

# The cost of living crisis and mental health

Shout's support for the financially vulnerable

"I'm really thankful  
for you talking to me  
and distracting me from  
my suicidal thoughts."

Texter who contacted Shout  
about the cost of living

**MENTAL  
HEALTH  
INNOVATIONS**

**shout**

**85258**

here for you 24/7

## Shout's accessible mental health support

Shout is a free, confidential text messaging support service, available 24/7 to anyone in the UK who is struggling to cope. The service doesn't require any data or a smartphone, instead using SMS to connect texters with 24/7 support from trained volunteers. Through digital provision via text, we are able to support financially vulnerable audiences, wherever they are in the UK, at no cost to them. In our first four years, Shout has scaled to take two million conversations with 678,000 children, young people and adults who have needed immediate mental health support.



***“Thank you for helping me through my lowest, I really admire how you take time to help people, I wouldn't of known what could of happened to me if I didn't speak to you, thank you so much you saved my life tonight.”***

**Feedback from a texter who contacted Shout about the cost of living**

## Executive summary

- The UK population is currently suffering as a result of a cost of living crisis, given the dramatic increases in living costs since 2021. The challenges of living with poverty cause stress and emotional strain and can have a significant impact on mental health and wellbeing.
- Those living in poverty are more likely to develop mental health problems than their peers, and least likely to have access to effective support. Increased costs of living often exacerbate existing mental health struggles.
- Shout has seen an increase in discussion of financial difficulties over the past two years since the rise of the cost of living, with 'cost of living' currently being the main issue in around 50 Shout conversations every day.
- Due to the sensitive nature of their concerns, people in financial difficulty specifically seek out Shout's accessible, text- and SMS-based mental health support. Of those who contact us about financial difficulties, 50% want to talk to someone they don't know and 48% are more comfortable texting than speaking about how they feel.
- Our data analysis shows that demand for Shout is highest from people living in the most deprived regions of the UK, based on the Index of Multiple Deprivation. 25% of texters under the age of 18 are in receipt of free school meals.
- Half of texters who have financial difficulties experience stress and worry and 36% struggle with suicidal ideation.
- Of people contacting Shout with financial concerns, 87% said their conversation was helpful and 65% said they felt more calm after their conversation.
- Texters with financial difficulties come to Shout from Google, social media, NHS and GP referrals, as well as from Mental Health Innovations' partnerships with a growing number of organisations who want to support their vulnerable audiences.

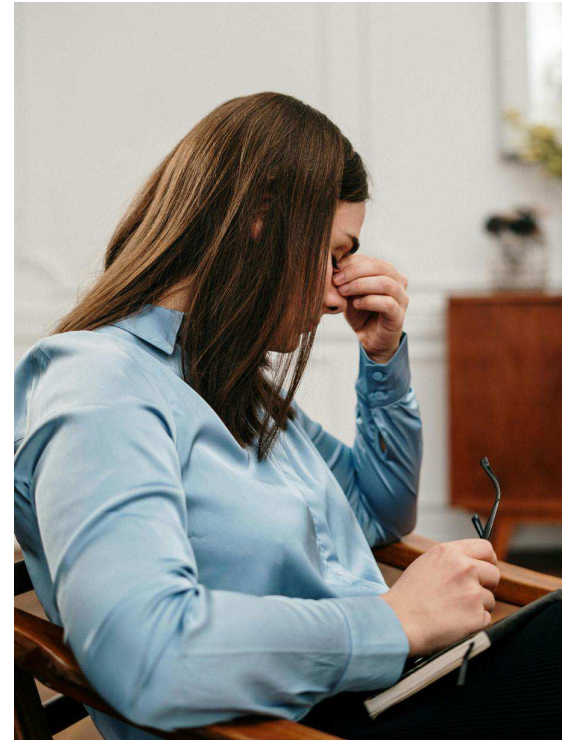


## Cost of living increase in the UK

The UK has seen a dramatic increase in the cost of living in recent years. Costs rose sharply during 2021 and 2022<sup>1</sup> with the annual rate of inflation reaching a 41 year high in October 2022 of 11.1% before easing. 51% of adults in Great Britain reported an increase in their cost of living in August – September 2023<sup>2</sup> and UK consumer prices were 6.7% higher in August 2023 than a year before<sup>3</sup>.

