



Pulse Survey

August/September 2024

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1. Executive summary

The latest Pulse Survey of 1,000 Northern Ireland residents was conducted August/September 2024. Some of the key findings from this survey are detailed in this section of the report. For comparative purposes, corresponding figures from the June 2024, February 2024, and December 2023 surveys have been identified where notable.

Current financial position of household

- When compared to 12 months ago, 43% of respondents felt that their household was worse off, which was similar to the figure from June 2024 (44%) and February 2024 (46%), but lower than the figure from December 2023 (53%).
- Amongst those who felt that their household was worse off, the increase in the cost of food and groceries (86%), the general increase in the cost of living (85%) and an increase in energy bills (75%) were the factors most likely to have been considered the cause.
- Three in ten (30%) respondents believed that their household was better off when compared to 12 months ago, which was similar to the figure from June 2024 (28%), but higher than the figures from February 2024 (22%) and December 2023 (21%).

Expectations regarding financial position of household in 12 months' time

- Three in ten (30%) respondents felt that their household would be worse off in 12 months' time, which was similar to the figures from June 2024 (32%) and February 2024 (28%), but a little lower than the figure from December 2023 (36%).
- Nearly a third (32%) of respondents felt that their household would be better off in 12 months' time.

Coping with bills and paying for essentials

- Nearly three-quarters (74%) of respondents agreed that their household can keep up with bills and buy the essentials that they need every month, whilst 14% felt that this is not the case.
- Around two in five (36%) respondents stated that they have £150 or less remaining each month after their mortgage/rent and all essential bills have been paid, with 18% stating that they have less than £50.
- About two in five (37%) respondents stated that they do without if they do not have enough money to cover an unavoidable expense, whilst three in ten (30%) stated that they make cutbacks elsewhere in their budget.

Managing finances

- Four in five (80%) respondents agreed that they try to stick to a budget.
- Close to three in five (56%) respondents agreed that they have savings that they can fall back on or use for an unexpected expense. However, around three in ten (31%) disagreed that this is the case.
- About two in five (43%) respondents agreed that they find dealing with financial matters a burden.
- Nearly two in five (38%) respondents agreed that recently their mental health has been negatively affected by their financial position.

Concern about the prices of goods and services

- The vast majority of respondents (94%) were concerned about home energy prices. The number (43%) stating that they were 'very concerned' was similar to June 2024 (42%), but lower than the figures from February 2024 (48%) and December 2023 (49%).
- The vast majority of respondents (93%) were also concerned about food prices. The number (41%) stating that they were 'very concerned' was the same as in June 2024 (41%), but lower than the figures from February 2024 (47%) and December 2023 (47%).
- Around four in five (82%) respondents were concerned about petrol and diesel prices, with the number (27%) stating that they were 'very concerned' similar to June 2024 (28%), but lower than the figures from February 2024 (33%) and December 2023 (35%).
- Nearly two-thirds (64%) of respondents were concerned about product availability/selection in shops, whilst similar numbers were concerned about mortgage/rent costs (63%) and delivery options/charges for online products (61%).
- Almost three in five (55%) respondents were concerned about the cost of getting a loan/borrowing money.

Cut back on essentials

- About three in five (62%) respondents stated that they have had to cut back on spending on essentials after their mortgage/rent and any loan or overdraft payments have been made.

Behavioural changes to improve financial position

- Around two in five respondents stated that they had done the following to improve their financial position: reduced spend on food shopping (42%), cooked more at home rather than getting takeaways or eating out (42%), reduced home energy

use (38%), spent more time shopping around to find the best deals (38%), socialised less (37%).

Sources of information on budgeting or saving money

- Nearly two in five (37%) respondents stated that they go to websites for information about budgeting or saving money, making it the most likely source to be used.

Biggest consumer issue faced in the last three months

- Amongst those respondents that stated the biggest consumer issue that they faced in the last three months, the price of food/groceries (30%) was the most likely to have been mentioned, followed by the price of energy/fuel (23%), then the cost of living crisis (22%).

2. About the Consumer Council

The Consumer Council is the statutory consumer representative body for Northern Ireland, responsible for protecting, empowering and representing consumers, and promoting their interests.

We operate under our sponsor department, the Department for the Economy (DfE), on behalf of the Northern Ireland Executive.

- We are an insight-led evidence-based organisation:
- Providing consumers with expert advice and confidential guidance.
- Engaging with government, regulators and consumer bodies to influence public policy.
- Empowering consumers with the information and tools to build confidence and knowledge.
- Protecting consumers by investigating and resolving consumer complaints under statutory and non-statutory functions.
- Undertaking best practice research to identify and quantify emerging risks to consumers.
- Campaigning for market reform as an advocate for consumer choice, welfare and protection.

Our statutory powers cover consumer affairs, energy, transport, water and sewerage, postal services, and food affordability and accessibility.

These legal responsibilities are drawn from legislation, licences given to companies working in Northern Ireland, and cooperation agreements set in memorandums of understanding. The work we carry out also aligns with a number of the Articles in the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland¹ (NI Protocol).

