

Stepping Up in a Changing World

Our strategy: 2022–2025



Contents

Chair's statement	4
CEO's statement	6
Our vision and mission	8
Executive summary of our 2022–2025 strategy	. 10
The background to our new strategy	. 12
Our strategy	. 16
Our values and culture	. 22
What we aim to deliver and when	. 30

Stepping Up in a Changing World







John Griffith-Jones Chair of StepChange Debt Charity

When I became Chair of StepChange Debt Charity in 2019, we were one year into our previous strategy. While the delivery of large-scale change programmes was proving predictably challenging, the charity was also clearly making great strides with these while simultaneously delivering for our clients.

As we all now know, the disruption and challenge that we have all faced as a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has meant focus has shifted and priorities have changed. And now, as we emerge from the pandemic, households across the country face a once in a generation cost of living rise that is squeezing incomes and making finances unsustainable for many millions who were already struggling.

As the world changes, our organisation must change too. That is why the Board of Trustees tasked our Executive team with comprehensively reviewing our strategy in the light of the seismic shifts in our operating environment. This resulting strategy sets out how we will not only seek to help those who need our support, but help them in more holistic and better ways. It articulates our aspirations to adjust to a rapidly changing funding model across the sector, invest in new technology to better support clients and to empower and develop our people.

I am under no illusion that this will be easy. The dust has only just begun to settle as we emerge from the COVID-19 crisis. What has changed may take some time to be fully understood. But what is clear to me is that StepChange, and the whole debt advice sector, will have a vital and increasingly pivotal role to play as we seek to re-establish and rehabilitate people's finances amidst increasingly choppy waters.

I hope you'll help us to step up to the challenge.

JI CHUR

John Griffith-Jones Chair

Client testimonials

"StepChange has changed my life for the better. As someone who had crippling debts in 2019 I have paid off more than half my debts. I am so grateful to them. The staff are always so kind and helpful. I can't recommend them highly enough."

> "I don't know what I would have done without the help I received from these people. I can now sleep at night knowing I have no worries."

"I don't know how I would have coped without the help from this organisation. Each and every member of their staff was completely non-judgmental and helpful. I was fortunate to be able to clear my debts and once again the help I received was second to none. I would not hesitate to recommend them for anyone who wants the understanding and support they have to offer in extremely trying times."



Phil Andrew Chief Executive of StepChange Debt Charity

The financial shock of the pandemic, while dramatic, now seems to be just the precursor of a prolonged period of financial uncertainty, marked by high inflation, rising interest rates and a cost of living crisis. Together, these conditions make our clients' circumstances worse and our operating environment significantly more challenging. So our new strategy has to be smarter, while realistic about emerging trends. While hard times are nothing new to StepChange clients, the reasons do change. The number of 'negative budget' clients, whose essential outgoings exceed their income, continues to rise — meaning fewer can enter into solutions under which they are able to repay their debts. The problems that people present with have become increasingly complicated, more have additional vulnerabilities, and many struggle with associated problems such as housing, benefits and mental health. We cannot ignore these fundamental changes.

Simultaneously, debt advice is undergoing a radical change in how it is funded. New Money and Pensions Service (MaPS) commissioning, when it is awarded, will result in fewer contracts but more sector collaboration. The introduction of Statutory Debt Repayment Plans (SDRPs), likely to be in 2024, will provide a catalyst both to cost reduction and innovation.

Furthermore, the workplace itself — the way in which our colleagues work, day in, day out — has already shifted and will continue to evolve. We are embracing a new hybrid way of working that supports colleagues to split their time between the office and home. It balances the need to foster efficiency and flexibility, while recognising the wellbeing needs that go with what can be a stressful role for our advisors.



It is against this backdrop that we set out this new strategic plan. It firmly continues to put our clients' needs at the heart of everything we do. It recognises that empathy and efficiency will need to be our watchwords for the coming years, and it sets out some of the ways we will do that — with a focus on harnessing technology, creativity and partnership working.

