Department for Work & Pensions

Government Social Research

Lived Experiences of Adequacy in Retirement 2026

July 2026

DWP research report no. RP0908

A report of research carried out by YouGov on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions.

This document/publication is also available on our website at: https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-work-pensions/about/research#research-and-analysis-publications

If you would like to know more about DWP research, email socialresearch@dwp.gov.uk

First published July 2026.

ISBN 978-1-80786-021-9

Executive summary

Lived Experience of Adequacy in Retirement is a qualitative research project commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions to support the Pensions Commission and wider government thinking on adequacy. It comprises qualitative insights from 35 Oral History and Futures interviews with adults in Great Britain, including retirees and those approaching retirement. This report presents the key findings from the interviews:

Perceptions of adequacy:

- **Participants defined adequacy as the financial baseline for retirement**. Crucially, adequacy did not necessarily imply comfort. Many described living adequately whilst also feeling restricted or disappointed by their retirement experience so far. Equally, 'adequacy' was seen as a changeable state requiring ongoing management.
- **'Enough' for retirees was holistic, combining wellbeing, autonomy and small freedoms beyond adequacy.** This included having a buffer, affording treats and being able to help others**.**

What impacts feelings of adequacy:

- **Adequacy was not understood through just retirement income alone.** It reflects the combined effect of income, savings, housing/assets, life-course experiences and how these resources are accessed and preserved.
- **Savings played a central role in perceptions of adequacy.** Many saw not drawing on savings as a key marker of adequacy. Likewise, people were still saving during retirement and therefore not always decumulating as you might expect.
- **Early life experiences also play a decisive role in shaping financial resilience in retirement.** Participants' ability to plan and maintain stability later in life was strongly linked to early socialisation around money. Many - particularly from low and middle-income backgrounds - were raised with strict financial habits such as avoiding waste, repairing and reusing, and saving where possible. While these early norms fostered discipline, they could not always offset the long-term impact of early adversity or fragmented employment.

Adequacy differences by groups:

- **There are clear Gender Pension Gaps and impacts.** Due to the volatility of many women's career trajectories, with frequent job changes and low incomes, these career paths usually accumulated minimal pension savings. They were also more likely to be single and living alone, experiencing ill health, and relying on the State Pension and benefits as their primary retirement income sources.

- **Partnered retirees often experienced higher levels of adequacy and higher retirement savings.** This was especially the case for couples with multiple State Pensions and workplace pensions, and even more so for those with Defined Benefit pensions. Partnered retirees were thus more likely to view the State Pension as supplementary income.
- **Housing offers a potential future source of stability, and was frequently substituted for income security**. This allowed those who owned their homes outright to manage with relatively small pension incomes. Participants who owned their homes outright consistently described this as providing a foundation for stability. Downsizing was considered a potential future financial strategy tantamount to having savings, with some also benefitting from rental income from additional homes.

The journey into retirement:

- **Retirement is often not a planned transition, especially for low income groups.** Lower-income individuals often aimed to work for as long as possible to top up their retirement funds. Retirement was instead triggered by declining health, redundancy, caring responsibilities or structural work changes, reinforcing a pattern where retirement is experienced as something that happens to people rather than being actively planned.
- **Automatic Enrolment (AE) may have helped but came too late for this group.** The majority did not join a workplace pension or begin saving towards a pension until AE was made mandatory in 2012. This was especially the case amongst low-income participants, and those who had manual or fragmented careers.

The state of being retired:

- **People find the retirement landscape tricky to navigate and understand.** Some groups are more likely to make miscalculations and misunderstand policies, such as overestimating their retirement income, or not considering the impacts of inflation or tax on income. Many regretted not putting enough thought into their retirement, nor being encouraged to do so.
- **Whilst the State Pension did not play a central financial role for all retirees - an essential pillar for some and discretionary spending for others - it represented a point of security, stability and continuity.** Likewise, given the uneven journeys that many make into retirement, it marks a clear point where one actually feels ‘retired’ and becomes a pensioner.
- **There are concerns and fears for the future, shaped by the complex interaction between health, finances, housing, relationships and wider economic conditions.** These challenges caused concerns about how far savings will go. Participants also expressed concern about the next generation who are facing a more difficult and complex economic environment with the same limited education on financial planning, with a focus on managing short-term challenges due to the cost-of-living, rather than understanding and investing in their future.

Contents

Acknowledgements

This research was commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and was carried out by YouGov, in collaboration with oral historian Jen Kavanagh, who provided methodological expertise and guidance throughout the design and duration of this project.

The report was written by Lois Harmer (Research Manager), Jerry Latter (Director), Jack Mackintosh (Research Executive) and Mariana Owen (Associate Director) in YouGov's Qualitative team.

The authors would like to thank Ellen Bottomley, Matthew Lawless and Rachel Riggs for their support and input during the project.

The successful delivery of the Lived Experiences of Adequacy in Retirement research relied on the contributions from a wide range of qualitative researchers at YouGov. We thank Jack Mackintosh in particular, for his efforts scripting and identifying relevant participants, and Stefan Long and Aniqa Rahman for their role in inviting participants and anonymising and pseudonymising transcripts to maintain participants' privacy.

We would also like to thank Jen Kavanagh for her specialist oral history expertise, which shaped both the design and delivery of the qualitative approach used in this study.

Glossary

Annuity:

An annuity is a financial product, often from an insurance company, that converts a lump sum (like a pension pot) into a steady, guaranteed stream of payments, typically for retirement, providing regular income for life or a fixed term.

Automatic Enrolment:

A legal requirement that employers must automatically enrol eligible workers into a qualifying workplace pension scheme, provided certain criteria are met. Employers introduced automatic enrolment in stages from 2012.

Defined Benefit (DB):

A pension scheme where the benefits a member receives are set out in the scheme's rules and do not depend on how much is paid in or how investments perform. Benefits are typically based on a member's salary along with how long they have worked for the employer. These schemes are often called 'final salary' or 'salary-related' schemes. The employer guarantees the pension benefits.

Defined Contribution (DC):

A pension scheme where the amount of money in an individual's pension pot is determined by how much they have contributed, how well the investments chosen for the fund have performed over time and how the individual chooses to access their pension.

Digitally excluded:

Participants defined as 'digitally excluded' had low digital confidence, calculated based on answers to 6 statements around their confidence, behaviour and attitude towards completing tasks and using digital devices. Statements were answered using a 10-point scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree.' 'Digitally excluded' participants also had some/a combination of: no regular internet access and/or no access to a smartphone/tablet/laptop. Further details are in the technical report.

Financial confidence:

Participants' financial confidence was calculated based on their answers to 6 statements around their confidence, knowledge and ability to carry out a variety of financial management tasks. Further details are in the technical report.

High income:

A high retirement income was defined as £30,000+ per year. This is gross, personal income from all retirement income sources, including personal savings, workplace pensions and the State Pension.

Income drawdown:

Flexi-access income drawdown allows someone to invest their pension pot into one or more funds while keeping the ability to withdraw money when they choose. These withdrawals can be taken as an income, either regularly or on an ad-hoc basis. Providers offer a variety of drawdown funds with different investment aims, risk levels and charges.

Lump sum:

A lump sum is a one-off withdrawal taken from a person's pension pot. Under pension rules, individuals can usually take up to 25% of their pot tax-free, either as a single lump sum or across multiple lump-sum withdrawals. Taking a lump sum reduces the remaining value of the pension pot, which may then be used for income drawdown, an annuity, or left invested.

Low income:

A low retirement income was defined as £15,000 per year and under. This is gross, personal income from all retirement income sources, including personal savings, workplace pensions and the State Pension.

Medium income:

A medium retirement income was defined as between £15,000 and £30,000 per year. This is gross, personal income from all retirement income sources, including personal savings, workplace pensions and the State Pension.

Oral Histories and Futures:

A qualitative interview method rooted in the traditions of oral history, which seeks to elevate individuals' voices and document their everyday lived experiences. The approach explores participants' pasts, presents and imagined futures, examining how earlier life events and decisions shape current circumstances, and how their present experiences inform expectations for later life. The 'futures' element adds a forward-looking dimension, enabling researchers to understand not only what has happened, but also how participants anticipate and make sense of what may come next.

Pension engagement:

Levels of pension engagement were self-defined, calculated based on their answer to 'which of the following best describes you experience with pensions and retirement finances?' Participants had the option of 7 answers ranging from 'I have little understanding and rarely review my pension' to 'I have a high level of understanding and consider myself very engaged.' Further details are in the technical report.

Pre-retirement:

Those that are 'pre-retirement' are individuals aged 55 to 64 that plan to retire fully in up to the next 3 years.

Pensions Commission:

The Pensions Commission was launched by the UK government in July 2025 to examine the long-term sustainability and adequacy of the UK pension system.

State Pension Age (SPa):

The age at which an individual can claim their State Pension. The State Pension Age is, at the time of publication, set at 66. It is set to rise to 67 over the next 2 years (2026 to 2028).

Abbreviations

AE: Automatic Enrolment (into workplace pension)
DB: Defined Benefit (pension)
DC: Defined Contribution (pension)
PIP: Personal Independence Payment
SIPP: Self-Invested Personal Pension
SP: State Pension
SPa: State Pension Age

1 Introduction

This report presents new evidence on individual life courses and financial decisions leading up to retirement, as well as how those decisions shape people's lived experiences of adequacy in retirement in practice. The findings are based on analysis of 30 Oral Histories and Futures interviews among retirees (65- to 75-year-olds) and 5 Oral Histories and Futures interviews among pre-retirement individuals (55- to 64-year-olds) in Great Britain, conducted between January and March 2026.

1.1 Research aims

This Lived Experiences of Adequacy in Retirement research was commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to develop a deeper, qualitative understanding of how people experience income adequacy in retirement. Using an Oral Histories and Futures (OHF) approach, the study explores how individuals aged 65 to 75 make sense of their past work and financial histories, their present circumstances, and their expectations for later life. A small comparator sample of 5 interviews with pre-retired individuals aged 55 to 64 was recommended by YouGov to aid understanding in what pre-retirement decisions are happening now in the current economic climate, in comparison to participants that had already retired.

In the past few years, the wider social and economic context has shifted significantly, particularly in light of rising living costs, inflationary pressures and ongoing changes to the pensions landscape. This study provides rich, narrative-based evidence to help inform future policy thinking that moves specifically beyond pension saving behaviour and income adequacy to lived experiences of retirement during periods of economic instability.

This research had four main objectives:

- To understand how retirees experience and interpret income adequacy and 'enough' in their everyday lives, including what feels adequate, what feels precarious, and how this changes over time.
- To explore how past decisions, work histories and financial circumstances shape current experiences of retirement, and how participants reflect on those pathways.
- To examine expectations for the future, including anticipated changes in lifestyle, expenditure, health, care needs and financial security as people age.
- To provide evidence to support the Pensions Commission's review of pensions adequacy, including insights into how people navigate different sources of income and how they understand the State Pension within their overall financial situation.

1.2 Policy context and research questions

Ensuring that people can achieve an adequate income in retirement is a central and longstanding challenge for UK pensions policy. Although automatic enrolment has significantly expanded the number of people saving into workplace pensions, recent evidence indicates that many savers remain at risk of under saving and may be unable to achieve the standard of living that they expect in later life. The Pensions Policy Institute (2021) highlights that ‘there is no single, universally agreed definition of adequacy,’ emphasising that it encompasses not only financial sufficiency but also ‘the ability to live with security, dignity and choice in retirement.’

New analysis reinforces these concerns. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS, 2024) has shown that ‘many employees - particularly those with low earnings or incomplete careers - are on course to achieve retirement incomes below widely used adequacy thresholds,’ with earlier research revealing large inequalities in retirement resources and elevated risks of inadequacy among single renters and those with disrupted work histories. These findings illustrate that adequacy is shaped not just by income, but by the interplay of work patterns, housing security, caring responsibilities and health. For example, common financial models often assess adequacy using income-based measures such as replacement rates or minimum income thresholds, which assume relatively stable housing costs and health needs. These approaches can overlook how experiences like renting in later life, managing long-term health conditions or providing unpaid care significantly affect whether people feel financially secure in retirement in practice.

Qualitative research provides further insight into how people understand and prepare for retirement. The DWP’s Low Earners and Workplace Pension Saving (2024) study found from qualitative fieldwork conducted in 2022 to 2023 that many participants struggled to imagine or plan for their financial needs in later life, often perceiving retirement as ‘too distant or uncertain’ to prepare for. People’s sense of adequacy was shaped by personal and relational factors - including family support, health and housing stability - that extend far beyond pension balances.

Alongside these personal experiences, retirees today are navigating a pensions landscape that continues to evolve. Policies relating to the State Pension age (SPa), the shift from Defined Benefit (DB) to Defined Contribution (DC) schemes, and increased flexibility in how pension pots can be accessed all shape people’s planning and expectations across the life course.

This research responds to these challenges by using an OHF approach to examine how retirees aged 65 to 75 and the pre-retired aged 55 to 64 understand adequacy through their past experiences, present circumstances and expectations for the future. Rather than assessing adequacy against predefined financial thresholds, it focuses on how adequacy is felt in everyday life: how people interpret security and stability, manage trade-offs, and navigate change.

Through rich, narrative accounts, the research explores:

- How people navigate their current income, manage trade-offs and define ‘enough’

- how emotional, social and health-related factors influence their sense of adequacy
- the ways that life events, responsibilities and resources shaped financial stability
- how people encountered, understood and engaged with pensions across adulthood
- how individuals anticipate their future needs, risks and sources of support.

By centring lived experience, this study complements existing quantitative evidence – for example the Planning and Preparing for Later Life survey (DWP, 2024), DWP's Analysis of Future Pension Incomes 2025 and the IFS' 'Adequacy of future retirement incomes' 2024 report by providing a nuanced, life-course perspective on retirement adequacy. It highlights the importance of understanding how people navigate uncertainty, how expectations evolve as they age, and how different forms of security - financial, social, relational and health related - come together to shape what retirement feels like in practice.

1.3 Methodology

This research was conducted using an OHF qualitative approach to explore how people aged 65 to 75 understand and experience income adequacy in retirement. A total of 30 in-depth interviews were completed with retired participants across England, Scotland and Wales, alongside a small comparator group of 5 individuals aged 55-64 who were planning to retire in up to the next 3 years. Interviews took place between January and March 2026 and were 90-120 minutes long. Participants were offered the option to conduct the interview by telephone, Zoom or in-person. Most participants opted to take part via Zoom or telephone despite the option of face-to-face interviews.

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling.[1] The primary sampling priorities were achieving variation across income bands, years since retirement, age categories, gender, region and ethnicity. Within this framework, the sample also sought diversity across work history, housing tenure, disability, digital confidence and levels of pension engagement. The majority of participants were sourced from YouGov's UK research panel. Recruitment was then supplemented with an external recruitment agency to reach groups least well covered by this approach, such as digitally excluded participants.

Before mainstage fieldwork, 10 cognitive interviews and 8 pilot interviews were conducted to refine the topic guide, creative pre-tasks and interview flow. The 8 pilot interviews form part of the final sample of 35 interviews included in the findings. In addition, some participants who initially took part in cognitive interviews were subsequently invited to complete a full interview and are also included in the final sample. However, analysis has been conducted solely on final OHF interview data, and not data from the cognitive interviews.

[1] Purposive sampling is a technique used by researchers where they intentionally select participants based on specific characteristics, knowledge or experience relevant to the study's objectives. In this instance it was in accordance with the sampling priorities mentioned.

Ahead of the final interviews, participants were invited to complete any of up to 5 optional creative pre-tasks - from biographical mapping (charting key events in their lives and hopes for the future),photo selection, word association exercises with ‘enough’, postcards to their future selves, and a newsletter reflecting on their key life events aged 90. These were used as prompts during the interview. The final interview structure then combined life-history interviewing with responses from the creative tasks.

Analysis followed a thematic approach, integrating transcripts, creative materials and researcher field notes. Coding was conducted by multiple researchers, with cross-checking and peer review to ensure consistency and rigour. Emerging themes were compared across subgroups, including income level, retirement stage and digital confidence.

Further detail on tools, recruitment processes and analysis can be found in the accompanying Technical Report.

1.4 This report

1.5 Outline of the report

The report takes a life-course perspective but begins with participants’ present-day experiences of retirement, reflecting the focus on how adequacy is currently lived and managed. It then explores how these experiences were shaped by earlier life events and retirement pathways, before considering expectations for the future.

- **Present-day experiences of retirement:** Examines current financial adequacy, day-to-day spending, definitions of ‘enough’, and the role of health, housing and unexpected shocks, with variation by income, retirement stage and digital access.
- **Influences from the past: life histories and foundations of adequacy:** Explores how early life and adulthood experiences shaped financial positions entering retirement, including work histories, savings, caring roles, and housing pathways.
- **The journey into retirement:** Looks at how participants transitioned into retirement, including levels of preparation, understanding of pensions, and factors influencing timing.
- **Futures: expectations, hopes and concerns:** Considers expectations for later life, including anticipated needs, financial security, health and the role of family support.
- **Conclusions:** The conclusions summarise the key insights from the research, drawing together how life-course experiences, preparation and circumstance shape retirement outcomes and perceptions of adequacy.