Food shopping is more expensive with food bank charities reporting increases in demand<sup>4</sup> - and gas and electricity bills have greatly increased. High interest rates have led to higher borrowing costs for households with both mortgage interest rates and private rental prices growing at record high rates. The impact of rising prices across the UK has been compounded by a two-year fall in real household income of 4%<sup>5</sup>.

The outcome of the cost of living crisis is that 13.4 million people in the UK, or one in five (20%) of the population live in poverty<sup>6</sup>, struggling to afford the essentials in life such as food, warmth and accommodation.



## Impact of cost of living on mental health

The challenges of living with poverty cause stress and emotional strain and have a significant impact on the mental health and wellbeing of those struggling. This is compounded by the environment of today's turbulent world, against a backdrop of global concerns such as climate change, political unrest and war.

The Mental Health Foundation finds that stress, anxiety and hopelessness over personal finances is widespread across the UK and expects that the effects of the cost of living crisis on public mental health will be on a scale similar to the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>7</sup>.

A survey for Time To Talk Day found that the mental health of 78% of Britons was affected by the cost of living crisis, with the percentage rising to 94% of those with existing mental health problems<sup>8</sup>.

### Partnership with The Aviva Foundation

We are extremely grateful to The Aviva Foundation who have funded a three-year project to help individuals and communities with their emotional wellbeing, whilst increasing financial resilience to prevent, prepare for, respond to, and recover from financial challenges.

Our project aims to ensure that people struggling with the rising cost of living get the appropriate mental health support they need to then seek help with their finances. Working with PayPlan, a free debt management and advice service, we will complement financial advice with an urgent, out-of-hours service for those struggling with their mental health due to financial hardship.



1 <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9428/>

2 <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9428/CBP-9428.pdf>

3 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/bulletins/consumerpriceinflation/august2023#:~:text=The%20Consumer%20Prices%20Index%20>

4 <https://www.trusselltrust.org/2023/04/26/record-number-of-emergency-food-parcels-provided-to-people-facing-hardship-by-trussell-trust-food-banks-in-past-12-months/>

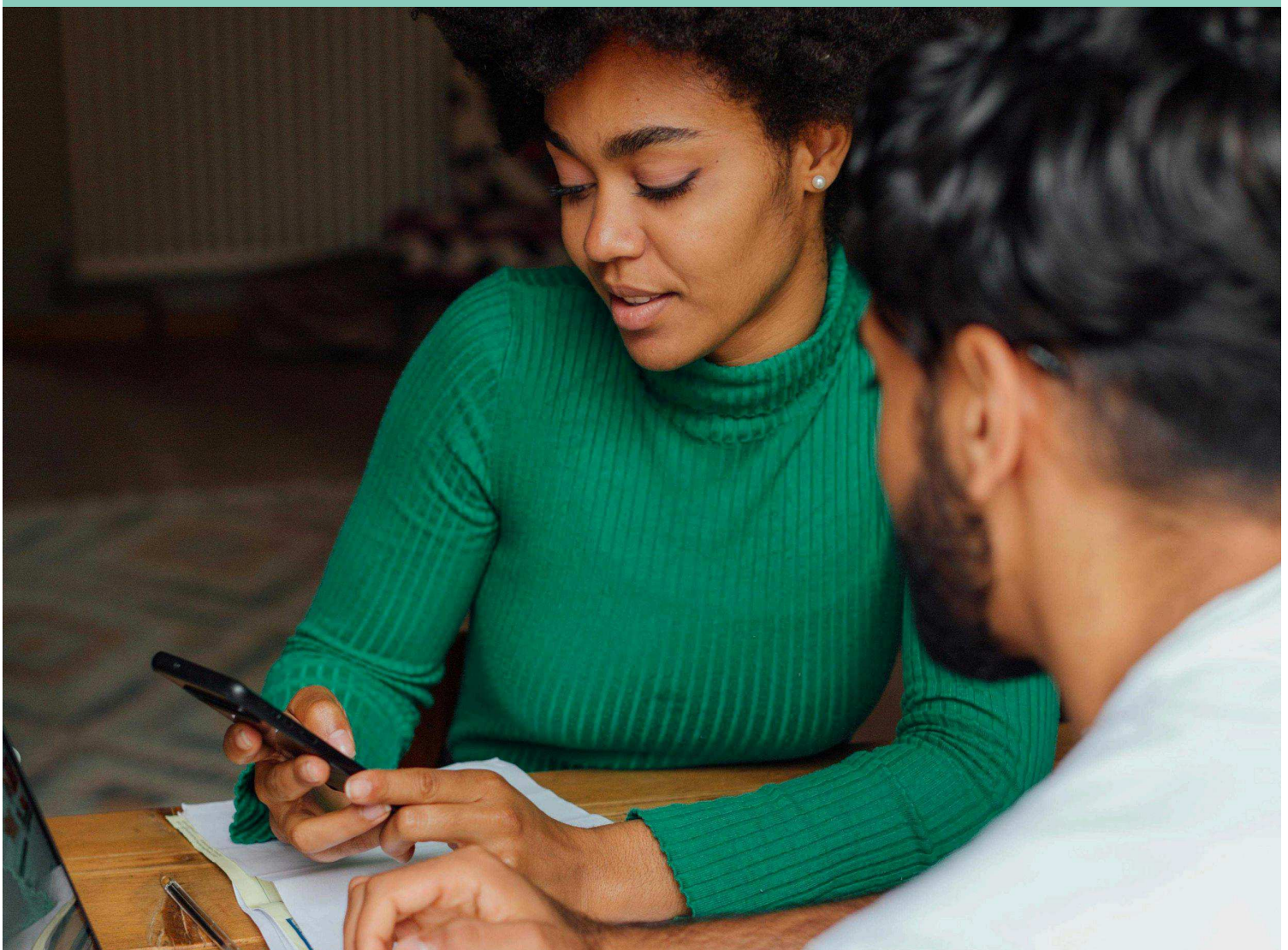
5 <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/living-standards-outlook-summer-2023/>