Collaboration with all our stakeholders will be key to achieving the best results and minimising the detriment caused by problem debt in the years ahead.

After reading this strategy, if you think we can help you — tell us. And if you can help us tell us that too. Together we can reduce the harm of debt and its associated problems.

Phil Andrew Chief Executive Officer



Our vision and mission



Our vision is to create a society free from problem debt

Problem debt is not just an issue for individuals but goes much further — it damages families and communities.

By helping those in debt get back on their feet, and by campaigning for policies that aim to prevent problem debt, we'll help overcome the difficulties that debt creates for our society in the 21st century.

Our interventions have helped transform the lives of millions and we're committed to helping millions more. With the support of our partners and stakeholders, we will work tirelessly to champion all measures that improve the debt landscape in the UK so that fewer people experience the harm of problem debt.



Our mission

We provide free debt advice and solutions for people at risk of or struggling with problem debt and we seek to influence public policy and private sector practice to prevent people falling into problem debt in the first place.



This strategy sets out how we will contribute towards this vision and mission.



Executive summary of our 2022–2025 strategy

This strategy sets out how we will work towards our vision of a society free from problem debt in five areas:

- 1 We will put our clients and their needs at the heart of everything we do
- We will empower our people, and further develop their skills
- We will deliver value for money in a changing funding landscape
- We will listen to and collaborate with our growing network of partners
- We will campaign to stop people falling into 5 problem debt, and help them recover if they do

What we want to do:

As organisations emerge from the pandemic and we start to address the financial squeeze that is impacting households across the United Kingdom, it's more important than ever that we prioritise effectively, so that we deliver the vital services required to support our clients' changing needs. In order to do this, we plan to adopt a multi-stage approach over the next four years to develop and strengthen the charity and its impact and to ensure we're clear about what we want to deliver, and by when.

By 2025, we will aim to be able to deliver highquality advice in line with anticipated demand of up to 350k full debt advice sessions a year and we will have achieved a return to charitable reserves of £12m+, ensuring we can continue to efficiently and effectively help clients and support our colleagues.



Stage 1

Excellence, influence and collaboration

The first stage of our new strategy, taking us throughout 2022 will see us concentrate on improving the fundamentals of what we do: by delivering excellence in core debt advice services, and positively influencing the debt landscape in the UK. What does this mean? We will:

- Further develop a truly client-centred culture
- Ready ourselves to adapt to the expectations and requirements of the new MaPS commissioning environment, including new reporting and service provision requirements, and continue to develop relationships with wider key funders across the UK

Stage 2

Help our clients to travel as far as possible on their own personal journeys to be free from problem debt

In this stage, likely to extend through 2023, we will measure our success not just by the number of people we help, but just as importantly by how much and how well we help them. Where we innovate, it will be to improve our core debt advice services, maximise good client outcome from core debt advice, reduce costs and codesign with partners to ensure earlier and more seamless referrals into debt advice. We will:

- Invest in ongoing infrastructure changes to reduce costs while further improving outcom for clients
- Focus on our quality measures, in addition to volumes and costs, continuously improving the excellence of our service
- · Be able to quantify the value and impact of our positive results for our clients and our funders, by developing a comprehensive

Stage 3

Evolve and enhance our service to adapt to changing client needs

While we continue to believe that earlier interventions and other innovations have a valuable role to play in reducing the harm of problem debt in the UK, we recognise that there are a number of important milestones to cross before we can return to these wider ambitions. These are likely to be fully realised only after SDRPs have been embedded into the debt advice landscape, likely to be in 2024.