Lastly, this report also includes case studies capturing lived accounts of retirement adequacy that are integrated through the report to illustrate how different life-course factors shape retirement adequacy in practice.

1.6 Caveats and limitations

As with all qualitative research, the findings presented in this report reflect the experiences, perceptions and circumstances of the individuals who took part. The aim of the study is to provide depth, nuance and contextual understanding rather than statistical representativeness. While the sample includes a diverse range of participants, the findings should not be generalised. The report draws on themes across 35 interviews. Although we highlight patterns across subgroups, such characteristics are often interconnected. The findings should be interpreted as reflecting the cumulative nature of life-course influences, rather than the impact of any single factor.

The analysis relies on participants' self-reported accounts of their finances, work histories, health and family circumstances. These accounts provide insight into lived experience but may be affected by recall issues or interpretation, particularly when discussing earlier life events or complex financial matters. The purpose of this study is not to validate facts but to understand how individuals remember and make meaning of their experiences. Equally, the life-course nature of the OHF approach means that findings capture the perspectives of individuals at one moment in time. People's sense of adequacy, wellbeing and future outlook may shift. The report therefore provides a snapshot of lived experience rather than a long-term account.

1.7 Reporting conventions

Use of terms

As this report is based on in-depth qualitative interviews, findings are presented in descriptive terms. Throughout the report, words such as *'a few'*, *'some'*, *'many'* and *'most'* are used. These terms should not be interpreted as precise measures, but as indicators of the relative frequency with which themes appeared. In this report:

- **'A few'** refers to views or experiences raised by only a small number of participants.
- **'Some'** refers to views or experiences raised by a noticeable subset of participants.
- **'Many'** is used where a theme recurred across a substantial proportion of interviews.
- **'Most'** indicates themes that were widely shared and commonly discussed across the sample.

Use of participant quotations

Direct quotations are included throughout the report to illustrate themes and ensure that participants' voices are reflected authentically. Quotes have been lightly edited for clarity where necessary – to add extra context or remove filler words - but meaning is preserved. All quotations are anonymised and formatted using a brief attribution that provides key demographic characteristics without identifying the participant. Attributions follow a consistent structure:

(Gender, years since retirement, income group)
Example:
(Female, retired around 2 years, low income)

Where relevant, additional descriptors such as digital access may be added if they are central to interpreting the quote. Definitions of ‘low income’, ‘medium income’ and ‘high income’ can be found in the glossary.

2 Present-day experiences of retirement

This chapter opens the report by exploring how people experience retirement currently, in practice. It focuses on accounts of daily life, financial management and wellbeing once paid work has ended, alongside the expectations of those approaching retirement. It examines how far expectations align with reality, what brings fulfilment or challenges, and how people understand and manage financial adequacy over time. The chapter also considers how people define ‘enough’ in day-to-day terms, how income levels stretch, and the role of savings and housing. It also explores experiences of the State Pension and other income sources, the impact of health, and how unexpected shocks can affect retirement adequacy and security. Throughout, it highlights differences by income, contrasts between pre-retired and retired participants, and the specific challenges faced by digitally excluded retirees.

Starting with present-day experiences anchors the report in lived reality. The subsequent chapters then step back to examine how earlier life experiences, work histories and retirement transitions shaped these outcomes, and how retirees’ current circumstances inform their expectations for the future.

2.1 Expectations vs. reality in retirement

Anticipating retirement

Participants’ expectations of retirement were often shaped long before they stopped working, reflecting their financial circumstances, health and family responsibilities in mid-life. The ‘gold standard’ for retirement was less about transformation or aspiration and more about continuity and modest expectations: maintaining familiar routines, a sense of independence, and the ability to live day-to-day life without pressure. When asked about what they wanted retirement to look like, responses tended to centre on broad, holistic ideas of ‘freedom’ from work demands and rigid schedules.

> “I just wanted to be able to continue to do what we do…[we have a] converted van, so we can go away in that for a long time. We do iron man triathlons, so we wanted to be able to continue to do that…we wanted to be able to make sure that the kids had a bit of a safety net should they need it…we needed to be able to run the house, make sure that any maintenance things that came up were going to be okay…”
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, medium income)

In sum, it was more about free time and staying healthy, than having any specific lifestyle goals. For many, this freedom was pragmatic and grounded in small pleasures, stability and peace of mind. Whilst some participants – particularly those on medium to high retirement incomes of £30,000+ per annum – had ambitions of travel, and financially supporting loved ones through life’s milestones (home ownership, children), this was out of reach for many retirees that we spoke to.

For many, active consideration of retirement began in their 40s or 50s. Looking back, however, participants commonly reflected that meaningful preparation should have started much earlier, often suggesting their late 20s or 30s as the point at which pension saving and longer-term planning would have been most effective, and where government intervention through information and advice would have been most valuable.

> “By now you think ‘you know what, things are going to get really tough, I need to get a bit more money behind me’, but in your 20s and 30s you think ‘well, I’ll go to the disco tonight. I’ll have a Chinese. I’ll go on holiday to Spain...’ Your mindset is totally different.”
>
> (Female, retired around 2 years ago, medium income)

Particularly for older participants that had been retired the longest (between 6-10 years) they referred to a dearth of information on SIPPs, in the absence of a workplace scheme, believing that digital resources have broadened access to retirement information and advice.

> “Back in those days, you couldn’t go to a computer and find out comparisons. You were dependent on identifying and contacting a company yourself to find out what was on offer.”
>
> (Male, retired 6 to10 years ago, medium income)

However, many also recognised with hindsight that they could have been more proactive in seeking out information. For them, a potential role for the government would be in nudging people to start considering their retirement in practical terms.

> “I didn't go and look for help, so I'm partly at a fault. I could have maybe got books out the library or talked to people…I had enough sense to go online and find out the State Pension amount, but it's not that much, you forget…but if the

> government sent out emails, you know, 'You're 10 years to retirement, do you want to consider X'… get them to get people to think about it."
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income)

Expectations about how retirement would be funded varied widely but were closely linked to people's sense of financial and personal stability in mid-life. Those who owned their homes outright or expected to do so before retirement described greater confidence in judging what they would need, as housing costs felt predictable. In contrast, people whose expenses were more uncertain - due to renting, fluctuating incomes, caring responsibilities or relationship changes - described it as much harder to estimate what 'enough' would look like, particularly against a backdrop of wider economic change. For some, this lack of clarity itself is distressing and can mark the run-up to retirement with anxiety:

> "I can remember a number of times when I had panic attacks that I wouldn't have enough money to live on, because it was such an unknown."
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income)

For others, expectations were formed much earlier. Participants whose working lives were disrupted by financial shocks such as redundancy, business failures, or long periods of financial instability and debt often described a point, sometimes decades before retirement, where they realised their later life would be constrained. This is where they effectively got to a metaphorical 'point of no return.'

> "From 2008 onwards, I guess we knew we couldn't do much, we knew we'd be leaving the pub if we gave it up with nothing. And clearing the debt was the biggest thing we could do. That meant we'd have nothing to put forward into any other pension. So, I guess we kind of knew from that moment on that life would be getting tougher. And there's not much you can do to prepare for that, you know?"
>
> (Male, retired around 2 years ago, low income)

This realism then hardened over time into acceptance that retirement would involve managing scarcity rather than enjoying abundance.

> "To retire comfortably, you need hundreds of thousands of pounds worth of assets. Either in terms of a pension, or in terms of a house that you could sell off, a second house that you could remortgage, or you need that amount, it's not in the tens of thousands, it's in the hundreds of thousands, in the half a million plus really, to comfortably retire nowadays. And I knew we'd have no chance of achieving anywhere near that."
>
> (Male, retired around 2 years ago, low income)

Financially, many participants reported that their expectations had not fully accounted for rising living costs, changes to taxation, or periods where investments and pensions did not perform as expected.

> "I used to get an annual summary from the insurance company [about his SIPP] which I didn't fully understand at the time. The predictions they give you

> include bonuses…those bonuses are nowhere near as high as they were predicting. You don’t know what it’s going to be until virtually the final day because whatever you’ve contributed then has to buy you an annuity. I think the whole process was a bit of a lottery.”
>
> (Male, retired 6 to10 years ago, medium income)
>
> “Things are a lot dearer than what they were so disposable income is not as much as I thought it was going to be. What savings I had have dwindled quite rapidly because of the additional expense.”
>
> (Female, retired around 2 years ago, medium income)

Much like the retirees we spoke to, pre-retired participants wanted their retirement to be a continuation of stability, with increased freedom and reduced pressure. Many imagined retirement as quieter and slower, but including things like hobbies and travel. Pre-retired participants’ expectations were tempered somewhat by economic flux in recent years, and so they did not expect retirement to be indulgent, but emphasised the importance of being able to pay bills without worry, and cope with unforeseen events. Health and mobility were central to these visions.

> [Expectations for retirement] “To be fit, to be healthy, and to enjoy it.”
>
> (Male, pre-retired, high income)

Whilst pre-retired participants demonstrated slightly more optimism than retirees, they also demonstrated high awareness and worry about the wider economic context. Rising energy prices, inflation and interest rate volatility featured frequently in accounts of retirement readiness. Participants had modelled the impact of increases on future budgets such as heating and food, even in instances where finances were currently comfortable – as rises in recent years meant it was seen as a point of flux.

> “Prices have gone up we’ve started noticing. You know, the gas bill is twice the price it was…but I’m very conscious of the inflation rate and seeing what’s happened to my father-in-law as well. He’s been retired quite some time and seeing the depreciation in his pension…I am very conscious of that.”
>
> (Female, pre-retired, low income)
>
> “[Energy] definitely costs the most money, and if it’s going to change [as I retire] it’s just going to get worse.”
>
> (Female, pre-retired, low income)

Outside of macroeconomic changes, political and world events and possible market crashes were a great point of uncertainty. Participants did not feel there would be stability ahead, which they feel impacts their retirement requirements.

> “I was probably happy, I'd have no worries up to about 2 years ago. And then things changed politically in this country and I can now see it being more of a pinch. Whether it would impact on me a great deal, I don't think I will see that. Because I've enough savings to mitigate that but I can see that going down faster than I'd expected.”

> (Male, pre-retired, high income)

Similarly to retirees, there was a sense amongst those pre-retired that changes to the SPa impeded planning for some. In the specific example below, a pre-retired participant referred to previous changes in the State Pension age affecting her planning – because her financial planning and intention to retire had been set for decades.

> "I was probably in my 40s when the government changed the rules, late 30s to 40s. So, we were, you know, quite a way into our financial trajectory when they moved the goalposts. I'm lucky that my pension, my works pension still kicks in at 60."
>
> (Female, pre-retired, low income)

Overall, for most retirement meant continuing much the same lifestyle as before - for better or worse - with standards of living broadly maintained rather than improved. Where retirement felt materially worse, this was most evident among participants on lower incomes, particularly those who were renting, supporting dependents, or managing ongoing caring responsibilities.

The reality of retirement

For many retired participants, daily life in retirement was described as quieter and more constrained than expected. While some welcomed the slower pace and freedom from work pressures, others found that retirement narrowed rather than expanded their world. Caring responsibilities - for partners with long-term illness, ageing parents, or grandchildren - were particularly influential, often replacing paid work with new forms of labour that had not been anticipated.

> "Looking after my mum is a big resource and I don't regret having to do that but it's encompassing more of what I thought I was going to do. And finances hasn't helped as well because obviously that stops you from doing a lot of things."
>
> (Female, retired around 2 years ago, medium income)

In these cases, disappointment was not necessarily purely financial but emotional, grieving plans that did not happen, and a slow acceptance that retirement became something that had to be adapted to rather than enjoyed on its own terms. Examining differences across participants and their time since retirement, this adjustment from expectations to their lived reality can be a process that takes years.

> "I've come to terms with the life I have now, […]I just want a reasonable amount of health and mobility, and enough money just to pay the bills and have enough to eat. […] that's only been in the last 4 or 5 years that I've come to [understand] this is my lot…so just be happy with it."
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income)

Across interviews with low-medium income participants, heating, eating and essential bills such as Council Tax were consistently described as the most immediate and pressing financial challenges in retirement, acting as clear markers of whether income felt adequate in practice. Participants frequently framed their financial situation through the lens of these essentials, with rising energy and food costs forcing difficult trade-offs in everyday life. While this was most acute for those on lower incomes, concerns about heating and food costs were voiced across the income spectrum. Even participants who described their overall finances as stable or relatively comfortable talked about being highly conscious of these expenses, monitoring usage closely and adjusting behaviour in response to price rises. Many described limiting heating use, for example heating only one room, delaying turning it on, or going without unless absolutely necessary, and tightly controlling food spending through batch-cooking, buying reduced items, or cutting back on fresh or ‘treat’ foods.

> “Food is an absolute nightmare at the moment price-wise. Most of my pension goes on council tax, heating and food.”
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, medium income)
>
> “I only heat my living room. What I'll do is when I'm going up for a bath... I'll put it on for an hour in the bathroom, make sure the door's closed...and then when I go into the bathroom, I'll turn it off.”
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, medium income)

For some, these practices were experienced as necessary sacrifices, and for others, they reflected heightened vigilance rather than overt hardship. Taken together, this shows that heating and eating functioned not only as necessities but as symbolic pressure points, shaping how adequacy was experienced and reinforcing a sense of ‘just managing’, even among those who were not otherwise struggling day-to-day.

Overall, the majority of participants described themselves currently, as ‘just getting by or ‘managing’ when asked to describe whether their current income is ‘comfortable’, ‘just getting by’ or ‘not enough.’ This reflects the diverse challenges that participants face, raised by living costs, limited disposable income, ongoing housing payments, health-related expenses, or caring responsibilities for partners, family members or grandchildren. For many, ‘managing’ meant maintaining stability rather than feeling secure or comfortable, with little financial headroom to absorb shocks or increase quality of life. Those that have been retired longest (6 to10 years ago) were more likely to express difficulty at managing price increases, perhaps due to having retired ahead of the cost-of-living crisis in the UK. These individuals were more settled into retirement and retirement budgets, and then found they had to recalibrate.

Sources of pleasure and fulfilment

Despite these challenges, participants described finding meaning and satisfaction in everyday routines and relationships. Sources of pleasure were often modest and local: spending time with family, maintaining independence, volunteering, hobbies, walking, or simply being able to manage without debt or reliance on others.

> "My wife [brings me pleasure and wellbeing] basically. She's my rock, my shadow. I'd be totally lost without her."
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income, digitally excluded)
>
> "Apart from my kids, obviously, I think it's my swimming. I love my swimming. I go to a private gym with a big pool and there's all the same people that go every day. The times we go, we all swim, seriously swim, and have a chat, go for coffee afterwards."
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, low income)

For many, fulfilment was less about consumption and more about continuity, stability and autonomy. For example, in the creative pre-tasks, common words participants used to describe what was 'enough' for them right now were: 'stability', 'comfort' and 'freedom.'

Overall, the findings suggested that retirement was rarely experienced as a fixed state. Instead, expectations formed over decades were continually revised in response to changing circumstances, with adequacy judged less against imagined ideals and more against people's ability to 'manage', maintain dignity, and preserve a sense of everyday control.

2.2 Financial adequacy in practice

Overall, participants described adequacy as a baseline rather than an aspiration. It was a point at which retirement "worked" – meaning that they could meet their basic needs, manage their finances and avoid immediate insecurity - rather than a point at which it felt good or equated to feeling fulfilled. The level below adequacy was often a financial state that prompted anxiety or stress. Participants rarely used the term 'adequacy' without prompting. Instead, they used terms such as 'getting by', 'managing' and 'holding things together', which they viewed as synonymous with adequacy.

Adequacy on lower-middle incomes

Across the sample, retirees consistently defined 'adequacy' as a minimum financial floor, rather than an enjoyable state of comfort or ease. It was often described in highly practical terms and defined by predictability – whether income stretched far enough to cover essential costs, reliably and repeatedly, without missing key bills or going into financial stress. However, it is important to note that 'adequacy', as a financial floor, differed across income groups.

For retirees on lower (under £15,000 retirement income per year) and middle incomes (between £15,000 and £30,000 retirement income per year) adequacy was defined by meeting essentials and maintaining the status quo. Adequacy was framed narrowly, and meant being able to pay for housing, utilities, food, and basic transport continuously. 'Treats' were routinely excluded from definitions of adequacy. Below is an example of how a recently retired participant described 'adequacy', which was positioned as surviving, rather than thriving.

> "I suppose adequate is what I've got already – I've got a roof over my head, I've got food, I can manage, I can pay my bills…is it comfortable? Not comfortable…it's adequate but I can't go out and do the things that I wanted to do."
>
> (Female, retired around 2 years ago, medium income)

Equally, another participant described their income as adequate whilst simultaneously recalling experiences of narrowly missing bills and the accompanying stress of those experiences, supporting the idea that 'adequacy' across low income groups can simply mean meeting financial obligations.