6 <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-2023>

7 <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/about-us/news/stress-anxiety-and-hopelessness-over-personal-finances-widespread-across-uk-new-mental-health-survey>

8 [https://www.mind.org.uk/news-campaigns/news/almost-20-million-adults-never-speak-about-mental-health-and-it-s-set-to-get-worse-due-to-the-cost-of-living-crisis/#\\_ftn1](https://www.mind.org.uk/news-campaigns/news/almost-20-million-adults-never-speak-about-mental-health-and-it-s-set-to-get-worse-due-to-the-cost-of-living-crisis/#_ftn1)





## Increased impact on vulnerable populations

Low-income households are most affected by rising prices<sup>9</sup>, with up to seven million families having to cut back on basic essentials such as heating, electricity and meals<sup>10</sup>. With a disproportionate percentage of Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups living in poverty<sup>11</sup>, struggling to afford their bills, rent or mortgage, it's clear that people from an ethnically diverse background are facing a greater risk as a result of the cost of living crisis.

The harsh reality is that people living in poverty, experiencing financial stress or from minority ethnicities are more likely to develop mental health problems.<sup>12</sup> But those living with social disadvantage have less access to effective and relevant traditional means of support for their mental health<sup>13</sup> and do not have the funds to pay for support. They also suffer from the knock-on effect that financial worries have on people's ability to engage in activities known to help protect mental health and prevent problems from developing, such as getting enough sleep, socialising, pursuing hobbies and taking exercise.

Additionally, access to online support has been curtailed for the million people in the UK who disconnected their broadband in the last year because they couldn't afford it, with people on Universal Credit being more than six times as likely to have disconnected compared to their peers<sup>14</sup>. They are therefore unable to access mental health support provided through webchat or other online mechanisms.

9 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/expenditure/articles/impactofincreasedcostoflivingonadultsacrossgreatbritain/junetoseptember2022>

10 <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-01/MHF-cost-of-living-crisis-report-2023-01-12.pdf>

11 <https://irr.org.uk/research/statistics/poverty/#:-:text=Furthermore%2C%20people%20in%20Black%20and,than%20people%20in%20White%20families.>

12 <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-01/MHF-cost-of-living-crisis-report-2023-01-12.pdf>

13 <https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/publications/mental-health-inequalities-factsheet>

14 <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/about-us1/media/press-releases/one-million-lose-broadband-access-as-cost-of-living-crisis-bites/>



## Why Shout appeals to people facing poverty

The fact that Shout is a free and text-based, discreet support service makes it attractive to people who want to discuss sensitive issues around the cost of living and money problems and who have not sought help elsewhere. Half (50%) of those who contacted us about financial difficulties say that they wanted to talk to someone they didn't know and 48% say they're more comfortable texting than speaking about how they feel.