Our non-statutory functions educate, empower and support consumers against discriminatory practices in any market through advocacy work, as well as education and outreach programmes covering a broad range of topics including promoting consumer rights, financial inclusion and a more sustainable energy future.

We serve Northern Ireland's 1.9 million citizens and champion consumers in everything we do. We prioritise those who are disabled or chronically sick, who are of pensionable age, who are on low incomes and who live in rural areas.

We have responsibilities under the Rural Needs Act 2016 and Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Our aim is to ensure government policies recognise consumer needs in rural areas and promote equality of opportunity and good relations across a range of equality categories.

¹ [Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland](#), House of Commons Library

3. About the Pulse Survey

The Pulse Survey is a quarterly research exercise designed to explore the following topics:

- household financial position when compared to 12 months ago
- expectations regarding household financial position in 12 months' time
- ability to keep up with bills and be able to buy household essentials each month
- amount left after the payment of mortgage/rent and all household essentials
- dealing with not having enough money to cover unavoidable expenses
- budgeting, savings and financial resilience
- impact of current financial position on mental health
- extent of concern about the prices of goods and services
- behavioural changes to improve financial position
- sources used for information about budgeting or saving money
- biggest consumer issue faced in the last three months

Each quarter, an online quantitative survey of 1,000 Northern Ireland residents is administered. Quota controls based on official population estimates are employed throughout survey fieldwork and corrective RIM weighting is applied during data analysis to ensure that the samples achieved are representative of the Northern Ireland population in terms of age, sex, socio-economic group and area. The questionnaire that is used for the surveys is detailed in the Appendix of this report.

The latest Pulse Survey was conducted in August/September 2024 by the research company Cognisense. This report contains detailed analysis of the main findings from this survey.

When reading this report, please note the following:

- Where differences by demographics have been referenced, these have been tested at the 95% confidence level.
- As a result of the rounding of figures or the use of questions for which multiple answers could have been given, the sums on charts may not always total 100%.
- Socio-economic group is a means of classifying respondents based on the employment status, occupation and working pattern (full-time/part-time) of the head of household. There are six socio-economic grades: A, B, C1, C2, D and E. For analysis purposes, these grades have been combined into the following groups: 'ABC1' (more affluent consumers) and 'C2DE' (less affluent consumers).

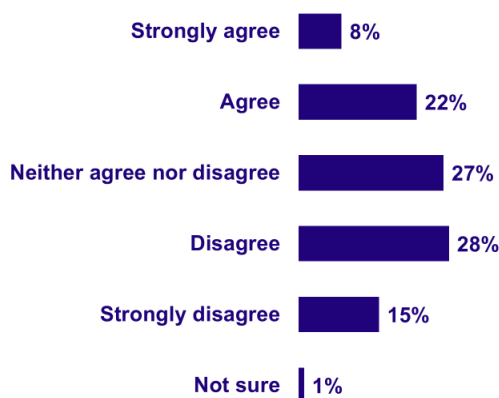
4. Main findings

This section of the report provides detailed analysis regarding the main findings from the August/September 2024 Pulse Survey.

4.1 Financial position of household compared to 12 months ago

Three in ten (30%) respondents agreed that their household was in a better position when compared to 12 months ago, 43% disagreed that this was the case, whilst 27% neither agreed nor disagreed (Figure 1).

Figure 1



Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: As a household, our financial position is better than it was 12 months ago
Base: all respondents (n=1,000)

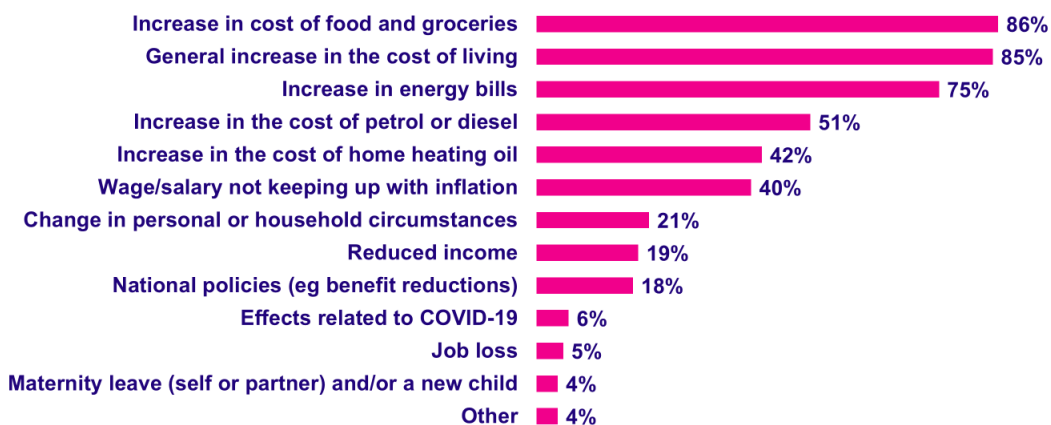
Disagreement with the statement 'as a household, our financial position is better than it was 12 months ago' was more likely amongst:

- Females (50%) when compared to males (35%).
- Those from a C2DE background (47%) when compared to those from the ABC1 socio-economic group (36%).
- Those with a disability (53%) when compared to those not disabled (39%).
- Those living in a household in receipt of benefits (48%) when compared to those living in a household not receiving them (39%).