> "I've become quite close to having 98p left and that kind of thing, but that's okay, so long as you have enough to pay the bill – whichever one's due, at that point in time."
>
> (Female, retired around 2 years ago, low income)

Another low income participant defined adequacy as maintaining their current standard of living, but also recognised that this was unlikely to be achievable for the coming years.:

> "Keeping the status quo would be adequate – if I knew we could remain within this house, afford to go on holiday once a year abroad, afford to visit friends and relatives as we wanted to. But that's not realistic… we've already decided we'll have to limit going out and limit purchases."
>
> (Male, retired around 2 years ago, low income)

In these accounts, adequacy was about limiting deterioration of their current situations. Trade-offs were already accepted as part of everyday financial management and had often long been a part of their lives across mid-careers, with participants describing having known approaching retirement that finances would be 'tight.' Therefore, conscious decisions to restrict social activity, heating, food expenses, and overall spending and movement in order to stay within budget and maintain a sense of adequacy were all too familiar.

Adequacy on moderate-higher incomes

Those on moderate incomes often described themselves as financially adequate in the present, but increasingly vulnerable over time. Whilst they could meet essential bills, adequacy depended on careful budgeting and, in many cases, the gradual drawdown of savings.

> "I get my State Pension and my firm's pension. I didn't realise how much tax I would pay on my firm's pension. The cost of living has obviously gone up more than what all of us expected it to be, things are a lot dearer…so disposable income is not as much as I thought it was going to be. What savings I've had, they've dwindled quite rapidly because…after you pay for additional things they've gone down. I thought things probably would be more comfortable."
>
> (Female, retired around 2 years ago, medium income)

The above quote highlights that adequacy is described as something that, whilst present, is being eroded in the current economic climate. For many participants, the role of savings – maintaining them and continuing to lightly add to them - played a vital and symbolic role in adequacy. Many had wanted to wait as long as possible into their retirement to dip into them for potential care costs. However, the observed premature decline of their savings has prompted uncertainty around how long their sense of adequacy can be sustained.

Participants with higher incomes – and often investable assets – also framed adequacy as a baseline, but that baseline was higher and included a greater range of priorities. Adequacy for this group often included maintaining a car, travelling, and supporting a particular standard of living alongside paying essential bills. However, even in these cases adequacy was not described as limitless or carefree, and participants still expressed concern about future risks, especially around potential health-related expenses, housing repairs, or ability to 'pass on' to their children.

> "I did not want my kids to have the financial stress that in hindsight we were under as a family…it's kind of in the financial DNA of the family 'I want you to have a different and better experience' and that's in my power and my wife's power to shape…so that's always underpinning our thinking. It can all go wrong very quickly."
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, high income)

Equally, when higher-income participants reflected on financial moments across their lives that were less 'adequate', it still represented comparably more stability than lower-income participants.

> [Reflecting on when finances were less adequate] "I think in early years of marriage and then having family, there wasn't as much money to go around…it wasn't that we were having to spend less towards the end of the month because we were going to run out or anything like that. So, that wasn't going to be a problem but at the same time there probably wouldn't have been a lot spare."
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, high income)

Adequacy as a biographical concept

Across income groups, definitions of adequacy were shaped by life history as much as by finances. Participants who had experienced hardship earlier in life often defined adequacy as 'not going back' to periods of deprivation where food, warmth or stability were uncertain. For these participants, adequacy was anchored in dignity and security rather than disposable income and was sometimes described as an emotional rather than monetary threshold.

> "I do think that [childhood] shaped it [sense of adequacy], not having enough food to eat as a child and so on, yes, not having to have for your Sunday dinner, a Fray Bentos steak and kidney pie with tinned potatoes...You need to have enough to be able to eat well and so on, be clothed, live somewhere that's warm and comfy."

> (Female, retired around 2 years ago, low income)

Meanwhile, for higher-income participants their early life experiences (going on holidays, low financial stress in the household) set the scene for what they *expected* adulthood finances to look like.

Crucially, adequacy did not necessarily imply comfort or satisfaction. Many described living adequately whilst also feeling restricted, disappointed or resigned by their retirement experience so far. Equally, most did not see ‘adequacy’ as a long-term fixed state, but something changeable that requires careful maintenance.

2.3 ‘Enough’ in practice

A key aim of this research was to understand how retirees themselves define adequacy in retirement, rather than imposing a single, income-based standard. While participants readily described what it meant to be financially adequate, discussions of what constituted ‘enough’ revealed a more nuanced and contextual set of judgements. ‘Enough’ was viewed as a step beyond adequacy - not just about covering essentials, but about whether retirement felt worthwhile and consistent with individuals’ personal priorities. This section therefore explores how retirees understand and articulate ‘enough’ in practice, situating these personal accounts within their wider financial, social and biographical contexts.

‘Enough’ for retirees was holistic, broad and personal, i.e. what makes a ‘good life.’ Whilst adequacy was defined as a financial floor, ‘enough’ equated to ‘a life that feels right’, combining financial security with comfort, dignity and the ability to do or give a little more. ‘Enough’ combined wellbeing with autonomy and small freedoms on top of adequacy. This meant having a buffer, saying ‘yes’ to treats, having money leftover and helping others. It is important to note that in this context, ‘adequate’ was a minimum acceptable standard, and ‘enough’ was the step beyond that, though still modest – it did not necessarily represent an individuals’ dream retirement, or a state of indulgence.

Below are some excerpts from pre-tasks participants completed, on what is ‘enough’ in retirement for them *now***,** demonstrating that ‘enough’ is achieved both through specific activities and emotional states**:**

> “Happy family days, holidays, caravan weekends away, Arsenal football matches, walks, dancing, squash, meals out.”
>
> (Male, retired 6 to10 years ago, medium income)
>
> “Paying living expenses, holidays/breaks, friends and family, leisure and well-being activities, regular support to charities, being able to plan for bigger outlays, rainy day money.”
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, high income)
>
> “Able to pay bills, ability to drive and get about, holidays in the sun, time with family, nice home, good food, peace of mind, good health, independence, feeling secure.”

(Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, low income)

These examples demonstrate that ‘enough’ was not purely financial to retirees. Phrases such as ‘quality of life’, ‘being able to do the things that matter’, and ‘time with loved ones’ featured prominently. The key state of mind that came with ‘enough’ was ‘not having to worry’, including about finances. For example, knowing an unexpected expense such as a rent rise or a household repair wouldn’t derail finances. Housing tenure was a big determinant in having ‘enough.’ Whilst adequacy was commonly linked to ‘having a roof over one’s head’, ‘enough’ extended to the security of stable housing *and* extras. Thus, ‘enough’ was more easily within reach for mortgage-free participants with more disposable income, whereas renters often hovered at adequacy, faced with higher and potentially rising outgoings.

> “Knowing that the house is paid for is definitely a nice, warm comfort blanket, definitely, knowing that the house is ours and nobody can do anything about that is definitely a comfort blanket.”
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, high income)
>
> “The rent, it's doable, it is doable but could you imagine if you had an extra £700 a month to spend? It makes a huge difference, doesn't it? Nigh-on £9,000 a year.”
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income)

Whilst participants’ definitions of ‘enough’ were broadly holistic and included having sufficient financial cushioning in case of unexpected expenses, perceptions of what constituted ‘sufficient’ varied significantly across the sample. Participants on lower and middle incomes tended to describe relatively small increases in monthly costs as uncomfortable but manageable, often requiring trade-offs in day-to-day spending. By contrast, those on high incomes were more likely to reference larger, one-off expenses as being within the bounds of what they could absorb, typically drawing on savings rather than income alone.

This suggests that while ‘enough’ was understood through similar principles, the scale and nature of the financial buffer associated with it expanded across both retirement income and accumulated resources, as indicated in the quote below.

> [When asked what number comes to mind as an unaffordable expense] “Probably quite a lot actually. Probably £30,000 or so. I mean, when my son had to come back from Australia, we brought his dog back, we brought his van back…I don't even know how much it cost. I didn't even add it up but we were certainly in the £10,000 to £15,000 region to actually bring all his stuff back, and that was affordable...”
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, high income)

For some participants on lower incomes, their personal definitions of ‘enough’ sometimes involved a conscious reframing of what brings them joy in life, often emphasising stability, connection and self-acceptance over material wealth. This was particularly the case following physical or mental ill-health. Here, ‘enough’ is explicitly decoupled from money and anchored in relationships and emotional wellbeing:

> "I think, since I had the mixed anxiety disorder, I'm happy with less because it's important for me and the people I'm in relationships with to be happy, and that's become more important over time. So, less thinking around the material-type things."
>
> (Female, retired around 2 years ago, low income)

Taken together, these findings reinforce a clear distinction between 'adequacy and enough'. 'Adequacy' described whether finances could hold; 'enough' described whether life felt worthwhile and manageable. While higher incomes made it easier to reach 'enough', they did not eliminate concern. Conversely, some participants on low incomes described life as 'enough' despite financial constraint, highlighting the deeply subjective and biographical nature of retirement wellbeing.

2.4 Interaction with State Pension and other pensioner benefits

Across the interviews, the UK State Pension was widely viewed as the most stable and predictable component of retirement income, and often symbolically marked the transition into retirement, even if individuals had stopped working or reduced their working hours earlier. Participants consistently saw it as something they could rely upon, even if the difference it made to their lives varied significantly between them. However, this sense of security coexisted with a patchy understanding of how the State Pension operated in practice, how it interacted with tax and other benefits, and what additional support might be available alongside it. Participants' understandings of the process for accessing it were also fragmented. Several participants had assumed it would start automatically, only to discover at the last minute that an application was required.

> "I knew I would be able to retire on my 66th birthday…but I didn't know how that happened. I thought it was relatively automatic. But that's not how it works. You have to apply to be a pensioner, and I didn't know that. What should happen is 4 months before you reach pensionable age, you should receive a letter saying, 'these are the facts, you need to make this application now to retire."
>
> (Male, retired around 2 years ago, low income)

These gaps in awareness were highest among those with low levels of pension engagement, lower incomes and more manual, vocational roles. Applications, alongside lower awareness that pension income would be taxed created initial teething issues around financial management, particularly for participants who were under financial strain or lacked confidence navigating official systems.

> "I just remember being a bit annoyed that you had to pay tax on a pension when you've paid tax all your life. On the other hand, you get enough money that you are getting taxed, which is nice. But you're getting taxed twice, that's what it feels like."
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income)

A key distinction across the interviews was how differently the State Pension was experienced depending on an individual's overall financial position. For those on lower incomes, the State Pension - often combined with Pension Credit or disability-related benefits such as Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and Attendance Allowance - was described as essential. It formed the backbone of household income and enabled people to cover basic living costs and access necessary services. This was especially the case for individuals that were single income, were renting, and/or had experienced recurring financial shocks.

> "The pension credit is such a big help… I get help with glasses and I get help with dental treatment. Which it is such a help on its own, it really is a massive help."
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income)

In contrast, participants with higher occupational pensions or other income streams often described the State Pension as marginal to achieving day-to-day adequacy. Rather than relying on it, it was framed as 'bonus' income. For example, one high-income retiree described the State Pension as money that would be used for "holidays", rather than essential costs.

This attitude of the State Pension acting as supplementary income was especially the case for partnered retirees with multiple income streams (multiple State Pensions and workplace pensions) – and even more so for those with DB pensions. This stark contrast highlights how the same income stream can function very differently: as a financial lifeline for some, and as disposable income for others.

> "I knew it [the State Pension] would contribute an income but I knew it was no way suitable for anything other than covering the absolute basics…the State Pension is there for the barest of bones…it was never going to be enough. Private pensions had to be part of the plan."
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, high income)

Awareness of additional income products and entitlements beyond the State Pension was uneven. Many low-income participants were unaware of eligibility for Pension Credit, Attendance Allowance or related passported benefits until they experienced financial difficulty or were advised by a third party. In several cases, access depended on intervention from charities such as Age Concern, rather than proactive communication from official sources. The assistance provided in completing complex forms and identifying linked entitlements was described as critical.

> "I had to do it all [applying for Pension Credit] through Age Concern because again, nobody told me anything and I was struggling when I first retired, I really was struggling. But with being a pensioner, I felt embarrassed having to ask for help. But I did, I went in and it was like a breath of fresh air."
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income)

These accounts demonstrate how interaction with the State Pension cannot be separated from interaction with the wider benefits system. For lower-income participants, the difference between just receiving the State Pension and successfully navigating associated entitlements often marked the boundary between ongoing struggle and relative stability.

2.5 The role of savings and investments

Across the full sample, savings and wider financial assets played a central but uneven role in shaping participants' day-to-day experiences of retirement. Income from the State Pension formed a stable foundation of most households' finances – as demonstrated in the previous section. However, it was the presence of additional resources, including savings, investments and property that determined the degree of financial stability, flexibility and perceived adequacy that participants experienced. Likewise, an individuals' annual retirement income did not always form the full picture either, especially given that some participants had patchy contribution histories.

Participants held a wide range of savings and asset types beyond regular income, though these varied significantly in use and scale. The most common form was cash savings, held in bank accounts, ISAs, standard easy-access savings accounts and in physical cash. However, the density of these savings varied, for example a minority of medium-high retirement income individuals – whilst not explicitly stating their full savings amounts – referred to being able to live off the interest of their savings as a specific income stream, alongside their pension(s).

> "I've got 2 pensions and the interest from my savings, but the interest from my savings is high because I've got money saved up for a house."
>
> (Male, retired 6 to10 years ago, medium income)
>
> "We [household] have a good standard of living [two private pensions, two State Pensions, the income from the buy-to-let]…and obviously interest from our savings that we have."
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, medium income)

In contrast, others – typically those with lower retirement incomes - described much smaller, incremental approaches to saving such as putting aside leftover cash:

> "At the end of the week, if I've got odd coppers and that, I put that in the tin, so that's my savings."
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, low income)

Regardless of cash savings levels, most participants predominantly used them as a supplementary resource to draw on where needed that provided a secondary layer of financial security. This was most often to meet costs that could not be absorbed within monthly income. This included home maintenance and unexpected repairs, larger one-off purchases such as holidays or replacing big-ticket items like white goods and supporting family members. However, a few participants described repeatedly lightly dipping into savings each month for anything 'extra' beyond essential bills, food and travel. For those individuals in particular, they also spoke of retirement costing more than they originally anticipated with rising costs, suggesting that they have struggled to reconcile with their expectations of retirement costs versus the reality.

> "What savings I had have dwindled quite rapidly because of additional expenses."
>
> (Female, retired around 2 years ago, medium income)

Alongside traditional savings and investment products, housing assets also emerged as a significant asset and income stream in retirement amongst many in the sample. It has been explored how participants who owned their homes outright consistently described this as providing a foundation or stability and the ability for their pension income to stretch further. However, downsizing was considered a potential future financial strategy tantamount to having savings, and a minority of the sample had additional properties or inherited homes that generated rental income. In some instances, these were funded using Pension Commencement Lump Sums.

> "We look the largest lump sum we could from the Local Government Pension Scheme and bought another buy-to-let property."
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, medium income)

However – with housing assets, drawing down on these options was often viewed as highly contingent and emotionally complex – something to be done only if one *had* to, rather than something which was an immediately accessible resource.

Overall, savings played a key role in participants' sense of adequacy, and were not just financial, but psychological. Where savings were present, adequacy was associated with resilience and peace of mind, and participants felt better able to manage uncertainty and future risks. Where savings were limited or absent, adequacy was more precarious, carefully maintained through vigilance and tied to close budgeting. In those scenarios, participants were more likely to describe themselves as 'just getting by.' Having savings contributed to feelings of control, independent and security. Thus, many were actively trying to save, but also reluctant to use their savings, even where they were available. Instead, many participants expressed a preference to preserve savings for emergencies, including various future unknowns and health costs that prompted acute anxiety – as explored later in this report.

> "We're still able to save each month, which, being retired, I think is quite an accomplishment really."
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, medium income)
>
> "We're trying to look after them [savings] but not particularly looking at using those. If the car needed replacing or something like that then yes we would use some money from savings for that, but we're generally trying to leave that money for big things and doing some estate planning."
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, high income)

The below quote demonstrates that - whilst unusual - there were some cases of individuals with low retirement incomes that were able to benefit significantly from high levels of savings, suggesting that income via Pensions did not always represent the full picture.

> "We have ISAs and we have Premium Bonds [we never dip into them]…that's sacrosanct. Can't go into that. We use the interest and any winnings to travel once a year…it would have to be something pretty dire to have to do that [dip into savings]."
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income)

These findings highlight that adequacy in retirement cannot be understood through income alone. Instead, it emerges from the combined effect of income, savings, housing and life-course experiences, and the ways in which these resources are accessed, preserved and interpreted over time.

2.6 Health, ageing and changing needs

Health emerged as a central factor shaping present-day experiences of retirement across the sample, influencing not only physical mobility and daily activity but also emotional security, financial trajectories and expectations of the future. For some, declining health narrowed their world in practical ways, limiting how much they were able to leave the house, socialise or engage in activities they once enjoyed.