Of texters with money concerns, 55% say they don't have anyone else to talk to and 34% are too embarrassed to talk about their issues on the phone. They are actively seeking out a text-based form of support, rather than support that requires them to vocalise their issues out loud. More than a third (34%) do not have friends and family they can talk to, or other mental health support services they feel they can access, so they turn to Shout.

***“Thank you for talking to me and just being there as I talk through my struggles of being homeless and lonely. Shout was empathetic and had a good understanding of how I was feeling.”***

**Feedback from a texter who contacted Shout about the cost of living**

### Partnership with IE Hub

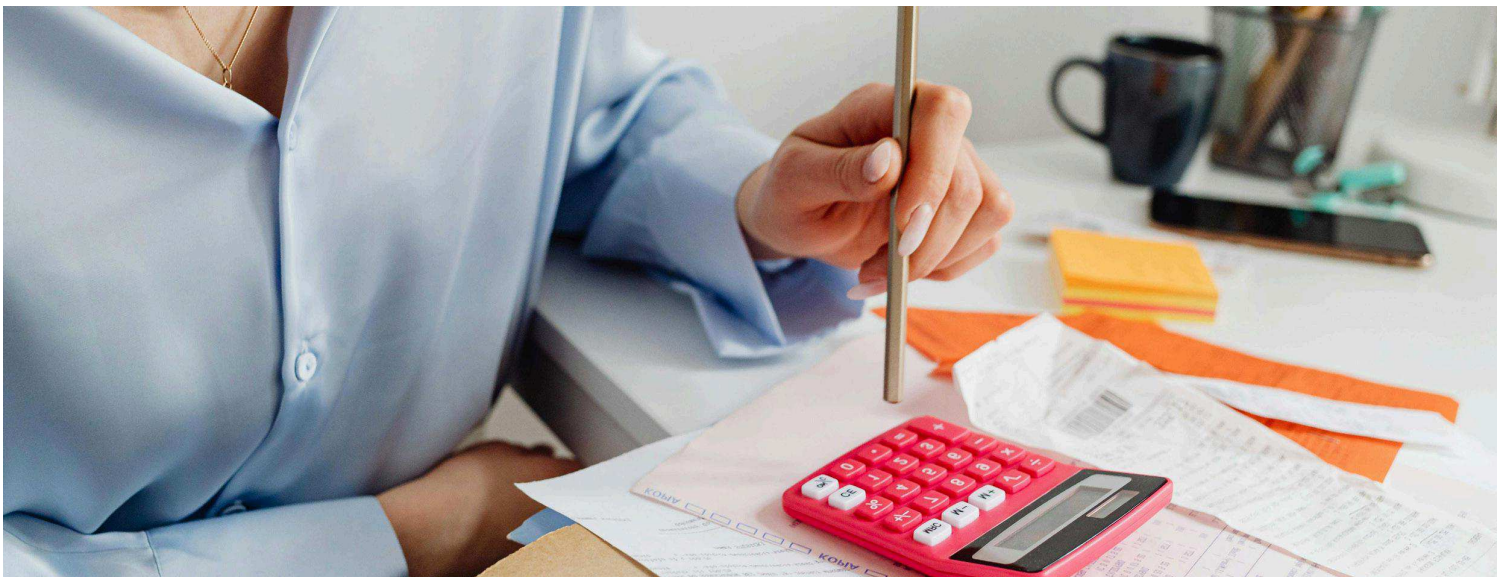
We are working with IE Hub to help people who are struggling with their mental health, due to their financial situation.

Shout Volunteers will direct texters who are worried about money to IE Hub to receive support with budgeting, managing their money and debts as well as engaging with their creditors. 83% of IE Hub users say their financial anxiety has reduced as a consequence of using the online tool.