4.2 Reasons household is worse off financially compared to 12 months ago

Amongst those who felt that their household was worse off financially compared to 12 months ago, the contributing factors most likely to have been cited were the increase in the cost of food and groceries (86%), the general increase in the cost of living (85%) and an increase in energy bills (75%) (Figure 2).

Figure 2

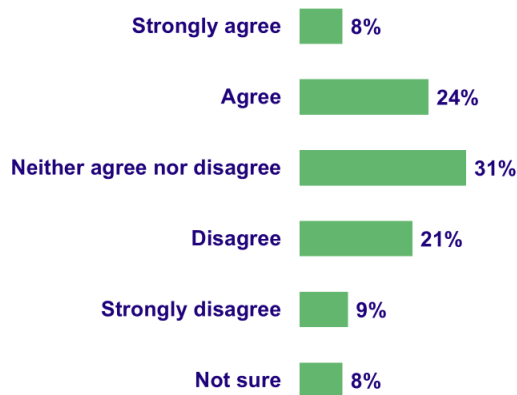


Q. Your response to the previous question indicates that you are worse off as a household compared to last year. What factors do you attribute this to?
Base: all respondents who disagreed/strongly disagreed that their household is in a better financial position than it was 12 months ago (n=412)

4.3 Expectations regarding household financial position in 12 months' time

Nearly a third (32%) of respondents agreed that their household would be in a better financial position in 12 months' time (Figure 3). Three in ten (30%) disagreed that this would be the case, a similar number (31%) neither agreed nor disagreed, whilst 8% were not sure.

Figure 3



Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: As a household, our financial position will be better in 12 months' time
Base: all respondents (n=1,000)

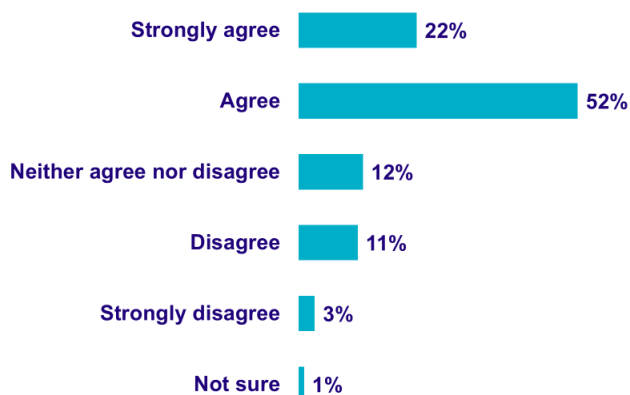
Disagreement with the statement 'as a household, our financial position will be better in 12 months' time' was more likely amongst:

- Females (33%) when compared to males (25%).
- Those with a disability (43%) when compared to those not disabled (25%).

4.4 Keeping up with bills and being able to buy household essentials

Almost three-quarters (74%) of respondents agreed that their household can keep up with bills and buy the essentials they need every month, 14% disagreed that this is the case, whilst 12% neither agreed nor disagreed (Figure 4).

Figure 4



Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: As a household, we can keep up with bills and buy the essentials we need every month
Base: all respondents (n=1,000)

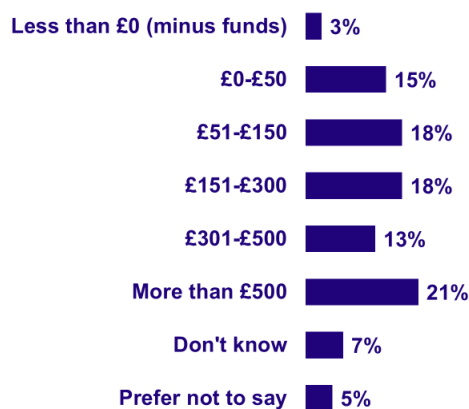
Disagreement with the statement 'as a household, we can keep up with bills and buy the essentials we need every month' was more likely amongst:

- Females (17%) when compared to males (10%).
- Those from a C2DE background (20%) when compared to those from the ABC1 socio-economic group (6%).
- Those with a disability (22%) when compared to those not disabled (10%).
- Those living in a household in receipt of benefits (24%) when compared to those living in a household not receiving them (7%).

4.5 Amount left each month after essential bills have been paid

Close to a fifth (18%) of respondents stated that they have £50 or less remaining each month after their mortgage/rent and all essential bills are paid, the same number stated that they have £51-£150 (18%) or £151-£300 (18%) left over, whilst around a third (34%) stated that they have over £301 remaining (Figure 5). Around one in eight (12%) either did not know or preferred not to say.

Figure 5



Q. In a typical month, after you have paid your mortgage/rent and all essential bills, how much money do you have left as a household?
Base: all respondents (n=1,000)

The following groups were more likely to have stated that they have £50 or less remaining each month after their mortgage and all essential bills are paid:

- Females (22%) when compared to males (14%).
- Those from a C2DE background (25%) when compared to those from the ABC1 socio-economic group (10%).
- Those with a disability (28%) when compared to those not disabled (15%).
- Those living in a household in receipt of benefits (29%) when compared to those living in a household not receiving them (11%).