 Maintain, grow and expand meaningful
partnerships with creditors and other
charities in pursuit of shared objectives

- Influence policymakers to protect households from problem debt, especially in the wake of COVID-19, using insight gained from our role as a provider of crisis services
- Restore greater working equilibrium to our colleagues after the challenging pandemic period
- Improve our systems and technology infrastructure, resolving and retiring legacy systems where appropriate, to achieve cost and process efficiencies

er	Social Return on Investment (SROI) model that quantifies the impact that debt advice has not just for clients, but for wider society
es	• Become a recognised employer of choice within the sector, offering meaningful and rewarding career pathways and progression within a socially-minded, commercially-aware charity environment
es	• Ensure that we use the valuable insight we gain from our clients to continue to help policymakers across the UK to shape measures that will help prevent problem debt, not just address it when it happens

• Ready ourselves for the implementation of SDRPs and work with government and the sector to ensure they are as effective a solution as possible for clients

We will invest in ongoing infrastructure changes (such as making use of Open Banking) to reduce costs while further improving outcomes for clients.

The background to our new strategy – the world we're operating in

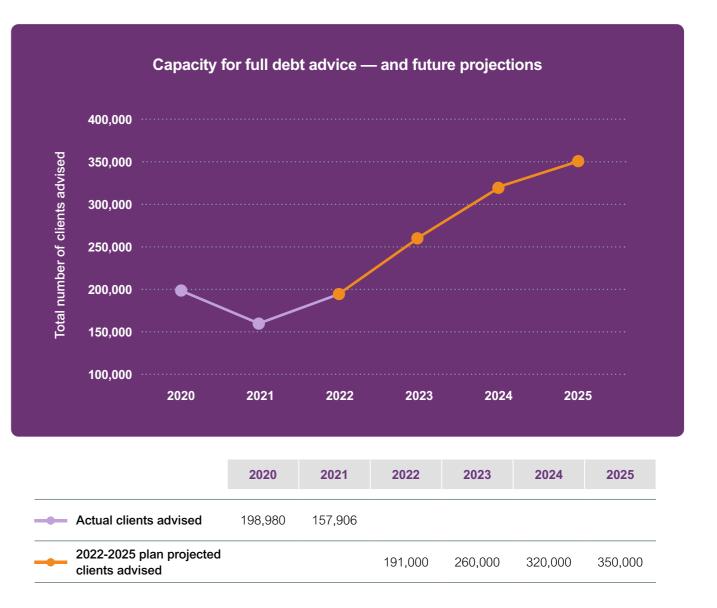
Our previous four-year strategy, published in 2018 and refreshed in 2019, took as a central assumption a significant upturn in demand for our services – both at the point of crisis, and through earlier intervention.

Since then, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the debt landscape in many and various ways — some predictable, others less so. Predictably, we have seen that those with the least financial resilience have been most susceptible to serious debt problems arising from the pandemic. Less predictably, we have seen far less demand than we expected for debt advice services (across the whole sector), which to a high degree has been displaced by emergency measures brought in by both Government and by regulators to support households through the crisis.

The big question is the extent to which these measures are a temporary phenomenon, which will soon be superseded by a return to "business as usual" in debt advice, or whether they rather represent a paradigm shift, with firms, regulators and advice providers experiencing the transition to a "new normal" in which the management of household debt problems will be fundamentally different from the past. While we cannot answer that question definitively, what we can do is use the learnings we have gained from the unusual period of the pandemic to inform our future strategy.

- We recognise that we need to be agile and flexible enough to cope with potentially serious fluctuations in demand, as well as a fundamentally different funding and operating environment from the one that existed even a few years ago
- We recognise that, in a sector that is becoming significantly more performance oriented and digitally focused, we must continue to develop and enhance our solutions and ways of working, adopting proven technologies to ensure we retain our reputation as a sector leader and a trusted provider
- We recognise that, in a world where better debt management techniques at individual creditor level are emerging, those who are referred for full debt advice are often those with the most complex and challenging situations. A high proportion of our clients have additional vulnerabilities; a high proportion are likely to need a service that adapts to their specific needs

These are the drivers that underpin the evolution of our strategy.







