking in the community of practitioners; particularly budgeting, introducing money topics with service users, interpersonal skills and empathy. Although there were training needs at all levels. The in-depth interviews clearly found that most organisations felt their practitioners were delivering their particular elements of support well, but they had some concerns about how other organisations supported similar service users if it was not their specialist area. This is somewhat supported by the survey of practitioners who consistently identified more skills gaps for wider colleagues than themselves.

Given that overall there was a low level of accreditation among respondents, training does appear to have the potential to increase the capabilities of practitioners currently working in the community and increase consistency of practice. Therefore, the inclusion of clear training routes on the PCF would be beneficial and several stakeholders saw this as a key benefit of developing a framework.

However, if this is the route that is to be proposed as part of the competency framework, it will be important to account for barriers that practitioners face in accessing training such as time and budget available for this.

Recommendation: Over time, explore the training and development options that can be linked to different activities and competencies in the PCF and how best practice may be developed to deliver this consistently either in-house or using external providers.

Accreditation and quality

As noted previously, only one in five practitioners have an accreditation related to the provision of financial or money support and the research has shown concerns amongst practitioners relating to quality of the services offered by the wider financial capability community.

For many key stakeholders, the establishment of a PCF, potentially supported by an associated quality mark, is an opportunity to increase the overall professionalization of the service, increase quality and consistency in practice, and improve support for service users. However, those more at the fringes of the community do express concerns at over-professionalising and formalising practice, believing it may be potentially off-putting, especially for volunteers.

Compromise between these two approaches will be needed to agree and implement a PCF that is embraced by the sector and is sustainable over time.

Recommendation: Explore the options presented by the consortium for future implementation strategies, developed following consideration of the emerging findings, and aim to reach a compromise on an approach that will be beneficial for as much of the community as possible. It is also recommended these are revisited over time to ensure the approach selected continues to be fit for purpose.

Core principles

Building on the evidence presented, and the Consortium's ongoing dialogue, the Consortium agreed upon core principles that should apply to any framework being developed. While the agreement of core principles falls short of agreeing a competency framework itself, it represents a significant progression given the range of often competing views including a lively debate on the tension between the desire for a professionalised and quality assurance service vs being flexible and inclusive so as not to put-off those less engaged in the community.

Through a process of evidence presentations, dialogue and reflections the following 8 core principles for the eventual framework and how it could be implemented were agreed by the Consortium:

1. We want the framework to provide practitioners with a sense of place, where practitioners have professional pride feel their skills are valued.
2. We want the framework to provide practitioners with opportunities for progression.
3. We want the framework to link to other relevant frameworks.
4. We want the framework to provide some minimum standards set to a level required to deliver a 'safe' service to clients.
5. The framework should be relevant to different client groups.
6. The framework should link to the MAS Outcomes Framework
7. At this stage the framework is a voluntary tool which organisations would opt into.
8. The framework should recognise that our understanding of what works in financial capability is developing.

Next Steps

This research conducted as part of Phase 1 one of the What Works Stream B programme provides a reliable evidence base about the financial capability community and practitioners, the practitioners strengths and areas for development, and the challenges in developing a cross sector competency framework. However, reflecting the range of services that make up the community, and the very different service user needs, achieving consensus on the on the detail of the framework remains a significant obstacle. For this reason, the Consortium has agreed to allow MAS to reassess the proposed framework outline in line with the core principles outlined above, with input from individual consortium members as required.

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