***“IE Hub is proud to be partnering with Mental Health Innovations to help provide practical support to people whose mental health is being impacted because of their finances. Many people come to us for support in managing their money and paying off debt and almost 70% of IE Hub users find they are entitled to an additional £433 per month on average. Partnerships like this are so important to us, allowing us to help people take control of their finances and improve their mental health.***

**Dylan Jones, CEO of IE Hub**

**IE HUB**  
INCOME & EXPENDITURE HUB



# Cost of living crisis and Shout data

## Poverty reflected in Shout user demographics

From analysis of our anonymised dataset, comprising more than two million conversations with 700,000 children, young people and adults, we know that Shout reaches a large number of people of lower socio-economic status, who are facing additional pressures on their mental health due to the cost of living crisis.

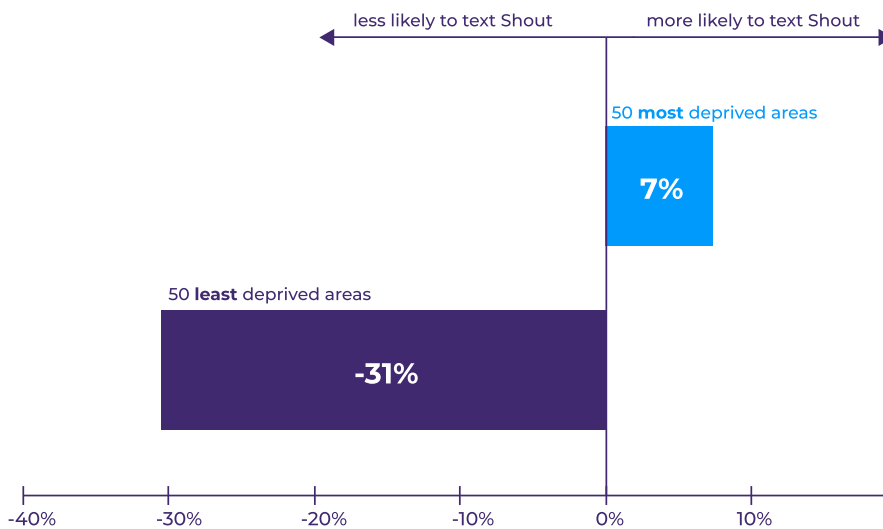
Among children who contact the service, 25% of texters under the age of 18 are in receipt of free school meals, which is a little more than you would expect based on national statistics.

***“I just wanted to say thank you so much, you’ve honestly given me the support i needed and i feel more confident with the idea of school i’m still uneasy but with a bit more support i think i can overcome this.”***

### Feedback from a texter aged 13 and under, on free school meals

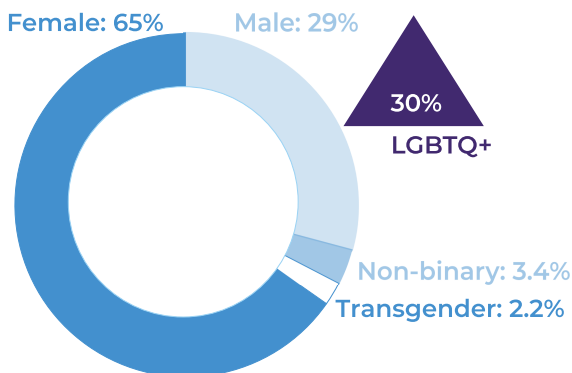
A large proportion (21%) of our adult texters are unemployed, which is significantly above the national average. Another indication that we reach a financially vulnerable audience is that we see demand for Shout across the UK correlating with the government’s indices of deprivation. This means that people from the most deprived areas in the UK are statistically more likely to contact Shout than people from the least deprived areas.