Changing client characteristics and drivers of problem debt



Impact of pandemic felt most by those with least financial resilience





A cost of living crisis



Increasing number of clients with additional vulnerabilities





Technology innovation is changing how people can access and take out credit







Certain groups e.g., single parents remain more susceptible to problem debt





More complex and challenging client needs





Household debt management impacted by emergency pandemic support measures

Our vision remains to create a society free from problem debt

We recognise that StepChange must continue to change and evolve to support clients to get out of unmanageable, harmful debt. We no longer see a significant increase in the number of clients we are able to take through full debt advice as the primary yardstick against which we will measure success. Against the backdrop of our changed operating environment and the changing characteristics of our clients, our short-term goals will be focused on a narrower range of activities primarily supporting those in crisis debt. We will be seeking to measure success not just by the number of people we help, but by how far and effectively each individual client is empowered and supported on their individual journey to becoming debt-free. The rest of this document explains the evolution we will be undertaking between now and 2025.



"We will ensure our work is based on deep insight, understanding and empathy."



Our strategy

1. Our clients and their needs at the heart of everything we do

For a number of years now we have been seeing a more challenging array of problems and difficulties presenting themselves among our clients. Specifically, the increase in the proportion of our clients with low incomes, negative budgets (that is, no disposable income available to put towards repaying their debt, and often so little income that even priority debt payments are a struggle) and vulnerabilities beyond their debt means that there is an increasing need for services that seek not only to address debt, but also to maximise income and trigger additional support and services.

This change in the profile of our clients raises the need for three fundamental areas of action within our future strategy:

- We will gain the best possible insight into what all of our clients need and want, against the backdrop of a rapidly evolving world where digital innovation, as well as financial circumstances, risk creating a cohort of "left behind" households. Our consumer insight programme, already under way, is providing richer and deeper insight than ever before
- 2 We will ensure we are as effective as possible at helping our clients (including negative budget clients) become problem debt free, in the way that suits them best, and which takes full account of their additional needs. For negative budget and vulnerable clients, this means an approach built around benefits advice and income maximisation, and more partnerships with other charities and providers offering complementary services (not just debt solutions)

Our clients' needs are at the heart of everything we do, and we will work hard with our funders to ensure that the funding environment actively supports this principle. The sustained rise of commercially-incentivised debt advice "scammers" (who actively mimic StepChange and other charities for commercial gain) means that client-centred, solution-neutral integrity has never been more important than it is now

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What does being client-centric mean to StepChange?

We will ensure our work is based on deep insight, understanding and empathy

This means we will:

- Take steps to ensure we truly understand clients' problem(s) before offering help
- Understand and take into account clients' needs and aspirations
- Constantly work towards a comprehensive understanding of all the organisations involved in clients' situations
- Recognise that we may not always be the right organisation to help clients

We will treat clients as individuals

This means we will:

- Provide clients with tailored advice and solutions
- Actively involve clients in dealing with their situation
- Take into account any relevant aspects of a client's situation
- Tailor our service to clients where they have additional vulnerabilities beyond their financial difficulty
- Work in partnership with clients' creditors to make sure we do what's right for them

We will guarantee the integrity of our advice and solutions

This means we will:

- Operate a 'best advice' model which guarantees our help is impartial and in clients' best interests
- Offer our clients all available solutions and we recommend the one we believe is best

We will be clear about how we will make a difference to clients

This means we will:

- Help clients understand their situation and take action to improve it
- Move clients on to the next step in terms of taking control of their finances and addressing their difficulties
- Be efficient and effective because this has a significant impact on clients
- Ensure our services are accessible — in the fullest sense of the word
- Work with clients in a way which focusses on the outcomes they want or need to achieve

We will operate a clientcentred culture from top to bottom on decisions both large and small

This means we will:

- Challenge our decision-making to ensure it's client-centred
- Ensure clients are always represented in the way that we work and the services that we design and deliver

Clients will leave us better equipped for their future

This means we will:

- Provide clients with the tools, understanding, confidence and support to manage their finances in the future
- Always be there for clients if they ever need us again

"We will be efficient and effective – because this has a significant impact on clients."