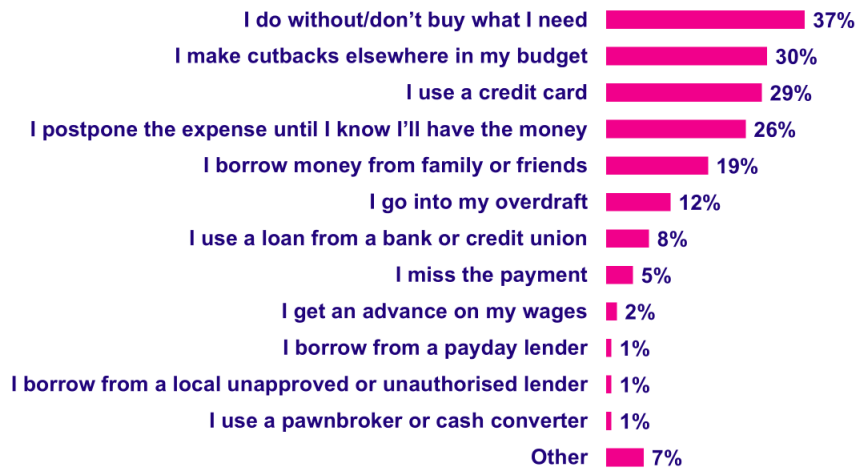
4.6 Dealing with not having enough money to cover unavoidable expenses

Nearly two in five (37%) respondents stated that they do without if they do not have enough money to cover an unavoidable expense, three in ten (30%) stated that they make cutbacks elsewhere in their budget, whilst a similar number (29%) said that they use a credit card (Figure 6). Around a quarter (26%) stated that they postpone the expense until they know they will have the money, 19% stated that they borrow money from family or friends, whilst 12% stated that they go into their overdraft.

Respondents were less likely to have indicated that they do the following to cover an unavoidable expense if they do not have the money: use a loan from a bank or credit union (8%); get an advance on their wages (2%); borrow from a payday lender (1%); borrow from a local unapproved or unauthorised lender (1%); use a pawnbroker or cash converter (1%).

Around one in 20 (5%) respondents stated that if they do not have enough money to cover an unavoidable expense then they miss the payment.

Figure 6

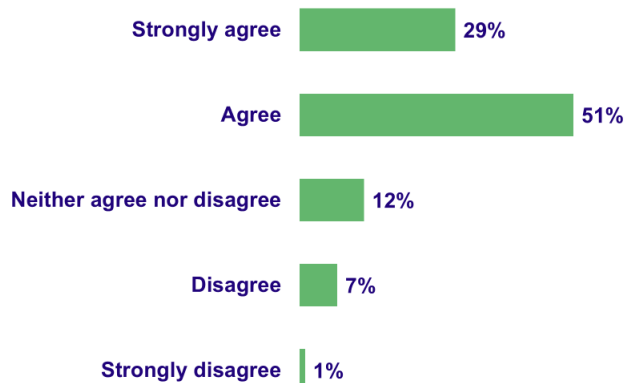


Q. If you don't have enough money to cover an unavoidable expense, how do you deal with this?
 Base: all respondents (n=1,000)

4.7 Sticking to a budget

Four in five (80%) respondents agreed that they try to stick to a budget, 8% disagreed that this is the case, whilst 12% neither agreed nor disagreed (Figure 7).

Figure 7

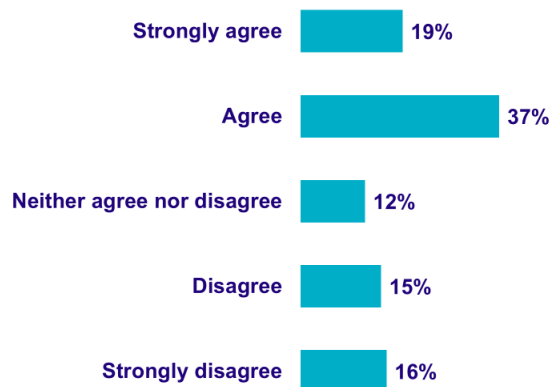


Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I try to stick to a budget
 Base: all respondents (n=1,000)

4.8 Savings to fall back on or to use for an unexpected expense

About three in five (56%) respondents agreed that they have savings they can fall back on or use for an unexpected expense, 31% disagreed that this is the case, whilst 12% neither agreed nor disagreed (Figure 8).