### Texters from the most deprived areas of England are more likely to text Shout



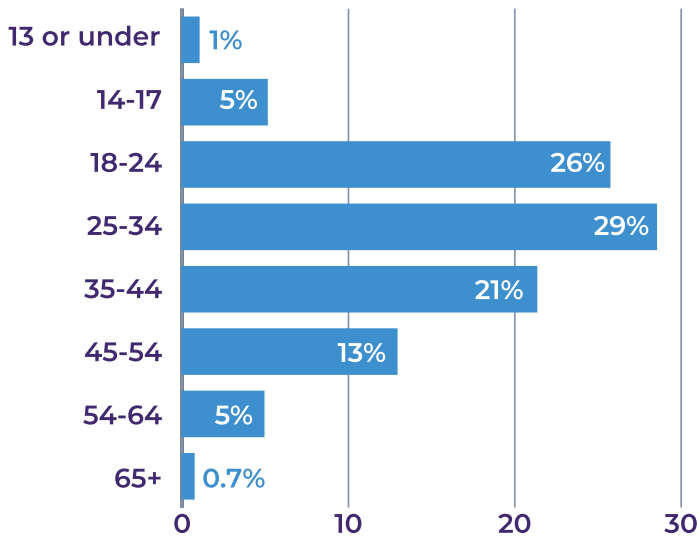
This chart shows how people living in the nation’s most deprived local authorities, including Blackpool, Manchester, Hackney and Leicester, are 7% more likely to text Shout than people living in the UK’s least deprived local authorities, including Bath and North-East Somerset, South Oxfordshire, Harrogate and Surrey Heath.

### Sexuality and gender of texters contacting us about financial issues



People texting Shout about financial difficulties are more likely to be male (29% versus 18%) than people contacting us about other issues.

### Age of texters contacting us about financial issues



They are also more likely to be older: 68% of texters contacting us about financial issues are aged over 25 years old, versus 38% of people contacting us about other issues.

### Cost of living mentions in Shout conversations

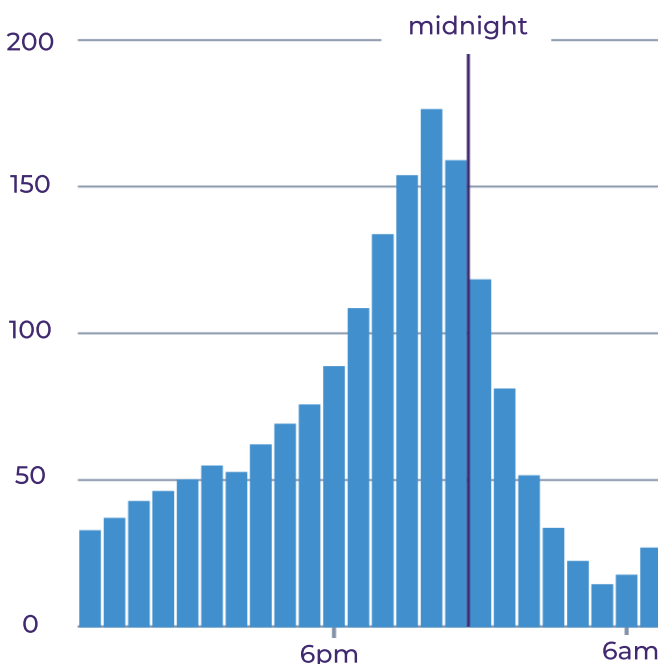
The use of the phrase 'cost of living' started to appear in conversations people had with Shout in early 2022. Mentions of the phrase grew towards the end of the year and have levelled off in 2023, but financial challenges remain a significant reason for people to contact us.

Currently, 'cost of living' is the main issue our texters are raising in around 3% of our conversations, equating to around 50 conversations a day. But given our understanding of our audience demographics across the whole service, we are contacted in the hundreds by people who are much more likely to be impacted by financial difficulties every day.

***“Thank you. I feel this volunteer is an asset and has given me a few ideas on how to cope and communicate with my partner and my feelings. They made me feel heard.”***