We will do this by:



1. Investing in the development of our leaders through a targeted leadership development programme



2. Engaging colleagues following the pandemic and as 'new normal' flexible ways of working continue to evolve



themselves and reach their potential





5. Monitoring and reviewing our rewards package to ensure that the charity can attract and retain socially driven, talented people in all areas



6. Developing an estates strategy that addresses the purpose, location, size, quality, and cost of our estate whilst supporting our colleague engagement, wellbeing and diversity and inclusion agendas



7. Creating an Environmental Social Governance (ESG) strategy that includes our position on the environment and how we will measure and reduce our carbon footprint

2. Empowering our people, developing their skills

Our colleagues are our single greatest asset and the foundation of our future plans. We know that the last two years have been difficult for our colleagues so we're redoubling our commitment to recruit and retain the best talent. Our strategy recognises the expertise and tireless commitment of our colleagues and sets out how we'll continue to invest in their wellbeing, development, diversity and inclusion.

3. Creating and bringing to life a clear diversity and

inclusion strategy that enables every one of our colleagues to be

4. Establishing a wellbeing programme that builds improved resilience of leaders, managers, and colleagues

Our values and culture

It is not just what we deliver that matters, but how we deliver it too. We'll seek to do this based on our shared values and a drive to develop a culture based on our passion to support those in problem debt.

Along with our vision and mission, our values underpin how we work. We're clear about what culture we want to build throughout this time so that we can support our colleagues and clients effectively.

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The culture we want to build

We are proud of our heritage, driven by our strong social purpose and we are client centred, supporting individual choice, and producing good client outcomes. We are effective and efficient, with a solid commercial understanding and foundation so that we can maximise the help we offer clients.

We are recognised as a destination of choice for careers, offering meaningful work, a good work/life balance and rewards that are sufficiently competitive to attract and retain talented people. Our people work collaboratively together, respecting one another and we take responsibility for our individual actions.

We have strong, resilient leaders who role model our values, understand the market and our position within it and regularly engage with creditors to ensure that we are effective partners in the delivery of our services to clients. Our leaders are experienced and inspiring, managing change and driving high performance. We value, engage, and develop colleagues at all levels to reach their full potential.

We are future focused, digitally led, and performance driven, striving to be agile and to leverage proven technologies and the expertise of innovators to drive better client outcomes.





3. Adapting to a new funding world

It is essential to ensure that StepChange is adequately funded to support our charitable purposes, including supporting our clients through their rapid and extensive changes to their needs. This includes the procurement and funding of debt advice and the introduction of new debt advice solutions like SDRPs.

We pride ourselves on offering the full range of debt solutions available in the UK, so that we can be certain we are able to recommend and deliver the most appropriate solution for each client. Yet securing sustainable funding for this widest range of debt solutions can prove challenging, especially given that a number of debt solution providers "cherry pick" clients for whom revenue-generating solutions are available, and refer other clients to us.

For a number of years we have been aware of, and drawing attention to, the significant risks and constraints arising from existing funding structures.

Significant change is now coming to the sector which will fundamentally change how debt advice operates across the United Kingdom. During the next four years the fundamental foundation of this strategy will be ensuring we are financially secure and resilient and that we can effectively adapt to an evolving funding landscape.

Money and Pensions Service

The Money and Pensions Service (MaPS) commissioning for the provision of national debt advice, debt relief order processing and a business debt service will be announced in September 2022. The delays that have occurred around this process and the challenges to the plans to fund regional debt advice, have created uncertainty in the sector and have led to increased attrition and therefore capacity issues, which will be felt throughout 2022.