Figure 8



Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I have savings I can fall back on or use for an unexpected expense
Base: all respondents (n=1,000)

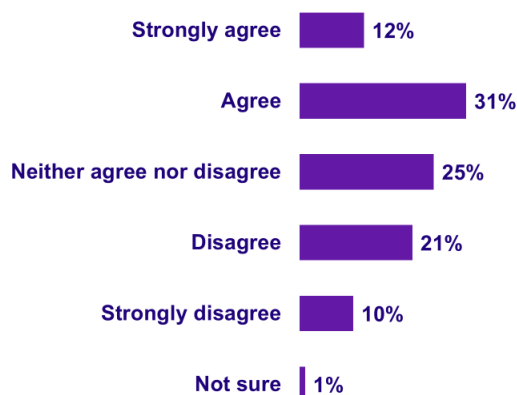
Disagreement with the statement 'I have savings I can fall back on or use for an unexpected expense' was more likely amongst:

- Females (37%) when compared to males (25%).
- Those from a C2DE background (38%) when compared to those from the ABC1 socio-economic group (22%).
- Those with a disability (47%) when compared to those not disabled (25%).
- Those living in a household in receipt of benefits (49%) when compared to those living in a household not receiving them (20%).

4.9 Impact of dealing with financial matters

Around two in five (43%) respondents agreed that they find dealing with financial matters a burden, 31% disagreed that this is the case, whilst 25% neither agreed nor disagreed (Figure 9).

Figure 9



Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I find dealing with financial matters a burden
Base: all respondents (n=1,000)

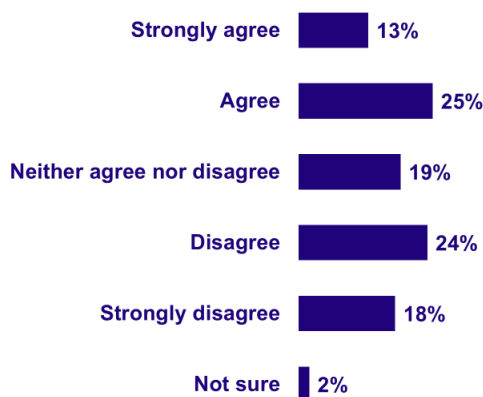
Agreement with the statement 'I find dealing with financial matters a burden' was more likely amongst:

- Females (51%) when compared to males (35%).
- Those from a C2DE background (46%) when compared to those from the ABC1 socio-economic group (39%).
- Those with a disability (58%) when compared to those not disabled (38%).
- Those living in a household in receipt of benefits (53%) when compared to those living in a household not receiving them (36%).

4.10 Financial situation affecting mental health

Almost two in five (38%) respondents agreed that recently their mental health has been negatively affected by their financial situation, whereas a similar number (42%) disagreed that this is the case (Figure 10). Around a fifth (19%) neither agreed nor disagreed that recently their mental health has been negatively affected by their financial situation, whilst a small number (2%) were not sure.

Figure 10



Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Recently my mental health has been negatively affected by my financial situation
Base: all respondents (n=1,000)

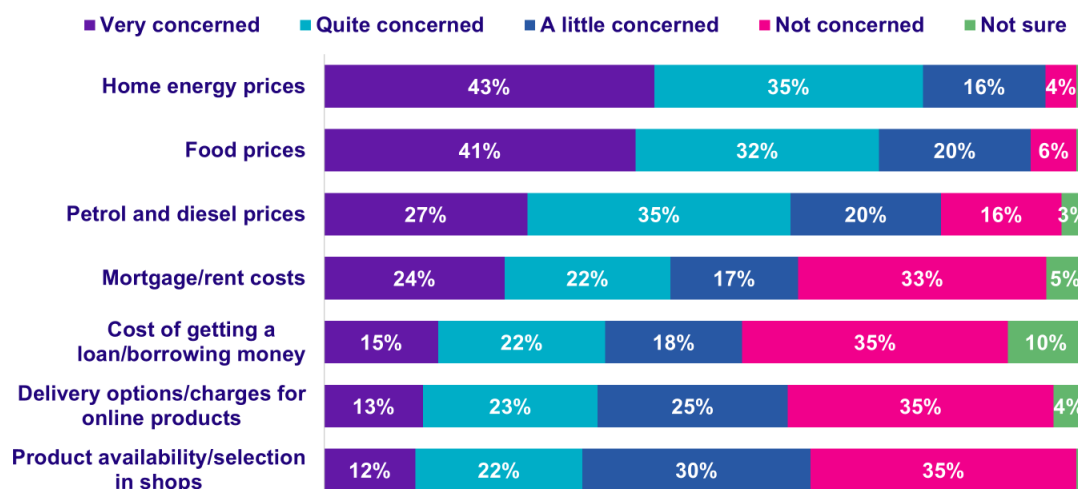
Agreement with the statement 'recently my mental health has been negatively affected by my financial situation' was more likely amongst:

- Females (44%) when compared to males (31%).
- Those aged 25-49 (59%) when compared to those in other age groups.
- Those from a C2DE background (42%) when compared to those from the ABC1 socio-economic group (32%).
- Those with a disability (55%) when compared to those not disabled (31%).
- Those living in a household in receipt of benefits (48%) when compared to those living in a household not receiving them (30%).

4.11 Concern about the prices of goods and services

Home energy prices (94%) were a concern for the overwhelming majority of respondents, as were food prices (93%) (Figure 11). Around four in five (82%) were concerned about petrol and diesel prices, 64% about product availability/selection in shops, 63% about mortgage/rent costs, 61% about delivery options/charges for online products, whilst 55% were concerned about the cost of getting a loan/borrowing money.