> "My health is plummeting, there's something wrong with my kidneys and they're going to fail - it's not a question of "if", it's a question of "when." And in general, I don't do an awful lot, I can't do an awful lot, not like I used to."
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income, digitally excluded)

Reduced mobility often translated into simple routines, fewer trips out, and more time spent at home. Participants described days becoming more contained, with activities shaped around energy levels, pain, or managing long-term conditions. This shrinking of everyday life fed directly into how retirement was experienced: not as freedom or expansion, but as something quieter, more restricted, and heavily conditioned by what they were physically capable of. For those managing long-term health conditions, this was sometimes linked to long careers in manual, vocational roles. As such, these individuals were also more likely to have lower retirement incomes from SIPPs or workplace schemes and thus were more reliant on the State Pension and other benefits such as Attendance Allowance.

Health was not only something that affected retirement once it had begun, but impacted how individuals arrived into retirement, and under what conditions. Early exits from work due to ill-health often disrupted plans to build pension entitlements or savings, and so intersected with financial adequacy but also a reshaping of life course.

> "I was hoping to go on [working] another couple of years because up until I had this accident I'd been what I call a fairly fit person, […] When I had this accident where I've obviously got an artificial shoulder now and only got 40% mobility in my left arm, it wasn't until then that my circumstances have changed."
>
> (Female, retired around 2 years ago, medium income)

There were also direct financial implications associated with health. Some participants described additional costs linked to managing long-term conditions - including transport, glasses, dental treatment or adaptations - which placed pressure on already limited budgets.

Overall, health acted as both a present-day constraint and a source of future anxiety. It shaped how retirement was lived, how much people engaged with the world, and how secure they felt looking ahead.

2.7 Housing

Housing played a key role in shaping experiences of retirement across the sample, often acting as the primary anchor of financial and emotional security. In some cases, the affordability of retirement and retirement adequacy was less about income level and more about whether housing costs were contained. Owning a home outright, or with a very small mortgage, was repeatedly framed as the point at which a comfortable retirement that resembled having ‘enough’ began to feel viable. This crucial milestone was reflected in participants’ pre-retirement actions – drawing down on pensions and using lump sums to pay off their mortgages, or buy investment properties, or for pre-retired participants, trying to pay off their mortgages ahead of retiring. Housing security was frequently substituted for income security, allowing people to manage even with relatively small pension incomes.

> “So, the day I retired I got my lump sum pension, 10 o'clock the pension came in, 10:05 it went to clear the mortgage.”
>
> (Male, retired around 2 years ago, medium income)
>
> “A big chunk of my expenditure was my mortgage, once I got rid of that, sold that house, got rid of my mortgage and was able with the money leftover to buy this flat outright, I’m £800 a month better off and haven’t got that round my neck. If I was paying that £800 out of my pension I’d only have a couple of hundred pounds left.”
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income, digitally excluded)

For many participants, homeownership was not only a source of day-to-day security but was also understood as a form of stored financial protection, akin to a savings account that could be accessed if needed. Owning a property outright, or being close to doing so, provided reassurance that, even if income was limited, there was an underlying asset that could be liquidated, downsized, or leveraged in later life. This perception shaped attitudes to retirement risk, with some participants expressing greater confidence about coping with uncertainty precisely because they felt they had “something to fall back on” in the value of their home.

However, those that owned their homes outright, whilst experiencing more security than those with a mortgage or renters, were not entirely immune to worries. Many homeowners reflected on ‘enough’ as being able to safely cover maintenance costs or major repairs in their home, conscious that housing shocks could arise. Likewise, in the current economic climate, many did not feel confident that they would ‘get their money’s worth’ if looking to downsize and free up income.

> "I mean, we would like really to downsize. This house is totally inappropriate for us. The stairs are really, really steep, which whilst it keeps you fit, at some point, we're going to start falling down them…we'd like to move nearer to family but as soon as you start moving south, it gets more expensive. We can't do that on stamp duty alone."
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income)
>
> "I would love [to downsize]. I think for mobility issues, definitely. Unfortunately, they [bungalows] don't come up, they're very few and far between. And again you think…we could sell this and get quite a lot of money. But everything's relevant and the market force is saying lots of people now want these bungalows, which is pushing up the prices. And we can look at properties and think, 'Well, we could get x for this.' But to go and buy something smaller is going to cost us the same as what we're selling this for."
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, medium income)

Tenure type also shaped experiences of retirement in important ways. Social housing renters and those in sheltered accommodation often described greater long-term security of tenure, but tighter ongoing budgets and limited flexibility to adapt their homes as their health changed.

Private renters, though lower in this sample than other renters, described the highest levels of insecurity, with concern about rent increases, landlord decisions and the difficulty of planning long-term. These differences reinforced inequalities in how much certainty people felt able to have about their futures, even when income levels were relatively similar.

> "My rent's currently £650 a month...but on 1st February it goes up to £960 a month, which is a bit of an eek moment…[I'm] really nervous…I would have to try and find a cheaper home, which I have looked at already, and they're all much of the same cost. So, I've looked at going smaller, and the only kinds of things that would be cheaper would be a one-bedroom flat, and the housing list…is absolutely massive. So, getting onto social housing wouldn't be possible, at this time, and a one-bedroom flat wouldn't be suitable. My son's 40... We couldn't share a room."
>
> (Female, retired around 2 years ago, low income)
>
> "It's council [housing]… I've been here for long enough, I've got protected tenancy."
> (Female, pre-retired, low income)

For renters, 'enough' resembled stable housing, and a sense of security that they would keep their tenancies without significant rent increases.

Overall, housing emerged as a central and early determinant of retirement adequacy, shaping both how secure people felt in the present and how exposed they were to future risk.

2.8 Case study

Barry

- 63
- Male
- London
- Homeowner
- Married
- Plans to retire in the next year
- High income

"I think [the State Pension is] due just before I'm 67…it's not something I worry about. I never worked on the basis that I'd be reliant on the government State Pension…It will be an added bonus not a reliant amount of income."

"15 years ago…I was probably keeping an eye on the finances a little bit closer than I am now…if I needed to buy a new washing machine, I would research which makes I could afford…Now, I probably wouldn't even do that, I'd just buy what I think is the best one."

Key life events

Barry had an unsettled childhood with frequent relocations, due to his father's frequent job changes. **Household childhood finances were tight,** with little disposable income and no holidays. Barry left school at 17 and took on a clerical job, and ended up spending 40 years in the same organisation, **progressing through multiple managerial roles across a long, stable career.** He took voluntary redundancy in 2019, receiving a healthy severance package, and since then, he has done part-time, voluntary and informal roles.

Sense of enough'

For Barry, **having 'enough' financially means being able to buy what he wants, when he wants.** He'd only feel uncomfortable financially if costs rose substantially, and has more than enough disposable income to support a comfortable lifestyle, expecting to go on multiple holidays a year with his wife – both abroad trips and shorter breaks. **Outside of finances, 'enough' means having the freedom, time and flexibility to spend with his wife, adult children and extended family.**

Pressure & pleasures

Since paying off the mortgage in 2010 – timed exactly to the schedule he'd set himself – Barry has felt enormous financial relief and decreased stress. Since he took redundancy, he's been effectively financially independent and his life is focused on things he enjoys. He volunteers regularly for schools, food banks, and is a football referee. **His prime concerns now revolve around future financial uncertainty** and the potential erosion of savings from inflation, political uncertainty, taxation laws and rising costs.

Retirement planning & pension engagement

Barry feels **fairly positive about the idea of retirement,** mainly looking forward to increased freedom and flexibility. He **describes himself as very financially secure,** and is distrustful of financial advice, feeling that he can manage his savings himself. He has been **highly engaged with his pension since early adulthood** – paying into it since he was 21 – and with a very strong final salary pension, **he expects to treat the State Pension as a source of disposable income.**

Barry feels broadly optimistic and calm about the future. He's financially secure and sees the years ahead as a chance to enjoy life – health, family, and his hobbies – though he remains quietly cautious about political change, rising costs, and long-term health

2.9 The experience of digitally excluded retirees

Digitally excluded retirees described a distinct set of present-day retirement experiences shaped by long-standing life-course patterns, practical attitudes to money, and limited engagement with formal systems.

The digitally excluded group naturally skewed heavily towards individuals with working histories in manual, vocational or service-based roles, early exit from formal education, and low pension engagement through adulthood. These factors combined meant that many entered retirement with lower incomes and more limited awareness of the support available to them.

For many digitally excluded participants, interacting with digital systems in retirement – including online banking, pension portals, benefit applications and service communications – felt overwhelming and unnecessary, and was actively avoided.

This aversion to technology existed along a spectrum. Whilst some rejected technology as a whole, others cited low digital confidence, fear of making mistakes and neurodiversity challenges (e.g. dyslexia).

> “As far as I'm concerned, if I never could send an email that wouldn't bother me one bit.”
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income, digitally excluded)
>
> “It [the internet] is way beyond my logic…like talking double dutch.”
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income, digitally excluded)

Digital exclusion had clear practical consequences for how people navigated retirement systems. Participants often relied on letters, paper forms, phone calls and face-to-face interactions, and several expressed a sense that ‘everything is online now’, in ways that they knew actively excluded them but felt difficult to overcome. This contributed to gaps in knowledge about entitlements, particularly around means-tested or health-related benefits. Some participants assumed support was unavailable when, in reality, they had never accessed information about it - reflecting a gap between formal eligibility and lived engagement.

In some cases, confusion also reflected the complexity of the system itself. For example, one participant expressed a desire for government support through something akin to Personal Independence Payment (PIP), without realising that this is not generally available to new claimants above SPa. This highlights how limited access to information, combined with specific eligibility rules can contribute to uncertainty about what support is available.

> “I’m hoping as I get older, I’ll get more help from the government, but at the moment I don’t see anything coming…like they used to do PIP, you know, things like that to help get round to living.”
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income, digitally excluded)

Similarly, for a digitally excluded female participant, her low digital engagement exacerbated vulnerability to State Pension age changes, which she only became aware of by chance when applying for a bus pass rather than through official correspondence. As a result of this disengagement, digitally excluded retirees were disproportionately reliant on family members to support them with retirement processes and financial management. Adult children and grandchildren were frequently described as essential intermediaries – completing online forms, checking entitlements, managing applications and explaining correspondence.

> “I knew I had to apply for it [the State Pension]. It was how to apply for it I didn’t know.”
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income, digitally excluded)
>
> “When it comes to this phone business, I have to go to her [daughter] and she sets it up.”
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income, digitally excluded)

While many participants expressed trust and comfort in this arrangement, reliance on others created uneven access, dependent on family availability, proximity and capacity, and introduced emotional tension around independence and burden.

Financial management among digitally excluded retirees also existed along a spectrum. Some participants managed their finances manually and meticulously keeping handwritten budgets, avoiding debt and prioritising essential outgoings - while others disengaged from day-to-day money management entirely, delegating control to spouses. For several men, this represented a continuation of long-standing gendered household roles, where they had brought home wages during working life and passed responsibility for managing money to their wives. In retirement, this pattern often persisted. This represented a clear difference from financial management patterns demonstrated in the broader sample, where partnered retirees often took a joint approach to managing money.

> “My managerial skills are absolutely appalling. When I met my wife, I made the agreement with her is I'll go to work, you spend the money, you spend it on what you need to spend it on and how you spend it, on bills, etc. and that's the way it's been ever since. Because I was absolutely dismal with money. You put some money in my pocket, by the end of the day it's spent, whether it should be or not.”
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income, digitally excluded)
>
> “She [wife] was the one then but she still is the one that controls all of our finances. I don't have any say in anything. I can have whatever I want. I don't get any pocket money but I can have anything I want. But she's got complete control of all of it, thank goodness.”
>
> (Male, retired 6 to10 years ago, medium income, digitally excluded)

Despite differences in approach, digitally excluded participants shared narrow, pragmatic definitions of adequacy. Retirement was not framed as a time for optimisation or expansion, but as something to be managed carefully. This approach and understanding of adequacy was likely linked to the low levels of retirement income across this sample. Many did not have large workplace pensions, and even where State Pension income was supplemented by benefits such as PIP, financial fragility remained a concern.

> "I've got a flat, I've got a car, I've got a telly, I've got a bed - what else do I want?"
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income, digitally excluded)
>
> "I manage. It's just a case of you have to, don't you?"
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, low income, digitally excluded)

Health and ageing further intensified the impacts of digital exclusion. Participants with declining physical or mental health described reduced capacity to engage with complex systems and increased dependence on others. Ill-health also shaped retirement pathways directly, with some retiring earlier than planned due to anxiety, depression or chronic conditions, and others taking on caring roles after retirement. These changes amplified fears of becoming a burden and reinforced preferences for predictability and minimal engagement with institutions. However, some participants did claim benefits such as PIP and Attendance Allowance, suggesting that whilst some participants were not aware of key support available, awareness had reached some of those that needed it despite digital barriers.

Across this group, digital exclusion did not always translate into immediate financial inadequacy, particularly for those who owned their homes outright or rented social housing with relatively stable rent prices. However, it consistently reduced confidence and agency. Retirees who were digitally excluded were less able to proactively check entitlements, respond to changes, or navigate shocks, relying instead on personal resilience, family support and tightly controlled routines. In this context, adequacy was achieved defensively - through coping, simplification and avoidance - rather than through informed choice or active engagement with retirement systems. Whilst this coping-led adequacy allowed many to manage in the present, it often left individuals more exposed to future risks - a theme explored in the following section.

2.10 Case study

Amy

- 71
- East of England
- Owns home outright
- Widowed
- Retired 6-10 years ago
- Low income
- Digitally excluded

"I'm not really 100% on how to work the internet. I'm a bit worried, [I'd do something wrong] so I don't do nothing."

"I would like more but you just have to manage with what you've got, that's the way I've been brought up. If you haven't got the money to do something, then you can't do it. You've just got to live within your means."

Key life events

Amy grew up on the outskirts of London, and after leaving school **moved directly into work,** keen to support her parents. She had extended periods of part-time work to raise children – and no workplace pension. Later life felt largely unplanned with a **premature exit from the workforce** to become her husband's full-time carer before his death in 2014. Alongside this, changes to the State Pension age meant **she did not retire when expected**, and had a prolonged period of uncertainty and financial adjustment.

Sense of 'enough'

Across Amy's life course, her understanding **of 'enough' was grounded in meeting needs and getting by, rather than achieving financial comfort** or ease. Growing up in a financially constrained household, she aspired to 'better herself' but this coexisted with an acceptance that **adequacy equalled stability**. 'Enough' in adulthood is being able to purchase essentials and set aside small amounts where possible. This demonstrates the **lower baseline for adequacy and 'enough' as seen with other low income participants.**

Pressure & pleasures

Amy's retirement is **shaped by ongoing financial pressure** and modest, everyday sources of fulfillment. Financially, her situation is fragile. Whilst she describes herself as 'managing', increases in **essentials/unexpected expenses would require her to reduce spending in heating and eating.** This constraint is rooted partly in her unplanned retirement, with caring, bereavement and pension changes which meant **retirement did not deliver the lifestyle expected.** Nonetheless, she **still finds pleasure in low-cost activities and routines,** getting out and about using her bus pass and maintaining connections with family and friends.

Retirement & pension engagement

Amy's **transition into retirement was complex** and influenced by disruptions in her life and digital disengagement – both of which limited her ability to plan effectively or navigate systems with confidence. There were **clear gaps in her entitlement knowledge,** from being unaware of changes in the State Pension age, to incorrectly believing she would be eligible for Pension Credit. Due to both **her reluctance to and challenges with engaging with digital resources, she relies heavily on her adult children and local services** (e.g. the library) to gain retirement information. Likewise, her children act as a support system to fall back on financially. She anticipates that this may increase if she requires care in the future.

Amy's approach to retirement is built on managing with limited resources and relying on trusted others instead of formal systems. Adequacy isn't about financial progression, but maintaining independence and navigating change without disruption.

3 Influences from the past: life histories and the foundations of adequacy

This chapter explores how participants' life histories and experiences from childhood to the present day laid the foundations for their financial attitudes, literacy, behaviours and perceived adequacy in later-life. It explores how patterns of financial security or vulnerability are developed over lifetimes, and rooted in experiences during childhood, education, work, relationships and parenthood, rather than in individual choice or behaviour alone. It further investigates how wider structural forces, like macro-economic crises, education, gender norms, and access to employment, have helped contribute to unequal outcomes.

3.1 Early life and formative experiences

Participants' accounts of happiness in childhood existed along a spectrum, ranging from warm and loving to deeply challenging and strained. While growing up in a financially secure household did not always pre-determine a happy and health childhood, the *absence* of financial security appeared to be a core component of unhappiness in childhood. Experiences of financial insecurity in childhood had major implications, often curtailing participants' education and restricting future opportunities, creating long-term constraints on career progression.