Despite the delays, the new commissioning framework has a lot to be positive about. The future funding environment recognises the crucial distinction — but also the interplay — between the funding of advice and the funding of solutions. We warmly welcome this new approach — but we do not underestimate the scale of change that the new MaPS commissioning will ultimately bring across the sector. The forthcoming new framework in England reduces the number of main recipients of funding through MaPS, while also incentivising a collaborative infrastructure within the sector. We support these aims and will have bid for funding in those areas where we believe we are strongly placed to deliver excellent services cost-effectively. A key part of this strategy is that we will be ready to deliver the services that we have committed to in the submission of our bids for MaPS funding for debt advice and solutions.

The new commissioning structure, combined with the introduction of SDRPs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, which StepChange was instrumental in campaigning for, promises to be the biggest change to our funding structure in the history of the charity. We are not afraid of funding challenges if they are for the good of our clients — as we have demonstrated by our campaigning and support for SDRPs.





Devolved funding

StepChange is a UK-wide charity. We are proud of the work that we deliver in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We are also proud that we are able to secure much needed support from, in particular, the Scottish Government.

We will work to more effectively flex to the needs of the devolved nations and are committed to maintaining a strong colleague presence in Glasgow and Cardiff. We will work to increase the level of funding we are able to access through the Welsh Assembly and Scottish Government, and we will enhance our collaboration and reputation in the devolved nations, enriching our delivery of services by improving the way in which we understand and nuance the devolved differences in debt advice and solutions in the constituent nations.

Statutory Debt Repayment Plans

StepChange has long campaigned for the introduction of both a statutory Breathing Space scheme and Statutory Debt Repayment Plans (SDRPs). We were delighted to see the introduction of Breathing Space in 2021.

Such plans will attract a statutory fixed percentage contribution from all creditors receiving disbursements. It is difficult currently to model how this transition will affect our funding, as there are several moving parts: first there is the question of how popular SDRPs will prove to be at that time, and then there is the comparison between the level of funding they will attract from creditors, compared to existing voluntary contributions on debt management plan disbursements.

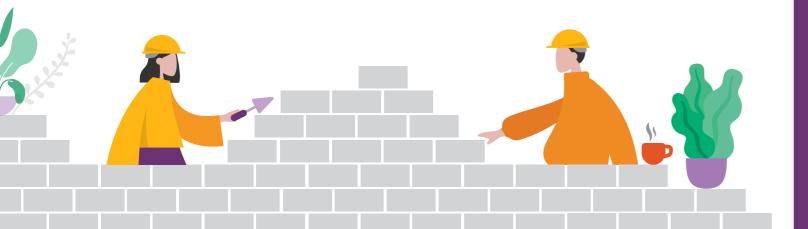
What is clear, is that we need to be ready for their introduction, (currently expected in 2024) and what it will mean for debt advice funding and solutions. SDRPs are likely to encourage new entrants in to the sector and we are committed to becoming the partner of choice for creditors by offering the best service for partners and clients.

A stable financial and risk governance footing

None of the ambitions set out in this strategy can be achieved if they are not built on a strong financial foundation. StepChange has made the strategic decision to use our charitable reserves to invest in new technology and process since 2017. Then, having experienced an unexpected drop both in demand for our services and in our funding throughout the pandemic, we found ourselves facing a deficit. Having taken action to right-size the organisation to match our funding, we have returned to a strong financial footing. We will now aim to return to charitable reserves of over £12m during the life of this strategy. This is in line with best practice for the amount a charity of our size should hold in reserves and with the risk-appetite set out by Trustees.

With new funding sources come new operational requirements too. We will continue to drive efficiencies through training, supporting our advisors and investing in new technology that ensures our unit cost for the delivery of debt advice is reducing and competitive, whilst continuing to deliver what clients need in a rapidly changing world.

Our risk and compliance framework, as well as underpinning our ability to demonstrate that we fully meet our regulatory responsibilities, is another essential bedrock on which we will continue to build to safeguard the long-term interests of the charity and its clients. We will also be preparing for any new requirements as a result of the proposed Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) Consumer Duty, something which we warmly welcome.



"...we will aim to return to charitable reserves of over £12m during the life of this strategy."