Figure 11

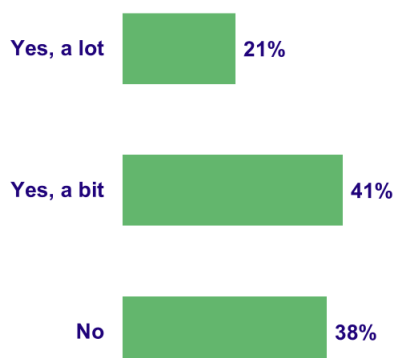


Q. Please rate your level of concern with the following ...
 Base: all respondents (n=1,000)
 Note: each chart segment without a data label =1%

4.12 Cut back on spending after mortgage/rent and loan/overdraft payments

About three in five (62%) respondents stated that recently they have had to cut back spending on essentials after mortgage/rent and any loan or overdraft payments have been made, whereas this was not the case for the remainder (38%) of respondents (Figure 12).

Figure 12



Q. Recently, after paying your mortgage/rent and any loan or overdraft payments, have you had to cut back on spending on other essentials (such as food, utilities, fuel)?
 Base: all respondents (n=1,000)

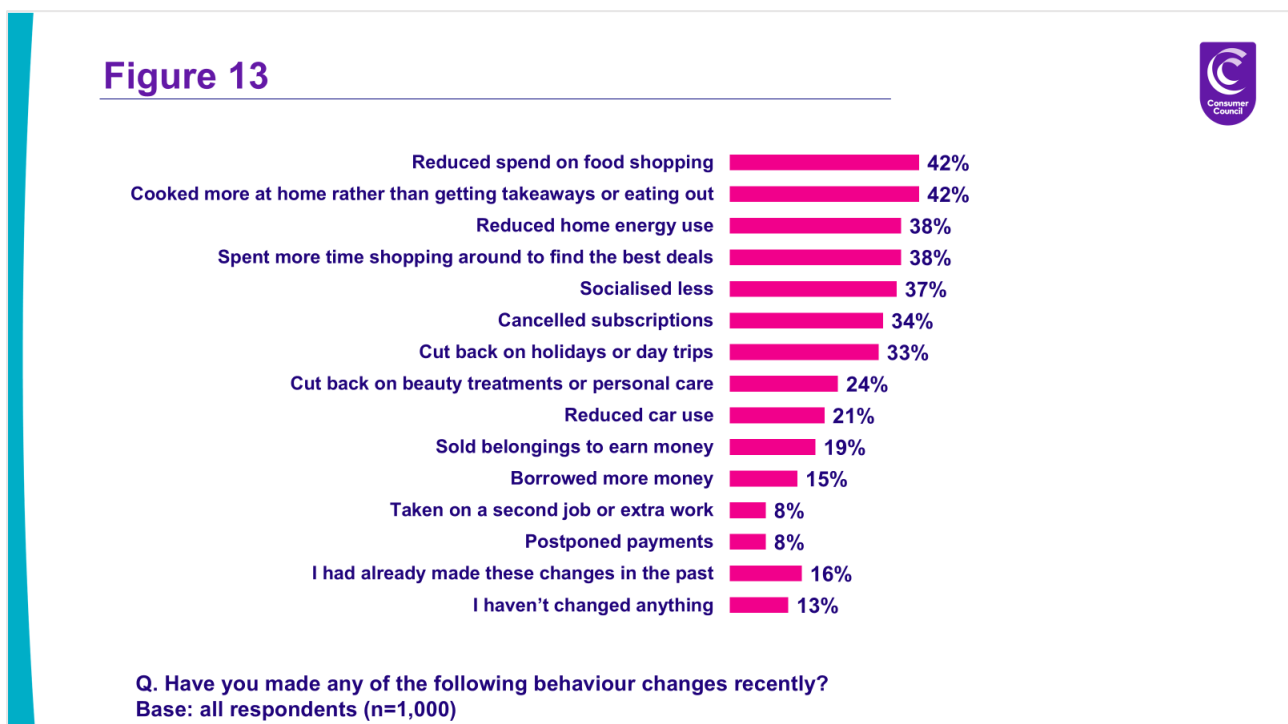
The likelihood of stating that recently they have had to cut back spending on essentials after paying their mortgage/rent and any loan or overdraft payments was higher amongst:

- Females (69%) when compared to males (54%).
- Those from a C2DE background (66%) when compared to those from the ABC1 socio-economic group (55%).
- Those with a disability (79%) when compared to those not disabled (56%).
- Those living in a household in receipt of benefits (73%) when compared to those living in a household not receiving them (53%).

4.13 Behavioural changes

Regarding behavioural changes to improve their financial position, around two in five stated that they had done the following: reduced spend on food shopping (42%), cooked more at home rather than getting takeaways or eating out (42%), reduced home energy use (38%), spent more time shopping around to find the best deals (38%), socialised less (37%) (Figure 13).