Childhood circumstances

Most participants described growing up in working-class or rural households, where money was overstretched and largely restricted to essentials. They often stressed that their childhoods were loving and caring in intent, but shaped and often constrained by challenging circumstances.

> "We had a very loving family, loving grandparents. A mum that was always at home. Dad that was always at work. Tried to bring us up with good morals, a good standing. It was a bit rough and tumble at times, where things could be a bit tight here and there, but we never went without anything."
>
> (Female, retired around 2 years ago, medium income)

Among participants who reported growing up in working-class communities, they commonly described their parents working in manual, low-paid and shift-based professions (e.g. manufacturing, mining/labouring, public services, cleaning, farming). They often described being raised in close-knit communities, characterised by strong moral values. Though they made frequent reference to anxiety about bills, run-down housing and deprived areas, many recalled attitudes of mutual reliance between family members, friends and neighbours.

> "Front doors were never shut. Somebody always knew where you were…No inside toilets, no baths. But there was a great sense of community. Somebody always knew where you were and knew who your parents were."
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income)

Another small group of participants cited deeply chaotic or traumatic childhoods, sometimes marked by extreme poverty, strained family relationships, family health crises and bereavement. In many cases, experiences of extreme poverty went hand in hand with experiences of ill-health and early death in the family; various participants noted the particularly devastating impact of one or both parents being unable to work, and the resulting financial strain this had on an already precarious household:

> "My mother was widowed and then there was a lengthy period of her ill health through depression and poverty, real poverty. There was never any money, so we had very little food, hardly any heating, no holidays and that."
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, high income)
>
> "We didn't have a lot of money and we didn't always have things to eat. We lived in [a slum]…my mum dying was very meaningful, and it did change, for example, leaving school early without taking my exams, because there was only my dad and my younger brother. So, I felt as though [I should] bring some money into the household."
>
> (Female, retired around 2 years ago, low income)

A key dividing line emerged in the extent to which participants assumed adult responsibilities early in life: many participants described taking on caregiving roles, managing households, or contributing financially from a young age, with childhoods frequently described as focused on maintaining household stability.

> "Probably up until about the age of 11, life was good…We had good things, nice food, we didn't want for much…Then dad got poorly. So, money got a bit tighter at that point because he couldn't do the job that he was doing before…so Mum had to go to work [and] I had to step up running the house, cooking meals, doing washing…not the normal things that a 12-year-old would be doing."
>
> (Female, pre-retired, low income)

> "When [my sister] was born…my mum had a complete breakdown. Now they would identify it as post-natal depression but she was really ill, so I was virtually bringing up my little sister along with a neighbour, and then I'd go to school and I'd pick her up."
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income)

Early experiences of severe adversity had lasting effects. Participants exposed to early adversity often reported developing heightened financial vigilance, including risk aversion and anxiety about spending. While some translated this into disciplined financial management, others remained constrained by limited opportunities and ongoing precarity into adulthood.

> "[My family's lack of money] became personal to me when I went onto university…I was totally reliant on grants to get me through university, they were never enough so that kind of lived poverty as a child carried on through lived poverty as a student."
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, high income)

By contrast, those who grew up in more advantaged backgrounds were more likely to describe childhoods in which they had the freedom to focus on education, and clearer encouragement to pursue careers. A small minority of participants recalled upbringings in which their parents had stable, professional careers in occupations like management, teaching, medicine and business. These households were not always tied to greater happiness, but participants generally reported having felt a sense of financial security, marked by parents in stable employment, and time and money for leisurely pursuits. These participants were considerably more likely to report stable career trajectories, and better retirement outcomes in the present day.

> "I've never experienced hardship as such…my dad was a former boiler maker, so he was reasonably well paid. My mother was a supply teacher, she worked most of the time and in those days, it was normally one parent worked and that was adequate and that's how it probably was with them and my mother, her work, for the extras, that's how we got our holidays."
>
> (Male, retired 6 to10 years ago, medium income)
>
> "My father was in the civil service. My mother, at that time, was deputy headteacher, but then she went on to be a headteacher… I can't say home life was excessively happy. That's probably why I spent so much time at tennis club."
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income)

Education

Participants often described school as an uninspiring or negative environment, with several saying they had very little interest in school or aspirations beyond it. Some also felt that their interest in school was sometimes hampered by a lack of academic support and limited encouragement to pursue their aspirations.

> "They didn't really teach us much and we didn't really learn much…they pumped us through. In a roundabout way, getting us ready for work. There was no mention of college or nothing like that."
>
> (Male, retired 6 to10 years ago, medium income, digitally excluded)
>
> "When you make choices at school you really don't know what you're doing and there wasn't an awful lot of advice around that you could rely on…, so I think I was determined that I didn't really want to have an academic career. I didn't want to teach, so it took me away from doing things I was quite good at, like English and History."
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, high income)

Regardless of whether they had been interested in school, most participants reported leaving school between the ages of 15 and 17, to begin working and either contribute to their family income or become financially independent. They consistently framed this as a norm of the time, emphasising that entering the workforce was expected of them, while pursuing higher education was not. In any case, some participants stressed that going to university would not have been financially attainable even if they had wanted to.

> "I left school at sixteen…In those days…my parents didn't have the money for us to go to further education or university or anything like that, [it] was totally out of the equation."
>
> (Female, retired around 2 years ago, medium income)

A far smaller group of participants described having pursued higher education upon leaving school. This phenomenon spanned socioeconomic backgrounds. On one hand, those who described having grown up in middle- or high-income households disproportionately reported having gone to university. They sometimes recalled having had clearer ideas and aspirations for their careers, and citing the influence of expecting to 'follow in their parents' footsteps' and enter professional occupations.

> "I was quite lucky, I got into an all-boys technical school…and at that point it was very much, you go to school and then you go to university…and my parents [said] 'Well, you can do whatever you like, as long as you do your best to make a success of it'… my father was a teacher…and I wasn't sure what I was going to do, and an opportunity came up to go to [university] to do a teaching course."
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, medium income)

On the other hand, some participants from working class backgrounds also reported going to university upon finishing their school exams. These participants usually described having grown up in relatively stable, financially secure yet modest households, or being actively encouraged by family members to pursue higher education. Their accounts highlighted the strong influence of familial support, and prevailing attitudes that university attendance was synonymous with upward mobility – even if only undertaken to pursue their academic passions rather than to prepare for a particular profession.

> "It was always assumed that I would go to university…I think it's because I was quite clever and I was the first person in our family to go to university…that was just always what it would be, I was going to university."
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, high income)
>
> "My father did an apprenticeship, he was a welder…But I think he was quite determined that I wasn't to do that. I think he wanted something better…[in the 1960s and 1970s] there were definitely doors opening for people like me…I think there were strong factors of education taking me into better employment."
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, high income)

Participants' accounts highlighted the prime importance of the social and cultural expectations surrounding education when they were growing up. Whereas most grew up in family contexts shaped by limited financial flexibility and strict expectations surrounding work, a minority from comparatively more privileged backgrounds were encouraged to explore their options through education.

Parental attitudes to work and money

Regardless of their socioeconomic background, almost all participants described having been brought up with a strong moral emphasis on hard work as a core marker of respectability.

> "I was surrounded by people who worked…that's what you did, you worked…I've always worked. Part of it is financial but I think part of it was just this work ethic and probably a big streak of Calvinism down my back as well."
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, high income)
>
> "You knew you had to work. You get nothing in this life if you don't work…both my parents and grandparents and aunts, uncles, all worked hard for what they had in life."
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income)

Strict money management was also a defining feature of most participants' childhoods. Within low- and middle-income households in particular, this approach was reinforced through strong norms around avoiding waste, repairing and reusing items, buying only necessities, and saving small amounts of money where possible:

> "We would cash in [a sixpence savings stamp] for our holidays, and…for Christmas. Another sixpence we got allowed [us] to spend on sweeties, so we were encouraged at an early age to save, and it just became natural to put money aside."
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income)
>
> "I left home when I was sixteen…so from that age, I had to budget…my mother taught me to cook from six years old, so it just set up a way that you did things. She taught me how to sew, and how to knit, and how to get by."
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, low income)

Debt was consistently framed as something to be avoided at all costs, and viewed as dangerous or shameful, with participants repeating the mantra ‘if you can’t afford it, you don’t have it’:

> “My dad was always worried about getting into debt…We'd been brought up with this…’If we can't afford it, we don't have it.'”
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income)
>
> “I hate debt. If I can't have it, I'm never going to buy anything on credit. That's something my father always instilled.”
>
> (Male, retired around 2 years ago, medium income)

At the same time, most participants reported having received minimal or no explicit financial education, either in childhood or across their adult working lives. In several families, participants described money as a source of anxiety and tension that was never or rarely spoken about, meaning they learnt about it indirectly through behaviour rather than conversation:

> “[My parents] always lived in rented accommodation…We never went on holiday, ever. Always had beaten down old cars. You could never do things like go on school trips…I was always aware that [money] wasn't in abundance.”
>
> (Male, pre-retired, high income)
>
> “I never really saw my mum and dad budgeting, but they must have done. They always coped with their money…I don't know if they had a book to write it down. I never saw it if they did. That's just how I decided to do my household budgeting.”
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, medium income, digitally excluded)

Only a small minority recalled being actively taught principles of money management while growing up, such as budgeting and using simple savings products like Premium Bonds or building society accounts. These participants typically hailed from households that strongly valued education and framed financial discipline as a route to upward mobility:

> “When [participant’s father’s] business was picking up…he bought me my first premium bonds, which I've still got, in 1961. I was not then quite 10 years of age, and I've still got them. I've got a lot more now.”
>
> (Male, retired 6 to10 years ago, medium income)

Across the sample, participants frequently cited the lasting influence of values around hard work, resilience and thrift learnt in early life. This approach to money management emerged as a key component of their identities, shaped as much by upbringing as by economic necessity.

3.2 Entering adulthood

Entry into the workplace

As mentioned, many participants left school between the ages of 15 and 17, entering paid work immediately. For most of these school leavers, the transition into work was driven less by career aspiration than by immediate financial need, with participants frequently taking the first job available to them.

> “My mum was looking after me [and] money was extremely tight so…whatever I could get hold of, I was quite happy to do it. That's why I was working part-time on the farm and full-time at [a supermarket].”
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income, digitally excluded)

Both men and women who left school in their teens overwhelmingly entered low-paid labour, often entering roles classed as ‘typical’ for someone of their age, gender, and geographical location. While both male and female participants recalled having received little to no career guidance at school, it appeared that women were particularly disadvantaged. Overall, they described having narrower employment prospects at the point of leaving school, with jobs largely concentrated in administration, nursing and caring, cleaning and retail.

> “We didn't [get] much career advice in those days, and there weren't the opportunities that there are today. You just didn't know. My mother was a nurse, my adopted mother was a nurse, so I wanted to be a nurse.”
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, low income)
>
> “There was a career advisor who said basically, 'You can either be a nurse or work in an office being a typist’.”
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, medium income)

By contrast, male participants commonly moved into manual or technical occupations like farming, engineering, transport, and skilled trades. For some men, access to formal or informal apprenticeships provided an early opportunity to develop skills, which in some cases translated into better job progression down the line. Likewise, participants who went to university reported relative ease in getting a job after university:

> "I was applying for jobs before having left university…basically the job was sorted by about the time I finished university…it was just a six week gap and then I was straight into a job.”
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, high income)

Financial security after leaving home

Many participants across the sample recalled periods of financial instability after leaving home. These experiences were often tied to earning low incomes, increasing living costs and wider structural changes in their lives, like getting married, starting a family, or buying a house.

Buying a home and taking out a mortgage was undoubtedly one of the most significant financial milestones participants reported experiencing in early adulthood, bringing with it both reassurance and long-term anxiety. Most participants bought their first home with a partner in their twenties or early thirties. Participants who had grown up with housing or financial insecurity recalled that buying their first home symbolised independence from their families and personal progression, as well as control over their future and finances.

> “It was only after I met [my husband] that I felt, 'Oh, this is what life is really like.' You had time for yourself and you can just have a bit more freedom…we had a flat over the shop…The pay was £40 when we got married, £40 a week but it felt like I'd got more money, more time-less responsibility for family.”
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income)

Rather than engaging with more complex financial products, many participants framed their mortgage as their primary form of long-term financial planning, reinforcing the central role of housing in their perceptions of financial security and adequacy.

> “[My husband and I] bought our first home together…we managed to get some money together with the help from both our parents to get the deposit [for] a two-bedroom flat. That was in my early twenties and that was when I felt [a] sense of security. We've got a home of our own, we won't have the rent going up every couple of months…that was what I thought was going to be the start of my future…and building towards retirement and security.”
>
> (Female, retired around 2 years ago, medium income)

Despite the potential stability and security that getting married, having children and buying a house could bring, many participants found that financial challenges began to mount during this period in early adulthood. Having children not only raised costs noticeably, but many households survived on low or single incomes, resulting in difficulty planning and saving. Both male and female participants cited the impact of women leaving the workforce upon getting married or having children, either permanently or before later re-entering the workforce and juggling work with caring responsibilities.

> “[On working to support a growing family] I found a job very soon after I graduated. And then I got married very quickly after that. Thereafter, my wife was pregnant quite early as well, so life changed again for us…[and] within a couple of years my daughter was born as well. Then it became a difficult thing for me, because you're working…My wife was working, but then she had to leave, and in those days, things like having a job for six months or nine months didn't exist.”
>
> (Male, retired around 2 years ago, medium income)

Female participants frequently described a cultural context in which they were expected to leave work to raise children, and systemic constraints that prevented them from continuing to work through motherhood:

> "I did a couple of years at the [hospital]…I met my husband to be, I got pregnant. I had to leave nursing, there was no maternity situations. For women, if you got pregnant, you left work and went home to do wifely things."
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, medium income)
>
> "It was always the thought that…you meet somebody, you get married, you buy a house, you have children…back in the '70s that's what 90% of people did."
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, medium income)

A small but significant subset of women described been forced or pressured to stop working by their husband, laying the groundwork for being under their husband's financial control, and impacting their financial security in later life.

> "I discovered that my husband was very possessive…he said, 'I want you to give up work'…he insisted, after a year at work, that I gave it up, and I fell pregnant."
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income)

In cases where women continued working part-time after having children, this often reflected financial constraints, including needing to supplement household income despite having a partner in full-time work. Given the pressures that many participants experienced upon leaving home and starting their own lives, some recalled relying on their families for financial or practical support, and others began accumulating debt. Early accumulation of debt through credit cards, overdrafts, high interest loans and mortgage arrears laid the groundwork for financial instability, which in some participants' cases persisted well into adulthood.

> "I probably decided to buy a house too soon, I bought a house when I was 23 on a 100% mortgage…it wasn't sustainable really given that there were some severe financial shocks as a consequence of [Black Monday]…I was living off credit cards just to make ends meet…gradually mounting up debt upon debt."
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, high income)
>
> "I had all these credit cards and I think I'd borrowed on all of them… I got married in Thailand…things changed then, my wife was looking forward to coming to England and then we started this family…once the child was on its way I began to think, '3 of us, in this flat? That's not going to work'...I'm still paying some of those [credit] cards…I've been doing that for as long as I can remember."
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income, digitally excluded)

3.3 Work and careers

Career structure emerged as one of the strongest predictors of financial and pension security in later life. Participants who had relatively stable, linear careers experienced the most secure outcomes, while those who undertook fragmented careers were more likely to feel financially precarious in later life. In addition to this, disruptions to career trajectory, including redundancies, health issues and caring duties, were experienced by participants in vastly different ways, with the most substantial differences resting largely on whether they had financial buffers in place to absorb shocks.

Career trajectories

Most had highly fragmented careers that featured long periods of part-time, temporary work in low-paid sectors such as retail, care and factory work, with limited progression. This trajectory was very common among women and digitally excluded participants, and was followed for numerous reasons, often stemming from limited academic or professional qualifications, an immediate need to earn one or multiple incomes, or due to caring responsibilities at home. Childcare and caring responsibilities specifically caused some of the most decisive disruptions to career trajectories, and were overwhelmingly undertaken by female participants. Whether single or partnered, women disproportionately juggled fragmented, part-time work in lower-paid, low-seniority roles, with limited opportunities for progression, and caring responsibilities for children and other family members.

> “[On balancing part-time work with raising a severely disabled son] The birth of my oldest son did make a lot of changes to my ability to continue in full-time work…[I] ending up doing part-time jobs, which weren't sufficient to continue paying into any sort of pension pot or saving…and was also quite costly, going backwards and forwards to the hospital.”
>
> (Female, retired around 2 years ago, low income)
>
> “I had my first child when I was 17, so from then until I got divorced, I always seemed to have tin pot jobs, jobs that fitted around my girls…my husband would come home, I'd go to work, cleaning or working in a shop at night.”
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income

As mentioned, many female participants had left school without exams results and entered straight into unskilled work, before leaving the workforce or working part-time once they had started families. Various participants reported having returned to education later in life, using this as a strategy for retraining, upskilling and reorienting their careers. However, these attempts at later-life reinvention did not necessarily lead to improved financial stability in later life. Due to the volatility of many women’s career trajectories – often spanning multiple decades – with frequent job changes and low-incomes, these career paths usually accumulated minimal pension savings. They were also more likely to be single and living alone by comparison with the rest of the sample, experiencing ill health, and relying on the State Pension and benefits as their primary retirement income sources.