4. Working with our partners

We already work with hundreds of organisations, banks, debt purchasers, utility companies and local authorities as well as with charities. Over the four-year lifespan of this strategy our goal is to develop greater collaboration with our key partners, seek their insights into key aspects of our work and enhance our existing partner toolkit and resources.

As we've developed this strategy, we've asked our partners for their views on our service, what matters to their customers and also what it's like to work with us as an organisation. The work we have done so far suggests that many creditors perceive we achieve better client outcomes in terms of debt solutions than other organisations, with fewer failures and a greater proportion of customers successfully addressing their debt. However, it's clear our partners want us to focus on enhancing some of our systems to drive greater data sharing and insights, which will enable them to drive their own efficiencies. We've already started to address this and have been working closely with partners to develop new tools and to better understand the journey their customers go on before reaching debt advice. This proof of concept will help us to continue to refine the new tools and should support easier adoption for the whole banking sector. In addition we will seek direct input from partners as we look to replace any of our key legacy systems. These insights will be invaluable in delivering an efficient, accessible and intuitive system, easing the resource requirements and training required for creditors.

In addition we want to work with our partners on key regulatory changes such as the Consumer Duty and SDRPs, to understand their positions and importantly how our service and processes need to dovetail with theirs. The learnings from the implementation of Breathing Space in 2021 have enabled stronger working relationships and we aim to build on those to ensure a smoother implementation for future sectoral changes. So many of our clients have complex needs or face vulnerable circumstances. While we can deliver the debt advice and solutions that they may need, increasingly we have clients whose needs extend further. In-depth advice on welfare benefits, income maximisation, specialist local and national grants and support are often needed. So is support for non-debt related problems such as illness, mental health conditions. addiction, family problems, bereavement or other issues that can act as a barrier to accessing debt advice, or to a successful journey to becoming debt-free. While we have, for several years, increased the levels of training we provide to our advisors, and increased the signposting we make available to other complementary services, we know we need to go further to help our vulnerable clients achieve better outcomes.

We see formal and informal collaboration with complementary service providers as an increasingly important component of our client-centred strategy over the next four years. We will seek to pilot collaborations and joint services, to test and learn what proves effective and helpful for our clients, and to embed a more holistic approach that sees facilitating wider support as crucial to the success of the debt advice journey that many of our clients face.

If you believe your organisation's objectives align with this strategy and that we should be collaborating with you, we would love to talk to you.

5. Campaigning to stop people falling into problem debt in the first place, and helping them to recover if they do

We view our campaigning work as central to our mission. While our advice services help the individual, our policy work aims to shift the landscape to prevent or reduce the harm caused by problem debt in the United Kingdom. Through our work we seek to prevent people falling into problem debt in the first place or to reduce the harm caused by problem debt if it does occur.

We will campaign on these four key areas:

£ 1. Making markets work

We campaign to ensure that the markets that people rely on work effectively. We seek effective regulation to protect consumers and a duty to ensure that products and services are designed in a way that delivers good outcomes, protects vulnerable consumers and does not inherently cause harm.

2. Providing a safety net against problem debt

We know too many people lack financial resilience to help them bounce back from shocks and are often forced to use potentially harmful coping strategies like using credit to make ends meet. Effective safety nets, like the benefit system, are essential for stopping people falling into debt.