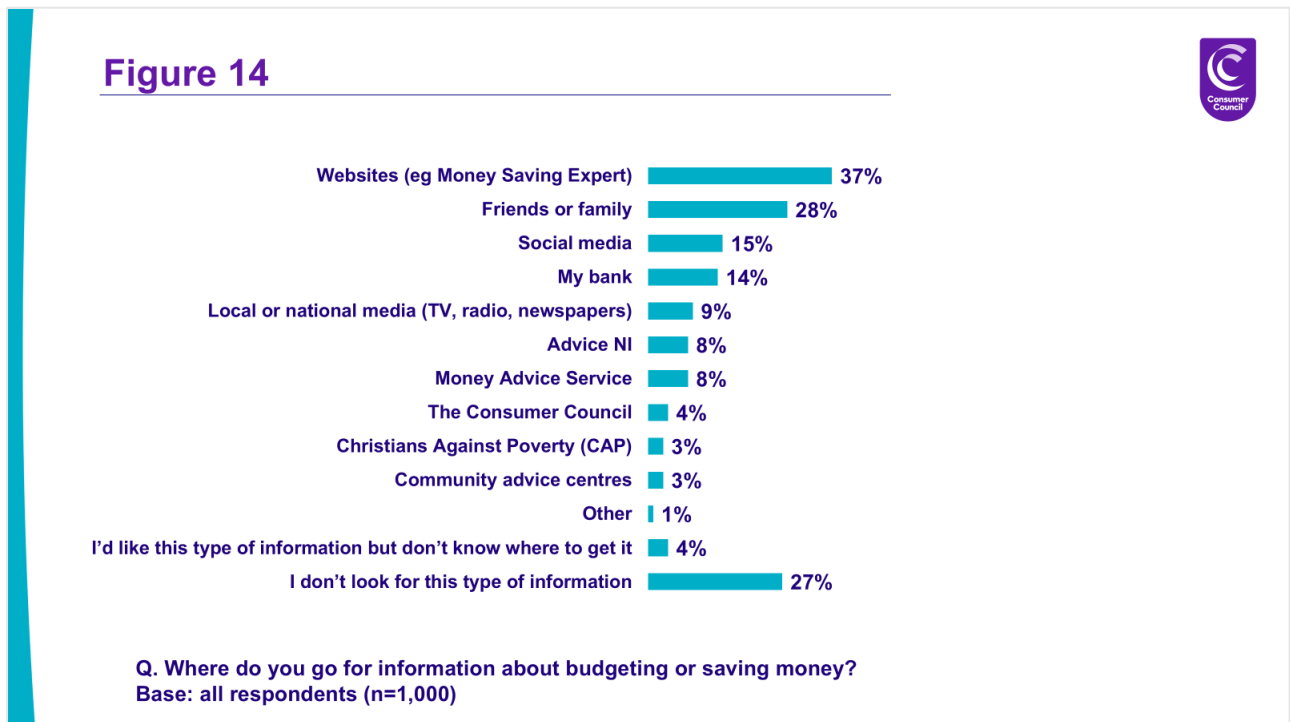
About a third (34%) of respondents stated that they had cancelled subscriptions and/or cut back on holidays or day trips (33%), whilst 24% stated that they had cut back on beauty treatments or personal care. About a fifth (21%) stated that they had reduced their car usage, 19% stated that they had sold belongings to earn money, 15% stated that they had borrowed more money, 8% stated that they had taken on a second job or extra work, whilst the same number (8%) stated that they had postponed payments.



4.14 Sources of information about budgeting or saving money

Nearly two in five (37%) respondents stated that they go to websites for information about budgeting or saving money, 28% stated that they go to friends or family, 15% stated that they use social media, whilst 14% stated that they go to their bank (Figure 14). Fewer respondents stated that they use the following sources: local or national media (9%), Advice NI (8%), Money Advice Service (8%), the Consumer Council (4%), Christians Against Poverty (CAP) (3%), community advice centres (3%).

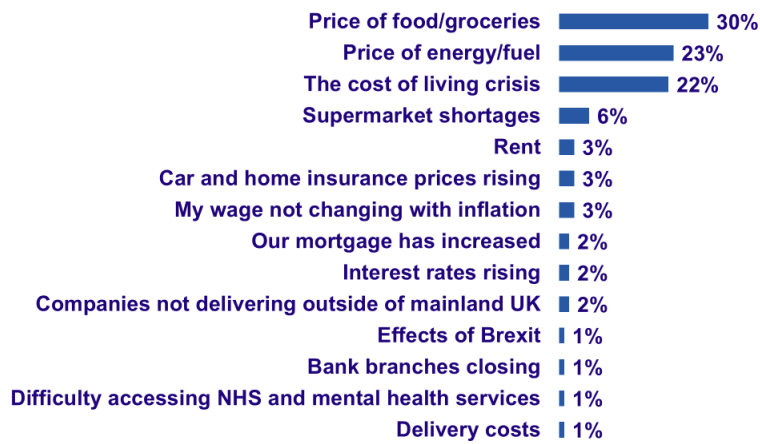
A small number (4%) of respondents stated that they would like information about budgeting or saving money but do not know where to get it, whereas 27% stated that they do not look for this type of information.



4.15 Biggest consumer issue faced in the last three months

Amongst those respondents that stated the biggest consumer issue that they faced in the last three months, the price of food/groceries (30%) was the most likely to have been mentioned, followed by the price of energy/fuel (23%), then the cost of living crisis (22%) (Figure 15).