Overall, caring for children and partners earlier in life delayed or disrupted women's careers, limiting their earnings, reducing opportunities to save, and often resulting in paused or foregone pension contributions. By contrast with many women's career trajectories, men's pathways tended to revolve far less around caring responsibilities. If they had caring duties, they tended to be more episodic and task-based, and far less likely to derail their careers or financial stability. Only a very small minority of men described having caring roles that spanned adulthood, such as single fatherhood or sustained financial support for former partners and children.

A smaller group of mostly male participants from working-class backgrounds reported having had skilled but fragmented careers, characterised by strong skills in industrial and manual roles, but also career instability. These participants did not follow a single continuous trajectory, instead moving between sectors, employers, or employment types, due largely to redundancies, job loss, and health issues. Though redundancy was one of the most common forms of career disruption across the sample, reports of redundancy were particularly common among male participants in manual and industrial roles like brewing, manufacturing and engineering. Accounts from these participants illustrate how, despite having often accumulated pensions through years of service in one role, many were still left financially exposed. Due to having trained in a specialised field, frequent or shock redundancies triggered a need to retrain or move into different, potentially less specialised fields, thereby limiting their ability to develop their career and build stable pension pots. Crucially, these participants also tended to come from more financially precarious backgrounds, meaning they lacked financial cushioning when crises hit.

> "[I] was getting made redundant every few months, it seemed to me. Well, certainly every year or 2. It was never as smooth as you hoped it would be."
>
> (Male, retired around 2 years ago, low income)

A small group of male and female participants who had linear, professional career trajectories, characterised by long tenure within one or more organisations, clearer opportunities for progression, and better-defined pathways into retirement. Participants in this group were more likely to have gone to university, to be earning higher incomes in pre-retirement or retirement, and to report higher financial security in the present day. This pattern was especially evident in participants who had worked in the public sector, most notably in teaching, the NHS and the Civil Service, as well as in sectors like finance, academia and science. Participants in stable public sector roles in particular described a strong sense of security, benefitting from DB pension schemes that offered predictability in retirement.

> "I think I'm more comfortable than what I expected to be…I left school at 16, and I had a choice of either going to an apprenticeship with [company] or an apprenticeship with [a public sector body], and I chose [the public sector body]…If I'd gone to the Electricity Board, I probably would've ended up self-employed…you wouldn't have had a pension like I've got now."
>
> (Male, retired 6 to10 years ago, medium income)

This group of participants were not immune to redundancies, but they appeared to process them less as financial crises, and more as practical or logistical challenges. Participants recalled structured processes often involving advance notice, severance packages and pension protection. In several cases, redundancy was also taken voluntarily or strategically. Some described actively using redundancy to reinvent themselves and pivot into new roles, or as a pathway into early or planned retirement:

> "We had a Defined Benefits scheme [and the company I worked for] was slowly and gradually being depleted, and we knew that this was going to close soon…I had a good chat and I was good lower management, and I got a very good redundancy pay-check."
>
> (Male, retired 6 to10 years ago, high income)
>
> "I didn't enjoy my job, so when the opportunity [came] to put my hand up for voluntary redundancy, I did…because of my years, I knew that I was going to get quite a nice pay off."
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, medium income)

Overall, it appeared that participants in more stable career trajectories felt more empowered to take risks, possibly pointing to wider financial stability, more safety nets and lower levels of concern surrounding finding another job.

Participants' accounts underline how financial security and adequacy in later life was shaped far more by career stability than by effort or skill alone. Linear professional and public sector careers facilitated pension accumulation while fragmented, unstable or low-paid careers made this far harder, predominantly affecting lower-income and female participants, and those who are now digitally excluded.

3.4 Approach to financial management across adulthood

Most participants aimed to be frugal with their finances, regardless of factors such as their class, gender and region. While this approach was widespread, there were some important differences in how frugality was enacted, with participants from working-class backgrounds more often describing financial strategies centred on survival, and those from more middle-class backgrounds tending to demonstrate more structured planning and higher levels of engagement with savings and investment products (e.g. ISAs, stocks)

Financial engagement, habits and behaviours

Overall, participants consistently reported low levels of financial literacy throughout adulthood, citing a limited understanding of pensions, taxation rules and savings products. These patterns were observed across socioeconomic backgrounds, education levels and genders, particularly with low levels of understanding of workplace pensions. In most cases, participation in them occurred by default rather than by choice, with participants enrolled automatically. Around a third of participants were enrolled into DB pension schemes in early adulthood, with the majority of them being men in public sector roles (energy, telecoms, engineering, teaching, local government, NHS).

Only a few participants chose to enrol in a SIPP early in their careers. The majority of participants did not join a workplace pension or begin making their own pension savings until far later, when automatic enrolment was made mandatory in 2012. This was especially the case for low-income participants, and those in manual or fragmented careers. More broadly, participants repeatedly described prioritising short-term costs over pension saving and lacking education about long term planning. A small minority demonstrated higher levels of financial engagement or confidence, such as familiarity with specific financial products, and this was often acquired later in life.

Challenges affecting financial security in adulthood

Accounts of divorce and relationship breakdown highlighted their potential to cause major, potentially permanent damage to participants' financial trajectories. Divorce was also identified as a significant trigger of housing insecurity, with some participants being forced to move out of their home, sometimes leading to long term renting, accumulation of debt, and limited capacity to rebuild pension provision. There were clearly gendered patterns among participants' experiences of divorce; women were more likely to exit relationships with lower pension entitlements, financial insecurity and weaker opportunities for obtaining stable employment, while men were more likely to retain their pension assets but face housing instability. Many women also had to navigate single parenthood following separation, facing severely constrained finances, emotional aftershocks, and potential upheaval in housing security.

> "My finances were the weakest when I got divorced because then it was just my salary and I didn't take anything out of the property financially…and I was in a rented property for a little while."
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, medium income)
>
> [On the impact of divorce] "[My husband] was on a good wage and he would have been on an even better pension, so if I'd stayed with him I would have been a lot better financially now…I thought we were going to live off my husband's pension."
>
> (Female, pre-retired, low income)

These disruptions highlight how quickly expectations built around shared finances and futures can unravel, with lasting consequences for later life security. One female participant pointed to the impact of paying the married woman's reduced National Insurance stamp, a National Insurance scheme (1948 to1977) that allowed working married women to pay lower NI contributions. While reducing immediate costs, this resulted in lower or absent state pensions for women in their own right:

> "When I first started work…I don't think I paid the proper State Pension because they used to call it a marriage State Pension."
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, low income, digitally excluded)

For men, divorce tended to shape life outcomes in narrower, financial terms, with some reporting significant financial impacts from supporting ex-partners and children:

> "When I divorced, our financial situation changed a bit because looking at our financial situation and the way that the law was, it was quite clear that I was being advised to sell the house. And to divide the share in the house 50:50 between myself and my ex-wife. I refused to do that; I didn't want my daughter to be turfed out of her house because we were getting separated. So, I made an offer that my ex-wife could keep the house, it was mortgage free… so my ex-wife got the house and I got a mortgage because I had to live somewhere."
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income, digitally excluded)

A few participants experienced debt as a result of severe financial hardship, triggered by life events like divorce, redundancy, health shocks and business collapse. They characterised periods of debt – some of which are still ongoing – as deeply traumatic. Participants who experienced debt bankruptcy or severe financial hardship as a result of a failed business venture were also considerably more likely to report physical or mental health shocks. Their accounts revealed how health shocks rarely occurred in isolation, often triggering downward spirals in which physical decline, financial strain and emotional distress reinforced one another. Gradual deterioration in health reduced their ability to sustain work, leading to financial difficulties and heightened anxiety about the future.

Participants described a range of strategies for managing or overcoming debt, including cashing out pension pots, entering Individual Voluntary Arrangements (IVAs), taking on multiple job roles to increase income, and remortgaging or selling their homes.

> "[On being made redundant and not being able to pay off debts] I got finished up at work, I used some of the money that I got as the three-months' pay to pay as much off as possible…in 2022 [I had to] put in for an IVA because I'd just run out of money completely and I couldn't pay."
>
> (Female, retired around 2 years ago, low income)

Although rare, experiences of home loss as a result of debt marked some of the sharpest points of divergence in later-life financial security. Home loss was always the consequence of multiple, compounded crises, and participants who lost their homes did not have any meaningful financial buffers to fall back on. Most had not accumulated substantial pension assets prior to losing their homes, and debt accumulation had a direct impact on their ability to build their pensions.

> "In 2008, with the banking crisis, we'd just taken out loans to enlarge the brewery and that wiped us out. It was clear from then on…that each year we were losing more and more money…[so] we took the difficult decision to sell the brewery and the pub. But, in order to get rid of all the debt, I had to cash in an old pension."
>
> (Male, retired around 2 years ago, low income)

The consequences of home loss were long-lasting, with all participants who lost their homes now renters rather than owners, reporting chronic anxiety about housing costs and stability, and expressing a sense of enduring financial fragility as they enter older age.

> "[On going bankrupt as a result of not paying tax bills] I had the business for about 10 years in total…I managed to pay my way, but I was careless with money. I didn't always remember to pay the tax bills, things which I should have done…I made payments to them, sold the house. I rented a flat and I was in that flat for 6 or 7 years but [when the landlord wanted to sell it] I got evicted…So, I was registered homeless."
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, medium income)

The next section examines how disruptive, life-altering events shaped participants' pathways into retirement, influencing the degree of choice available to them in later life.

3.5 Case study

Gill

- **66**
- **Female**
- **North West**
- **Renting from private landlord**
- **Divorced**
- **Retired 1 year ago**
- **Low income**

"My biggest fear is not having enough money to pay a bill."

[About what 'getting by' means to her] "Being able to keep up with paying bills, have sufficient heating and so on, particularly with [Child]'s conditions because he shouldn't really get 'cold' cold…It's never been a priority to be able to go out or do things."

Key life events

Gill **grew up in slum housing** in Liverpool, **faced with constant financial threat,** and her mother's sudden death led to her leaving school without exam results. Motherhood then redirected Gill's life towards **intensive caring for her three sons,** including one with severe disabilities. In her eyes, this fundamentally altered her life course, preventing her from working full time and saving. Her later career at an SEN college proved to be **her most stable period of work, ending abruptly during COVID** due to ill health.

Sense of enough'

For Gill, **'enough' is not about abundance but safety, stability and escaping the fears of her childhood** - hunger, housing instability and financial threat. Growing up in poverty and later raising children under extreme pressure, 'getting by' meant meeting basic needs and avoiding crisis, with little choice or long-term planning. **Now, 'enough' means predictability, independence and security** – stable housing for herself and her 40-year-old disabled son, paying bills, eating healthy, home-cooked food, keeping warm, and small comforts.

Pressure & pleasures

Gill has **limited safety nets and little margin for the unexpected.** Living on a very tight, fixed income requires **constant vigilance over bills** and rising costs, and **reliance on private renting brings housing insecurity.** Lifelong caring responsibilities shape nearly every aspect of her life, alongside her own mental health challenges and the lasting effects of serious illness, including two heart attacks. **She finds meaning in her relationships with loved ones** – with her sons, grandchildren and a small circle of friends – and joy in spending time with them. Her resilience is underpinned by kindness, acceptance and emotional endurance.

Retirement & pension engagement

Gill has long had to prioritise survival over long-term strategy, limiting her ability to learn about pensions. Her **route into retirement was unplanned and involuntary.** Having expected to work beyond State Pension age, **intense pressure during COVID led to a mental health crisis and her dismissal** on ill-health grounds in 2021. After a prolonged period on Universal Credit while an employment tribunal was resolved, she finally retired in 2025. Now retired, Gill lives modestly; though she is financially vigilant, **years of part-time work, late auto-enrolment, and early exit from work have constrained her retirement income.**

Gill approaches the future with caution, describing herself as a 'pessimistic optimist.' Her hopes are modest and grounded, with her outlook less about progress or improvement, and more about avoiding a return to earlier insecurity.

4 The journey into retirement

Building on experiences of the past outlined in the previous chapter, this chapter examines how participants planned for retirement and how prepared they felt as they approached it. It outlines emotional readiness for retirement, catalysts for retirement, and explores the differences of planned versus forced retirement journeys. We also outline how much participants knew about their pension entitlements, and when they acquired this knowledge.

4.1 Planning for retirement

Across the interviews we uncovered a range of different plans and experiences leading up to the point of retirement, but they broadly fell into two camps; a planned, smooth transition into retirement, or a sudden, more immediate and unanticipated end to their working life.

Amongst those who experienced a more planned and slow transition, some of this was down to mindset, as explored previously. This tended to happen with those who were more financially diligent – they had learned over time to be prudent with their finances and, therefore, had planned for their retirement from a young age. There was a sense that making practical provisions for their retirement also helped them mentally prepare for it as well, and the transition was much smoother and easier for them to handle.

Such participants had tended to make a number of staged decisions when planning for their retirement, all of which enabled them to be able to plan for the event and predict the age at which they would be ready to retire. These decisions tended to focus on their entitlement amounts and the age at which they would be able to access their pensions.

> “Well, my husband has got really bad arthritis and couldn't work. So, we decided that when he was 66 and he could get his [State] pension, because obviously we didn't have any other pension, we would retire. He retired at 66, got his government pension. I taught for a year-and-a-bit during COVID at this school and they said would I stay one more year, which is why I stayed until I was 67. In that year we'd bought a motorhome, and we bought our chalet at the sailing club. So, that year was specifically targeted money to buy what we specifically wanted for retirement.”
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income)

Some had checked their National Insurance payment history and had explored the benefits of moving to Self-Invested Personal Pensions (SIPP) and other products.

Typically, this group tended to be more affluent retirees who had more complex financial affairs and therefore were more aware of different financial products and benefits. Such participants tended to have multiple income sources, such as Defined Benefit or Defined Contribution pension schemes, investments and often rental income. Those in this group often looked at their mortgages, calculated when they would be able to pay them off, and when it would be advantageous for them to cash in on their investments and other savings.

This behaviour not only reflected their affluence, but often their circumstances as they approached retirement, with those with partners and properties more likely to be in this category. The presence of a partner is crucial – there is a sense that retirement becomes a shared enterprise and they need to understand each other's entitlement in order to make decisions about their own retirement. Partners often encourage each other to get their financial affairs in order.

For many in this group, the State Pension is a supplementary income that they are not reliant on, in some cases they have retired much sooner than State Pension age and are using their savings or private pensions to fund those early years of retirement.

> "I think this idea of planning ahead is perhaps useful. I mean, I never thought of mine, but I was lucky in that I knew I had a good pension, even without the State Pension. It would've been better if I'd have carried on, I mean, if I'd retired at 60 or whatever."
>
> (Male, retired 6 to10 years ago, medium income)

A small minority had received advice about how to proceed from friends or individual financial advisers (IFAs), but many had simply done the research themselves online.

On the other hand, many of those who we spoke to did not exhibit this behaviour and often experienced a more hurried, or disorganised transition into retirement. Some of these participants were the inverse of those already described, they had a short-term approach to financial management, coupled with fewer sources of income that meant they paid less attention to their finances for retirement. This meant that they were less likely to have taken formal financial advice or sought information online. They were also more likely to be single and living alone.

> "Well, I didn't really think about my retirement because I was expecting to get my pension and with him having a pension as well, hopefully, the house would have been paid off by then, but, obviously, things don't work out that way, do they?"
>
> (Female, Retired 6 to10 years ago, low income)

Due to this disengagement, those in this group were more likely to be susceptible to sudden shocks or financial miscalculations. For one participant specifically, being in receipt of a large amount of money close to retirement lulled her into a false sense of security and helped her make the decision to retire.

> "Although I wasn't in receipt of my State Pension, I had my redundancy and I did have that inheritance, which enabled us to clear the mortgage and various

> things. And I thought at that time, 'Well this is great, we're going to be hunky dory.' But then, you don't realise you've got to keep on living and you're draining that resource as well….I was basically using that inheritance and my redundancy to live on and do the things that we wanted to do - going on holidays…so, that was a draw down and it was taking all that money away. I just didn't think about it…I just thought, 'This is great, let's spend it.' It sounds very flippant."
>
> (Female, retired 6+ years ago, medium income)

In terms of the information sources that participants use to plan their retirement, use of the internet was widespread across both groups, but those who were more organised around their retirement tended to use it proactively in order to plan, whereas those who were either less organised, or for who retirement had arrived unexpectedly, tended to use it more reactively, to check information they had heard or been told elsewhere.

In many cases, information had been provided anecdotally by friends and family, or more formally by colleagues and HR departments, though participants tended to use the internet, and particularly sites such as Citizens Advice and government websites as the gold standard. Those that were digitally excluded were only able to rely on information provided in person, though some had asked questions of professionals in libraries or council offices, often as a last resort.