3. Help in crisis

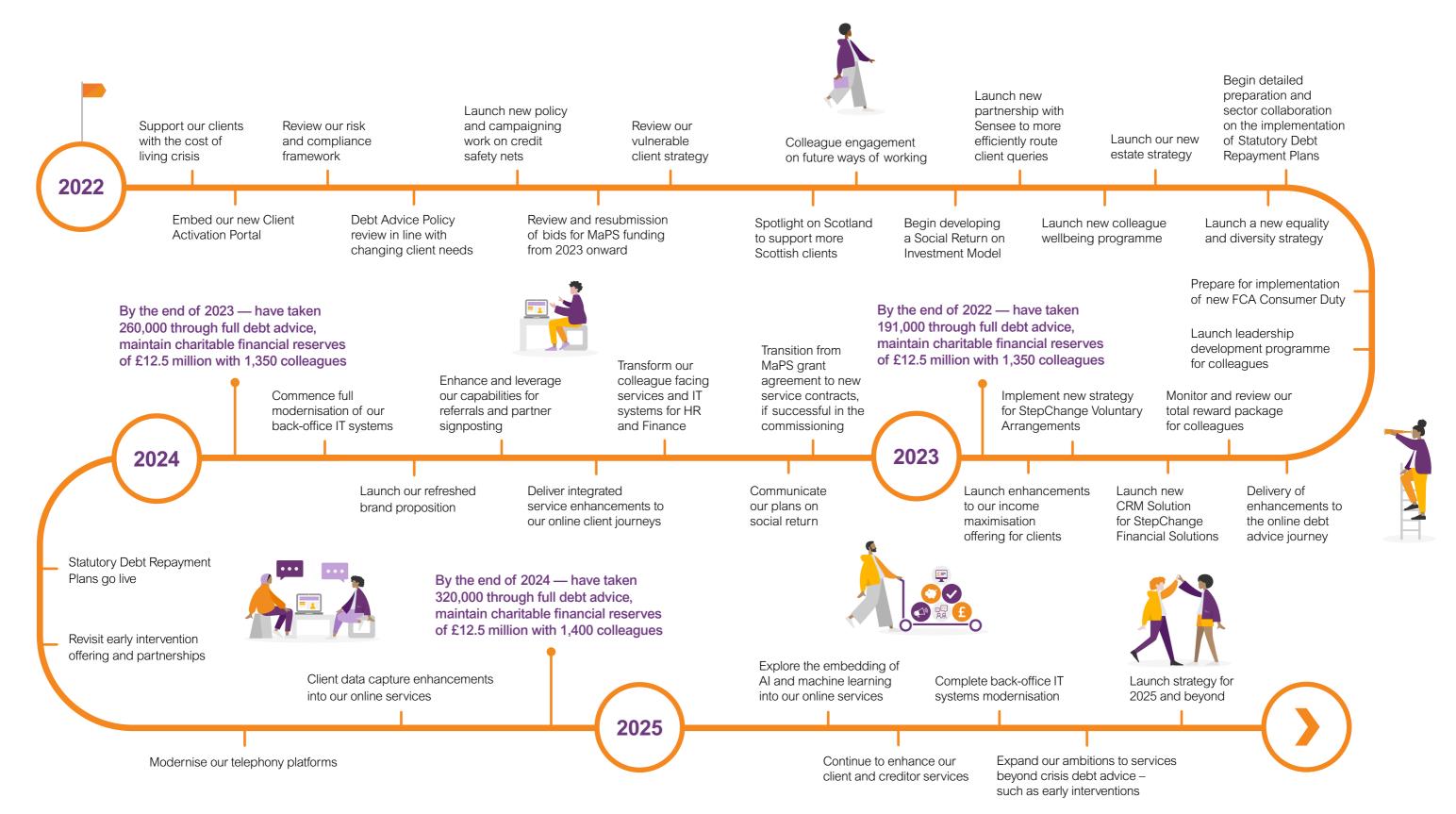
When those in crisis turn to debt advice and solutions for support, they expect them to protect them and not make their problems worse. However, lack of regulation and poor practice means that all too often people are not getting clear, independent and impartial advice. Poor regulation across the individual voluntary arrangement (IVA) market, imitators, lead generators and unclear eligibility for certain solutions can prevent people from accessing support or, worse, can cause further harm.



We know from our clients that debt impacts certain groups more regularly and more severely. We will campaign to raise the disproportionate impact that problem debt has on certain demographics and undertake research to understand the issues more accurately.

What we aim to deliver and when

2022–2025 Strategy: activity timeline



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