Figure 15



Q. As a consumer living in Northern Ireland, what has been your biggest consumer issue in the last 3 months?

Base: all respondents who cited a consumer issue that they have faced in the last three months (n=888)

5. Conclusions

The findings from the latest Pulse Survey indicate that the economic environment continues to be an issue for a significant number of respondents, with 43% feeling that their household was worse off compared to 12 months ago, 62% having had to cut back spending on essentials after their mortgage/rent and any loan or overdraft payments were made, and 38% agreeing that their mental health has suffered because of their financial position.

It remains the case that substantial numbers of respondents do not have savings to fall back on for an unexpected expense (31%), have less than £50 remaining each month after they have paid their essential bills (18%), and have to do without if they do not have enough money to cover an unavoidable expense (37%).

The price of food/groceries, the price of energy/fuel and the cost of living crisis were most likely to have been considered the biggest issues faced by consumers in the last three months.

Appendix - Pulse Survey questionnaire

Q1a. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: As a household, our financial position is better than it was twelve months ago.

Q1b. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: As a household, our financial position will be better in twelve months' time.

Q1c. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: As a household, we can keep up with bills and buy the essentials we need every month.

[The response options for Q1a, Q1b and Q1c were as follows: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree, not sure.]

[If the response to Q1a was disagree or strongly disagree, respondents were asked Q2.]

Q2. Your response to the previous question indicates that you are worse off as a household compared to last year. What factors do you attribute this to?

Please select all that apply from the following options:

- Increase in energy bills
- Increase in the cost of home heating oil
- Increase in cost of food and groceries
- Increase in the cost of petrol or diesel
- General increase in the cost of living
- Wage/salary not keeping up with inflation
- Change in personal or household circumstances
- Effects related to COVID-19
- Job loss
- Reduced income
- National policies, such as benefit reductions, changes to tax/national insurance
- Maternity leave (self or partner) and/or a new child
- Don't know
- Other (please specify)

Q3. In a typical month, after you have paid your mortgage/rent and all essential bills, how much money do you have left as a household?

Please select from the following options:

- Less than £0 (minus funds)
- £0-£50
- £51-£150
- £151-£300
- £301-£500
- More than £500
- Don't know
- Prefer not to say

Q4. If you don't have enough money to cover an unavoidable expense, how do you deal with this?

Please select all that apply from the following options:

- I miss the payment
- I do without/don't buy what I need
- I postpone the expense until I know I'll have the money
- I borrow money from family or friends
- I make cutbacks elsewhere in my budget
- I get an advance on my wages
- I go into my overdraft
- I borrow from a payday lender
- I use a credit card
- I use a loan from a bank or credit union
- I borrow from a local unapproved or unauthorised lender
- I use a pawnbroker or cash converter
- Other (please specify)

Q5a. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I try to stick to a budget.

Q5b. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I have savings I can fall back on or use for an unexpected expense.

Q5c. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I find dealing with financial matters a burden.

Q5d. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Recently my mental health has been negatively affected by my financial situation.

[The response options for Q5a, Q5b, Q5c and Q5d were as follows: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree, not sure.]

Q6. Please rate your level of concern about the following:

- Petrol and diesel prices
- Food prices
- Home energy prices
- Mortgage/rent costs
- Delivery options/charges for online products
- Product availability/selection in shops
- Cost of getting a loan/borrowing money

[The response options for Q6 were as follows: very concerned, quite concerned, a little concerned, not concerned, not sure.]

Q7. Recently after paying your mortgage/rent and any loan or overdraft payments, have you had to cut back on spending on other essentials (such as food, utilities, fuel)?

Please select from the following options:

- Yes, a lot
- Yes, a bit
- No

Q8. Have you made any of the following behaviour changes recently?

Please select all that apply from the following options:

- Reduced home energy use
- Reduced car use
- Cancelled subscriptions
- Reduced spend on food shopping (either by buying less or switching to cheaper options)
- Taken on a second job or extra work
- Borrowed more money (via credit cards or a loan from friends or family, for example)
- Postponed payments (on a mortgage, rent, loans or overdraft, for example)
- Sold belongings to earn money (via websites, social media or car boot sales, for example)
- Socialised less
- Cut back on holidays or day trips
- Cooked more at home rather than getting takeaways or eating out
- Spent more time shopping around to find the best deals
- Cut back on beauty treatments or personal care
- I had already made these changes in the past
- I haven't changed anything
- Other (please specify)

Q9. Where do you go for information about budgeting or saving money?

Please select all that apply from the following options:

- Friends or family
- Websites (such as Money Saving Expert)
- Social media
- Local or national media (TV, radio, newspapers)
- Christians Against Poverty (CAP)
- Community advice centres
- Advice NI
- The Consumer Council
- Money Advice Service
- My bank
- Other (please specify)
- I'd like this type of information but don't know where to get it
- I don't look for this type of information

Q10. As a consumer living in Northern Ireland, what has been your biggest consumer issue in the last 3 months?

[Respondents were provided with space in which to identify their biggest consumer issue.]

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