4.2 Planning for the unexpected

There were also a large number of participants for whom unlucky and unexpected circumstances had made their retirement more difficult than they had anticipated. Many of them simply retired much sooner than they had anticipated, often due to a health condition, or feeling physically incapable of doing the job anymore.

> "I eventually ended up working the night shift and I'd do 5 nights a week and all day Sunday. Towards the end, I was diagnosed with fibromyalgia….I found I was struggling and I felt as though people were carrying me. They'd say, 'Don't lift that.' They'd lift it, …. I didn't want to be carried. I felt as though I had to go, it was time to give up the job and that I was due to retire."
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income)

Several participants described retiring earlier than planned in order to care for partners, parents or other family members. Others experienced an escalation of health problems after retirement, which reshaped their daily lives and financial needs in ways they had not anticipated. In these cases, retirement was less a transition into freedom and more an adjustment to new forms of responsibility.

> "I always thought that my husband and I would go on lots of abroad holidays and enjoy ourselves…go on lots of walks, things like that. But when I did retire, I retired because he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and none of that really happened. Plans didn't happen."
>
> (Female, retired around 6 to10 years ago, medium income).

For others, there was more of a vague sense that the ‘time was right’, especially after reaching or approaching a ‘milestone age’ – they took no pleasure in the job any more or were bored of the monotony.

> “I retired when I was 65, and I'd been thinking about it for a few years up to then. Once I passed 60, really… I was coming towards the end of wanting to work anyway, and I thought, 'Well, I might as well'.”
>
> (Male, retired 6 to10 years ago, high income)

For many, a cultural shift in the workplace had helped to usher them out; participants gave examples such as a new boss, new office location, or a new software or system that they were required to adopt and felt that this was the ‘final straw’. For many, it was the unwanted changes brought about by COVID lockdowns that proved to be the accelerant to their retirement.

> “I was a teacher, and COVID came along and that meant teaching on screen, which was appalling. I'm a health and fitness person, so a lot of what I did was fairly hands on and practically based. Trying to do that through Teams was a disaster…and after a little while of that, probably a few months, I thought, 'This is just going nowhere, it's not fun anymore.' So, we did the sums and I could afford to retire at that point, I was 62, and so I did.”
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, medium income)

This feeling often came on quite quickly, however, and meant that many retired years before they had anticipated. Even for those that had prepared their retirements carefully over many years, these ‘best laid plans’ were quickly undone by circumstances.

> “No [I hadn’t thought about retirement], the business was going absolutely brilliant. My books were full, I was snowed under with work and then I had this accident and it just killed everything. Yes, I was doing bloody 7 days a week. Just to keep people happy.”
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, medium income)

This group also included women born in the 1950s (sometimes called WASPI women), many of whom say they had only in the years immediately before retirement or at the point of retirement found that they were not eligible for the State Pension at 60. This had left some of them financially vulnerable until the age of 65 or 66, relying on savings or smaller private pensions to fill the gap. Though they felt they could have received information earlier, it was clear, often by their own admission, that they had not given enough thought to their retirement.

> “In my head I was always retiring at 60, and I was quite happy to continue my work until I was 60. So, when I got to about 58 and I mentioned something about retiring at 60, and was told, 'There's no way that you're having a pension until you're 66,' and I went through and read things, and found out, 'Actually, this is right.' I was miffed.”
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, high income)

On the whole, it was not that participants simply stopped work abruptly, – these circumstantial changes prompted them to re-examine their financial position to see if retirement was viable and what standard of life they could expect.

However, for those that were forced to retire due to their own illness, or that of a loved one, there was no other choice, they were forced to make do with what they had, even if they were not entitled to the State Pension or if their private pension had not yet reached maturity.

> "As far as I was concerned, I would be able to continue work for as long as I wanted to…I wasn't thinking I'd have to retire at 65. I just thought I'd be able to carry on working until I was at least 70."
>
> (Female, retired less than 2 years ago, low income)

Overall, our interviews uncovered a sense of regret around retirement - few had had the perfect experience in terms of planning and execution, and many regretted not putting enough thought into their retirement, nor being encouraged to do so.

> "Well, I suppose I didn't envisage how much I actually would have needed. I think mentally I wish I'd planned better. I suppose we all don't think retirement is going to come that quick, so in hindsight I suppose I wish I'd planned a little better than what I actually done."
>
> (Female, retired less than 2 years ago, medium income)
>
> "In fact that whole thing around retiring is almost forgotten. Nobody talks about it, no one says to you, 'Right.' One of the things I was trying to push as a Trade Union officer was a move towards the last 5 years of your working life being a transient thing where you worked one day less every year that you worked for the company, and spent some of that time being trained on how to retire. Because I think it is a skill…not just your monetary amounts but how you live."
>
> (Male, retired around 2 years ago, low income)

4.3 Pension preparedness

Our research found that those who were mainly or entirely reliant on the State Pension were less likely to have made the appropriate investigations into their entitlement and pension plans

Indeed, this seemed particularly true with digitally excluded participants who had fewer opportunities to explore their entitlement. Often digitally excluded participants had not engaged with technology because their spouse had 'done everything for them' and been able to browse the internet, manage accounts, and apply for benefits on their behalf. This was sometimes as much of a hindrance than a help because, upon their passing, they find themselves without the skills to navigate 'the system.'

But, broadly, the spectrum of pension engagement reflected how much planning had gone into their retirement and whether it was imminent or not. We were able to identify three retiree types, shaped by both circumstances and personality, that form the spectrum of pension engagement.

Firstly, there are proactive planners. As referenced above, they tend to be more affluent with a broader pension portfolio and are therefore more financially resilient. They are more likely to still live with their spouses, and own one or more homes.

They reported to us that prior to retirement they checked their National Insurance contributions, sought financial advice where necessary, diversified their incomes, and earmarked a date for retirement based on what would allow them an optimised ongoing income (though, as discussed, sometimes this date came much earlier). They liaised with partners to assess their pension eligibility as well.

> "Now, my SIPP, I've got that as a drawdown and I look at that regularly in terms of do I need to increase the drawdown, do I need to reduce the drawdown, how it's performing? And more recently, it's been performing quite well. So, I look at that in terms of if I continue with the drawdown at the current rate, how long will that pension last me until it comes down to zero without any growth on the fund at all?."
>
> (Male, retired 6 to10 years ago, high income)
>
> "We had a financial adviser at that point, and so we were just doing some sums, along with looking after the pensions that we started building up as I was in contract work; what did we have overall in terms of assets? What was our general spending pattern? Where might things end up? So, before even thinking about retiring you would want to make sure that as far as you could tell within sensible boundaries that financially things would be okay."
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, high income)

For this group, the State Pension was less likely to be a crucial component in their retirement, and more likely to be a 'nice to have'. This group also understood their State Pension entitlement better than those for whom the State Pension is more critical.

> "I'm assuming the government will write to me when I come up to my 67th birthday and tell me I can either take it or hold it until a later date and take it then. I think it's due just before I'm 67 which is 3 years away, so, it's not something I worry about. I never worked on the basis that I'd be reliant on the government State Pension."
>
> (Male, pre-retired, high income)
>
> "All of a sudden, my employer pension became available, and I had an earlier retirement age there, I think it was 63, but I could take it earlier….I then realised I could, between that pensionable income and some self-employment, I could live quite well, and from then I learned to work with financial advisers, and getting all my money together in that one place, putting it into a diversified but secure form of income, finding ISAs as a way to get a bit of savings. All of that, I think, was where the planning started."

> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, high income)

Secondly, we identified ad-hoc engagers, who exhibit similar behaviour, but in a less consistent way. They engage, but with knowledge gaps, and are often more likely to fill the gaps with anecdotal information from their friends or loved ones around such things as accrual amounts, tax, and entitlement. This means that their roads to retirement are less smooth, particularly if they are forced to retire earlier than they had anticipated.

They are more likely to make miscalculations and misunderstand policies, for example overestimating their retirement income, not taking inflation into consideration or not accounting for the tax impact on their occupational income. This makes them more likely to need their State Pension income as critical spend, as opposed to being able to set it aside for luxuries or savings.

> “All I can see is just that the living expenses and the prices of food will still keep going up, and the pensions won't hardly change at all. So, it's like inflation is going up quicker than what we get in the pension.”
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income)

Finally, we identified the third, more vulnerable group, reactive retirees. They are more likely to be less affluent, to live alone, and work in jobs with a physical requirement, meaning they are more likely to retire in a sudden, unexpected way. However, they have not put sufficient thought or planning into their retirement meaning they are less protected from the ‘slings and arrows’ of unforeseen shocks and financial shortfalls. Their prospects often only come to light for them after they have retired, when it is too late to go back, and they are forced to react accordingly. Some in this group told us that the intention to start planning for their retirement was there, but the moment of retirement had come too soon, and their finances were not where they had wanted them.

However, there were other experiences of pension preparedness not captured in the spectrum reported above. For example, those with a public sector pension, the overall experience of retirement was better, as they had both a relatively generous settlement and were equipped with the information they needed to know when they might retire.

> “I didn't really think much towards the future, towards pensions or anything like that. I worked for the local authority and my husband worked in the civil service then. So, we both had a pension with those bodies and didn't have to really think about it very much.”
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, low income)

And for others, there was a combination of distrust in the system and disinclination about paying money into the system, to the extent that they had invested their money in other ways.

> “At that time, we've had to start thinking about retirement, and it came about because the company asked… if we wanted to contribute towards a pension. So… I said, 'Well, I'm not really into giving these people money,' because you

> hear all these things about these bloody pension places going bust and all this, and I said, 'Why don't we just go and buy an apartment in Turkey?' And so that's what we did, so that was our investment for retirement."
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, low income)

Taken together, these different journeys into retirement left participants entering later life with markedly different levels of preparedness, confidence and resilience. These same patterns continue across pre-retired participants.

Whilst many pre-retired participants demonstrated a high level of engagement with retirement planning in general, this confidence often broke down when discussions turned to how pensions should actually be used at retirement. Participants showed awareness of concepts such as annuities, lump sums and drawdown in abstract terms, and could often describe their own main workplace pension pots well.

> "I get a full State Pension. I'm on top of that. I know what an annuity would buy me and to get my money back, I would have to live to about 90 odd, 90 odd years."
>
> (Female, pre-retired, low income)

However, some described uncertainty and avoidance when it came to specifically making those decisions about pension products, or specific pension pots, especially smaller or fragmented ones. Understanding these smaller pension pots represented unfinished business from their working lives that they knew needed to be dealt with, but there was a sense of 'not knowing where to start.' They felt too small to materially impact retirement income, but too important to ignore and not act on.

> "Financial advisors, because it's such a small pot of money, they're not interested. We've approached a couple over the years, but because it's not a vast amount of money, they really don't want to know…"
>
> (Female, pre-retired, low income)

This pattern of understanding what decisions have to be made, but not feeling equipped or supported to make them, was common across pre-retired participants. Risk aversion tended to intensify feelings of hesitation too, especially for those with previous losses or low trust in financial institutions, including pension providers and organisations offering investment or savings products. One participant in particular experienced the collapse of a building society earlier in life, which reinforced a fear that money could just 'disappear'.

In contrast, already-retired participants were less likely to describe this kind of active indecision and spoke about pensions in more settled terms, as income streams that had already been accessed and simplified. In several cases, retirees appeared to have defaulted into specific outcomes (e.g. drawing an annuity or relying solely on the State Pension) rather than actively choosing between products.

The next section therefore moves beyond how people arrived at retirement to explore how these different pathways translated into expectations, hopes and concerns for the future.

4.4 Case study

Kevin

- 66
- Male
- East of England
- Renting from private landlord
- Married
- Retired 2 years ago
- Low income

"We're now totally debt-free, which is a good thing, but we've also got very little money, which is not a good thing. And the future is bleaker, I suppose."

"I don't see myself at 90, I don't think I'll be alive then. I'm not sure I want to be."

Key life events

Kevin grew up in London and **left school at 15 to become an apprentice engineer** after a challenging upbringing. After 20 years he **moved into brewing**, eventually **owning his own business**, but he lost the business during the **2008** financial crisis. Kevin's **retirement was unexpected and unplanned rather than an active choice;** upon his doctor's advice, **health issues** pushed him into early retirement two years ago, and he has **relied on his wife's pension** since then.

Sense of 'enough'

For Kevin, 'enough' is defined by **visible material things** e.g., a home, a car, holidays. This made 'enough' feel **aspirational** and framed around **enjoyment, as well as security.** Due to the impact of redundancies, he also defined 'enough' through having **job security. Job security and reliance on his wife's income strongly shape his views** on enough, reinforcing a desire to maintain the status quo rather than aim for growth. **His aspiration is not for a "lavish" life during retirement,** but a "normal" life.

Pressure & pleasures

Kevin **enjoyed owning his own brewery** and found it fulfilling, particularly being **able to make his own decisions.** However **external shocks, particularly the 2008 Financial Crisis,** forced financial decisions that prioritised survival, including cashing out two pensions and taking on debt, this also meant that he could not save. Outside pressures have also continued to add financial pressures, with the increase in **cost of living impacting** his day-to-day life. In the future he would take **pleasure in travelling and seeing family more**, but uncertainty around finances and health make these prospects feel unlikely.

Retirement & pension engagement

Kevin entered retirement feeling **under-informed and under-prepared** about his entitlements. He "knew [he] wasn't going to save the amount [he] needed" and was not aware of the need to apply for the State Pension. He felt that **the process of applying should be made clearer**. As Kevin had not been focused on saving for retirement he **found it hard to engage with the idea of the future**, particularly regarding how finances would look once his wife retired. He expressed **pessimism** about the future and concern about the prospect of reaching 90 years old.

Kevin prioritised getting by and building stability in his working life, so retirement was something that arrived rather than something that he prepared for. He therefore feels uncertain and pessimistic about what lies ahead.

5 Futures: expectations, hopes and concerns

This chapter examines participants' views of the future and how they are shaped by a complex interaction between health, finances, housing, family and wider economic conditions. Across age, gender and income groups, health is the dominant future concern, with most anticipating physical decline and recognising that unpredictable care needs could threaten both financial security and independence. This chapter also uncovers how financial outlooks varied by income and housing tenure. Those with multiple income streams and home ownership felt more optimistic and buffered against any upcoming shocks, while lower-income participants focused on day-to-day pressures and the rising cost of living. Inflation, geopolitical instability and shifting government policy added to a sense of unpredictability.
Finally, we will reflect on legacy; participants with high incomes expect to leave assets and actively support family, while others prioritised their personal comfort and independence, redefining legacy through relationships, community contribution or caring for grandchildren.
Despite financial uncertainty, participants' hopes for later life consistently centred on maintaining health, independence and adequacy.

5.1 Anticipated future needs

Future needs are shaped as much by the body as by the bank account. Across the interviews, concerns about health were universal across age, gender and income level. Participants' financial outlooks were therefore less about what they currently have and more about uncertainty over what their health might demand in the future. The possibility of sudden or gradual health decline, and the potential long-term costs of care loomed large, influencing how secure participants felt and how they approached retirement planning.

Most expected a steady decline in their health, although some expect to stay healthy in the short term due to their focus on health and fitness, others are concerned about a sudden and rapid decline due to illnesses outside of their control. A decline of health is expected to threaten financial adequacy and independence due to the cost of care, as the length and complexity of the care is unpredictable. Such fears are not unfounded, given that many retirees were already currently managing a range of health conditions at the time of being interviewed.

Others were concerned with the rate and severity of their decline, particularly those who have: lower retirement incomes, have already had health scares/have been living with long-term health conditions, or those without partners or family to support them.

> “It depends on who goes first. At the end of the day, my husband's 10 years older than I am. If he goes first, I'll struggle... Just general things around the house, I would struggle with, so really I need to go before he does, but then if he's left behind, he's not going to be able to cope and manage the financial side of things”
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income)

Participants expected to need care in the future, but many were also concerned about being a ‘burden’ either to their children or their partner or to the state. This concern is top of mind for those who have cared for their partner or have had a health scare, as the prospect of ill health or complex care needs feels more ‘real’ and urgent.

> “I'm frightened to death of going into a nursing home. I'm frightened to death of dying and I don't want to be a burden. I've always tried to look after myself and not ask for help.”
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income)
>
> “Because we've got no children, what we're doing for my in-laws, we're not going to have anybody to do that for us so we've got to put some finances away to pay for that when we do get to that age.”
>
> (Female, pre-retired, low income)

Most participants foresee challenges with regards to their mobility in the future. Although the majority want to stay at home as they age, they recognise that this may not be feasible in the long term. Those who own their own homes would look to downsize in order to pay for their care or to manage mobility issues but renters are concerned about how they will manage in their current homes.

> “I think that we will become less mobile, more house-bound, more dependent on gas and electric to keep us warm”
>
> (Female, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income)

Looking to the future and what they might need, participants highlighted the need to maintain friendships to counteract a sense of isolation and loneliness during retirement. Maintaining friendships or making new ones is felt to be important for emotional security and to have a network to rely on.

> “I think it's trying to keep that network alive and well, and they're all getting older as well, so you've got that to anticipate. Not everybody's going to stay the course, but I think it's trying to manage those relationships would be something to work on.”
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, high income)

Whilst some feel comfortable looking to the future and what they might need, others prefer to live in the moment, particularly participants on lower incomes. Some believe there is ‘no point in saving now’ and that they should focus on spending as they do not know ‘how long they will be around for’.

> “I mean, I'm one of these people, that you live for today, you don't know about tomorrow. If you've got the money to do something, do it, don't save any more because you don't know whether you're going to be here tomorrow.”
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, low income, digitally excluded)

5.2 Financial outlook

Optimism for the future depended on financial security, those who were insecure felt pessimistic and those who have secured different streams of income felt more optimistic. However, across financial situations, many have shared views on the future.

Participants who were less financially confident and secure found it ‘hard to think long-term’. Rising costs have contributed to pessimism about the future.

> “I would have said the pension met my needs before all these prices shot up… but now it’s not so easy. You’ve got to think about what you’re spending.”
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, low income)

Pessimism towards the future was also dependent on housing tenure, those who owned their own home felt more confident about their future, whereas those who were renting felt less secure and were concerned about managing an expected rise in rent.

> “I understand that without the finances behind us, we're going to find things really limiting. I know we're not going to win the lottery...that really is our only lifeline, doing something like that. I can't think of anything that's going to help us going forward.”
>
> (Male, retired around 2 years ago, low income)
>
> We can only tighten our belts so much, that's the main thing...But I'm hoping things stay the same or ideally get better, for all of us, not just for myself.”
>
> (Male, retired around 2 years ago, medium income)

Participants who felt more optimistic and confident about the future tended to have different income streams e.g. private and State Pension along with private savings, and a partner receiving similar streams. Those who owned their home felt secure in their future, with some considering downsizing if their financial situation deteriorated.

Those who were renting did not feel they have the same ‘buffer’ and could not ‘cut back’ more than they already, choosing between ‘heating and eating’.

> “If I didn't want to sell this house, I could use one of the downstairs rooms as a bedroom downstairs if I needed to. But I do think at some point I will downsize.”
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, low income)
>
> “If circumstances change, there's a lot that I could cut back on. So, I'm not too worried about things in the future.”
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, high income)

For lower income participants, financial concerns are much more around the ‘micro’ e.g. managing everyday life and day-to-day pressures, particularly the rise in cost of bills, rent or food. Those on a higher income tended to be more concerned with the ‘macro’ e.g. changes in government policy and geopolitical impact on investments as these will have significant implications on their money and whether they would need to dip into savings, particularly for those living on the interest of their investments.

Overall, financial outlooks vary, whilst some live day-to-day and feel some discomfort thinking about the future, others feel excitement about maintaining their lifestyles alongside ‘extravagances’ like eating out or holidays.

> “As long as we can pay all our bills, we can go out when we want to do, we can go and enjoy a meal out, we can go and book holidays that, to me, is enough”
>
> (Female, retired, 2 to 5 years ago, high income)

Thinking about the future, many would like a continuation of their current lifestyle as they shared that they are looking to maintain a simple and sustainable life. Those who are more financially comfortable and stable expect ‘more of the same’ in the future’. A minority are expecting their lifestyle to ‘ramp up’ with long holidays outside of Europe. In contrast, those who are less secure have resigned themselves to having a ‘simple’ life looking to the future.

> “More or less going forward, more of the same, really, as long as I've got enough money to go on holidays when I want to, treat my grandchildren. To stay in the bungalow is my main hope for the future, as long as I can stay here and look after myself… I don't expect money to be a problem or to fluctuate much.”
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, high income)
>
> “I have simple needs. I don't need to go abroad. So, yes. I might not live a flash life.”
>
> (Female, Retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income)

Financial outlook can also be determined by whether participants describe their circumstances as determined by luck. Some commented that their positive financial situation was due to luck and passive decision-making and others felt it was down to strategy e.g. investing in a home which doubled in value over 2 years versus getting ‘lucky’ with investments and redundancy packages. The importance of luck versus strategy highlighted that some retirees felt that they are in control of their lives and their financial decisions, but others felt they have less agency.

> “I realise now, when you've only got a small pension to live on, then you have to manage, and I appreciate that I am lucky, when others aren't so fortunate.”
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, high income)

How I expect my future to look

Living within my means at present. No extravagances e.g. pubs, restaurants, theatre, holidays. Mainly shopping at budget supermarkets.

Able to draw down savings as required.

Not contemplating buying a new car.

Always mindful of future ageing and possible health problems.

Rising council tax and income tax will be a challenge.

Cost of living increase not predictable – utility bills, etc.

BoE base rate changes affect savings interest

Figure 1: ‘Life mapping’ pre-task response, on expectations of the future, focusing on 'living within their means' (Male, Retired, 6-10 years ago, medium income

5.3 Family legacy, inheritance and intergeneration concerns

Participants often reflected on the future through thinking about their legacy. Whilst some wanted to leave something behind for family, others want to maintain their own comfort and some prioritise their emotional and relational legacy. Whilst so many things felt out of participants’ control (health, wider economic and policy changes), leaving a legacy felt like something retirees could control and leave an impact with.

For participants with property assets and Final Salary pensions they often see inheritance as expected and part of good financial planning. Participants with mortgage-free homes, Final Salary pensions and substantial savings expected to leave significant assets to their families (children or grandchildren). These participants had often started actively planned for managing inheritance tax. Some have concerns around inheritance tax and how future policy reforms could erode their ability to leave a ‘legacy’.

> “We've done some things like we've put junior ISAs in place for the grandchildren, so, there's that money there for them when they get to sixteen.”
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, high income)
>
> “If we can provide extra money which enables them to do what they want to do at a younger time rather than them waiting until maybe they have less need of

> it at older ages, then that's a good thing and providing a bit for our grandchildren as well is something we seem to want to do."
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, high income)

For lower income participants, inheritance was not always a realistic goal, as their personal financial security has to be the top priority. They are focused on ensuring that they have the funds they need before they look to support their children. Whilst some funds may be 'reserved' for inheritance most do not want to feel limited by this intention e.g. if they needed to purchase a new car, they would use the 'inheritance fund'.

> "My son in London, I think he'd love to buy a property, but it's so difficult for them, and I think in some way we'd like to try and help him…but that could impinge upon what we're trying to do"
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, high income)

Participants with lower incomes often rely on their children financially or rely on them for administrative and emotional support. They do not expect to leave any assets, particularly those living in rented homes, those with complex health conditions or those struggling with rising cost of living.

For lower income participants legacy is often reframed as emotional or moral rather than financial. Legacy can be defined by community impact, creative pursuits or supporting with grandchildren. Overall, participants would not compromise on their own comfort or independence in order to leave an inheritance.

> "If the car needed replacing or something like that, yes, we would use some money from savings for that, but generally trying to leave that money for big things that we might need, but also looking for future generations."
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, high income)

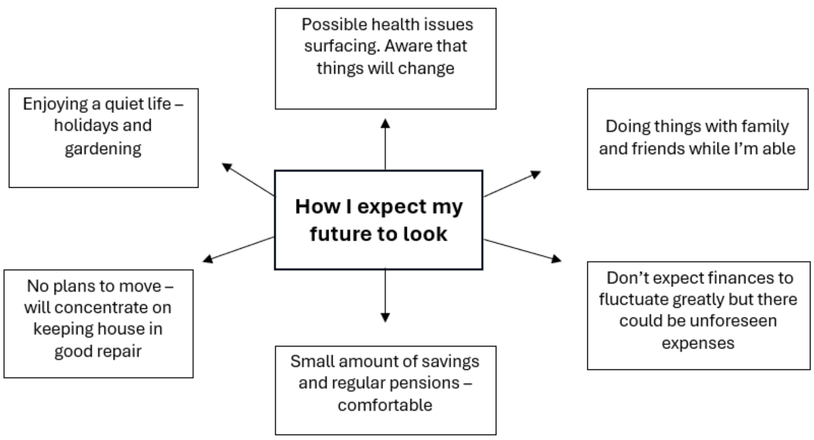

Figure 2: 'Life mapping' pre-task response, on how they expect their future to look, including potential health issues, spending time with family and 'enjoying a quiet life' (Female, Retired, 6 years ago or more, high income)

5.4 Planning and knowledge gaps

Feelings of adequacy were informed by feelings of regret and the sense that they could have done more in their past to set them up more confidently for the future. For example, some did not consider the long-term implications of their housing e.g. renting versus owning their home - many were concerned about rising rent and others are concerned with homes not being appropriate when facing mobility issues.

> "I think I would also have put things into an ISA, for example. So, essentially, what I would have been spending, what I was, not would have been, spending on buying stuff, into a savings account."
>
> (Female, retired around 2 years ago, income low income)

Others had and continue to have limited understanding of taxation during retirement e.g. tax codes with pension pots. Many wish they had used a financial adviser to plan for retirement through consolidating different pensions or had researched changes in pension policy.

> "When you get your first job, you're not thinking about retirement, that's a million miles away. I never thought I'd ever get to this age. You don't accept when you're that young that you've got to start planning 50 years ahead, at that age, but really that's the key."
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, low income)
>
> "I think when you're young and in school, you don't even think about it, but I think it comes around so quickly. I think this whole business about financial planning, finances, everything like that, maybe it should be taught in school."
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, high income)

5.5 Hopes for later life

Finally, participants shared their hopes and aspirations for the future. The strongest and universal hope across participants was to remain healthy, mobile and self-reliant for as long as possible. For many, ageing well is defined by physical capability rather than financial confidence – those who are stable and confident highlight that health is needed to spend and enjoy their money.

> "You can have all the money in the world, but if you haven't got your health, you're struggling really to enjoy life."
>
> (Male, retired, 6 to10 years ago, medium income)

Looking to the future, for some retirement meant freedom and independence e.g. with leisure, hobbies and travel. Those whose partners have not yet retired are looking forward to sharing in their freedom and independence, alongside additional pension income.

> "I've never thought of retirement as being the end of my working life, it's the beginning of my retirement life, where I can do what I want when I want."
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, medium income)

For others the future is more focused on constraint than freedom. Some expect to manage caring obligations and others are managing chronic or complex health conditions. Participants who are facing health issues imagined their time expanding during retirement but their physical capacity shrinking.

Participants were asked to look to their life at 90 and reflect on what they hope for themselves. Many shared that they wanted to be stable, to have maintained relationships and to have been true to themselves and to have looked after themselves.

> “Looking back, just to say to myself, 'You've managed on your own. You've carved out a nice life for yourself on your own.' I'd like to think I've been sensible in my life, not too flamboyant and not too rigid, but just sensible really, and had a good life, without going to any extremes.”
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, high income)

Postcard to future self

- Look after yourself e.g. eye test, medicals, vaccinations, rest, down time
- Keep yourself mobile – stretching exercises, walking and gardening
- Keep your brain alert – crosswords, puzzles, quizzes, listening to music, theatre outings, films, social interactions
- Give yourself permission to do things/tasks at a slower pace
- Be informed about scammers, house safety etc.
- Stay independent for as long as you can but don’t be afraid to ask for help with needed. It is not a sign of weakness, it’s being realistic

Figure 3: ‘Postcard to your future self’ pre-task response, highlighting the importance of maintaining mobility and independence (Female, Retired, 2 years ago or less, medium income)

Finally, participants expressed concern about the next generation who are facing a more difficult and complex economic environment with the same limited education on financial planning. Participants were concerned that this generation would be focused on managing short-term challenges due to the cost-of-living, rather than understanding and investing in their future. Some pre-retired participants were also concerned about the pension age changing again. Participants commented that more education including coaching was necessary to improve confidence and ensure that the next generation invest in their future in a preventative, rather than reactive way.

> “I think my generation has had things relatively good, but I worry about how things are going to work for future generations with the combination of debts which they struggle to pay and their inability to feel like they will have a really good financial future when they get to a retirement age through pension provision.”
>
> (Male, retired 2 to 5 years ago, high income)

> "I'm not going to be here much longer. I'm more concerned about the future of younger people… Younger people generally whose lives are going to be impacted by these things that are going on in the world."
>
> (Female, retired 6 to10 years ago, high income)

5.6 Case study

Dave

- 66
- East of England
- Homeowner
- Married
- Retired 3 years ago
- High income

"'Enough' is the basic needs, food, heat, health and a home that isn't falling apart around us…Then going forwards it's…having decent care costs…you'd want and my wife would want for herself to be in the kind of care home that was in that Netflix Richard Osman movie, rather than the care home that we tend to experience for our parents where it's a small room, a basic chair and no grounds to speak on."

Key life events

Dave grew up in significant hardship following his father's early death, with persistent poverty and his mother's mental ill-health shaping a loving but challenging childhood. **He was financially insecure into adulthood**, despite steady career progression, due to accumulating debt. Later, **well-paid roles enabled him to clear his debts** and achieve financial stability, which was **consolidated through marriage, family life, and saving.** He retired at 63, able to enjoy a low-stress retirement.

Sense of 'enough'

For Dave, **'enough' means security and resilience** rather than excess – being free from worry about basics costs, having savings and pensions that can absorb financial shocks, **and knowing he can support and protect his family**. It's about a comfortable life with room for meaningful experiences, **helping his children build secure futures**, and being **prepared for later-life care** without fear or loss of quality of life.

Pressure & pleasures

Early experiences of poverty and instability have left an indelible impact on Dave, leaving a **lasting sense of how fragile financial security can be** and a strong responsibility to shield his family from hardship. These are **driven less by present need than by memory** and awareness of inequality. By contrast, his pleasures come from being free of financial worry, pride in having created stability for his children, and a strong sense of autonomy in retirement.

Retirement planning & pension engagement

Dave's transition into retirement three years ago was gradual and well-planned, grounded in decades of consistent pension saving. Despite having low financial confidence, **early pension enrolment, later additional voluntary contributions, and support from his financially knowledgeable wife and advisers put him in a strong position. He feels confident that his pensions and savings provide enough resilience to face the future,** including potential health or care needs, which he sees as issues to prepare for rather than fear.

Dave feels largely untroubled about the future. His perspective is strongly family-centred, focused on supporting his children and sharing experiences with his wife once she retires.

Conclusions

Reflecting on this research the experience of, and preparation for, retirement is hugely individual, and the landscape is shaped by both personality and preparedness, but also luck and circumstance.

Retirement outcomes were often established long before exit from work, early instances of redundancy or divorce often showed their true impact at the point of retirement. Therefore, early nudges to check enrolment status, consolidate pensions and forecast retirement income is critical.

Planned retirement, without any pitfalls, felt smooth and secure, but unplanned retirement due to health, caring responsibilities, economic shocks or redundancy, can create early instability and long-term adequacy challenges, leaving retirees vulnerable to administrative frictions and less resilient to financial shocks. Support should therefore be framed around building up *resilience* in the lead up to retirement.

Overall, adequacy in retirement was defined as a financial baseline, which was treated differently depending on income, although most did not define adequate as ‘comfortable’. Whereas ‘enough’ is more holistic, it was often equated with having ‘a good life’, combining financial security with comfort, dignity and the ability to do or give a little more. The sense of what constitutes a good retirement with ‘enough’ is also conditioned by income levels throughout life, and an attitude towards money that is informed by early life experiences.

Those on a lower retirement income discuss having grown accustomed to ‘being happier with less’, deriving value and fulfilment from non-material sources, such as their relationships. This was particularly the case after adverse life events such as mental health problems or ill-health. This shows that ‘enough’ is holistic and can change with time.

The role of the State Pension varied – for some the State Pension provides essential baseline security, particularly for low and middle-income retirees, whereas high income retirees tended to have multiple streams of income, allowing them to manage unexpected expenses and be resilient in the face of financial shocks.

Across our discussions, hopes for the future focused on maintaining health, independence, housing and relationships. Most were expecting, or at the very least, hoping for continuity in their current circumstances, particularly their physical and financial autonomy. However, for many, the future is not viewed as an open space which they can shape but an uncertain and unpredictable terrain they must navigate.

Attitudes to, and experiences of retirement, are biographical - they are shaped by a mindset crystallised at a young age, life experiences that accumulate resilience and coping strategies, and by the often arbitrary and unfair dice roll of life experiences.

References

Department for Work and Pensions (2024). *Low Earners and Workplace Pension Saving – a qualitative study.* London: DWP.

Department for Work and Pensions (2024). *Planning and Preparing for Later Life.* London: DWP.

Institute for Fiscal Studies (2024). *Adequacy of Future Retirement Incomes: New Evidence for Private Sector Employees.* Available at: https://ifs.org.uk/publications/adequacy-future-retirement-incomes-new-evidence-private-sector-employees (accessed 12 September 2025).

The Pensions Policy Institute (2021). *The UK Pensions Framework: Paper 3 – Adequacy Concept and Content.* London: The Pensions Policy Institute.