**Feedback from a texter who contacted Shout about the cost of living**

#### Conversations (average % hourly)



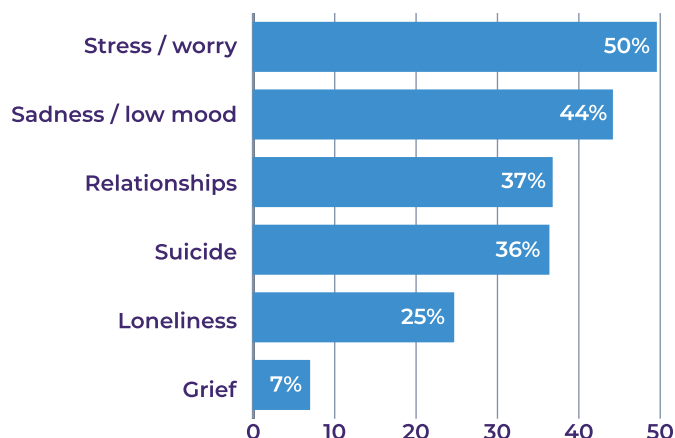
The issue is very consistently seen across all days of the week and all hours of the day, showing how important it is to have 24/7 service availability to support people with mental health issues that are related to the cost of living. This chart shows that demand for Shout is sustained at all hours of the day and night, with demand being greatest between 8pm - midnight when many other avenues of support are not available.





## Issues affecting texters with financial worries

### Most common issues raised in conversations about financial difficulties (% of conversations)



This chart shows the key issues about which those in poverty contact Shout. Stress and worry are the most prevalent theme in these conversations.

From in-depth thematic analysis, almost all Shout conversations with texters contacting us about the cost of living related to struggles to cope with soaring energy prices, rent and mortgage payments, risk of homelessness and rising food bills. In around a third of cases, these concerns were exacerbating existing mental health struggles. In almost half of these conversations, texters had suicidal thoughts as they struggled with mounting bills and debts.

Some texters could not afford the commute to work and were worried about losing their jobs and some mentioned feeling exhausted, drained and burnt out as they took on additional jobs or worked extra hours but still struggled to make ends meet. Others had businesses that had been hugely impacted by rising costs and feared loss of livelihood.

While many of the people who text Shout may be of an age where they are not directly responsible for finances, younger texters worried about their parents' mental state, and not having enough money to live comfortably.

***“Thank you so much I genuinely believe you stopped me from hurting myself and that is angels work! Thank you so so much I’m so grateful for people like you in this world and it fills me with hope.”***

### Feedback from a texter aged 13 and under on free school meals

In over a third of conversations, texters talked about experiencing a deep sense of loneliness in the current cost of living crisis. Some texters felt they had no one to turn to for support and financial advice. Others felt embarrassed and ashamed to talk about their finances with friends and relatives, many of whom referred to Shout as their outlet to vent and offload their anxious thoughts and feelings.

In a third of conversations, texters identified with a psychological diagnosis such as severe depression and anxiety, and were already struggling with their mental health. These texters spoke about how the rising cost of living exacerbated their symptoms. Some were unable to attend their therapy appointments as they could not afford the commute while others had to stop taking their prescribed medication as they could no longer afford them.

With large percentages of texters experiencing anxiety and stress and struggling with suicidal ideation alongside their financial concerns, many described feeling hopeless and not able to see a way out of their financial crisis.

Overall, texters were worried about how they were going to manage and spoke about the negative impact the cost of living crisis was having on their mental health. Texters referenced experiencing a lack of motivation and low self-esteem, and having difficulty sleeping.

- 87% of people who contacted us about financial difficulties said their conversation was helpful
- 65% said they felt more calm after their conversation

## Coping skills used by texters

One of the most frequently mentioned coping skills in Shout conversations with people with financial difficulties was talking to someone about their concerns, whether that be family, friends, a partner or one's GP. Texters also frequently mentioned planning on contacting their GP or seeking counselling.

Coping skills brought up in these types of conversation are shown in the word cloud below.



Other coping mechanisms were also mentioned, but not nearly as often as in other types of Shout conversation. These include resting, watching a film, gaming, relaxing, listening to music, getting some sleep, going for a walk or taking the dog out.

It therefore appears that texters in financial difficulties are keen on unburdening themselves by talking, or seeking professional help, rather than engaging in solitary activities.

## Partnerships to reach financially vulnerable people

Shout is commissioned by nearly 100 organisations across a huge range of sectors who are then able to offer their audiences bespoke access to our mental health support through a tailored 'keyword' that can be texted to 85258. In the current economic climate we are seeing increasingly that organisations such as Cadent, EDF Energy, Anglian Water and Sovereign Housing are commissioning us to support their customers, who are struggling financially, and in some cases to also support their staff who are having distressing conversations with them.

### Case study - Cadent Gas



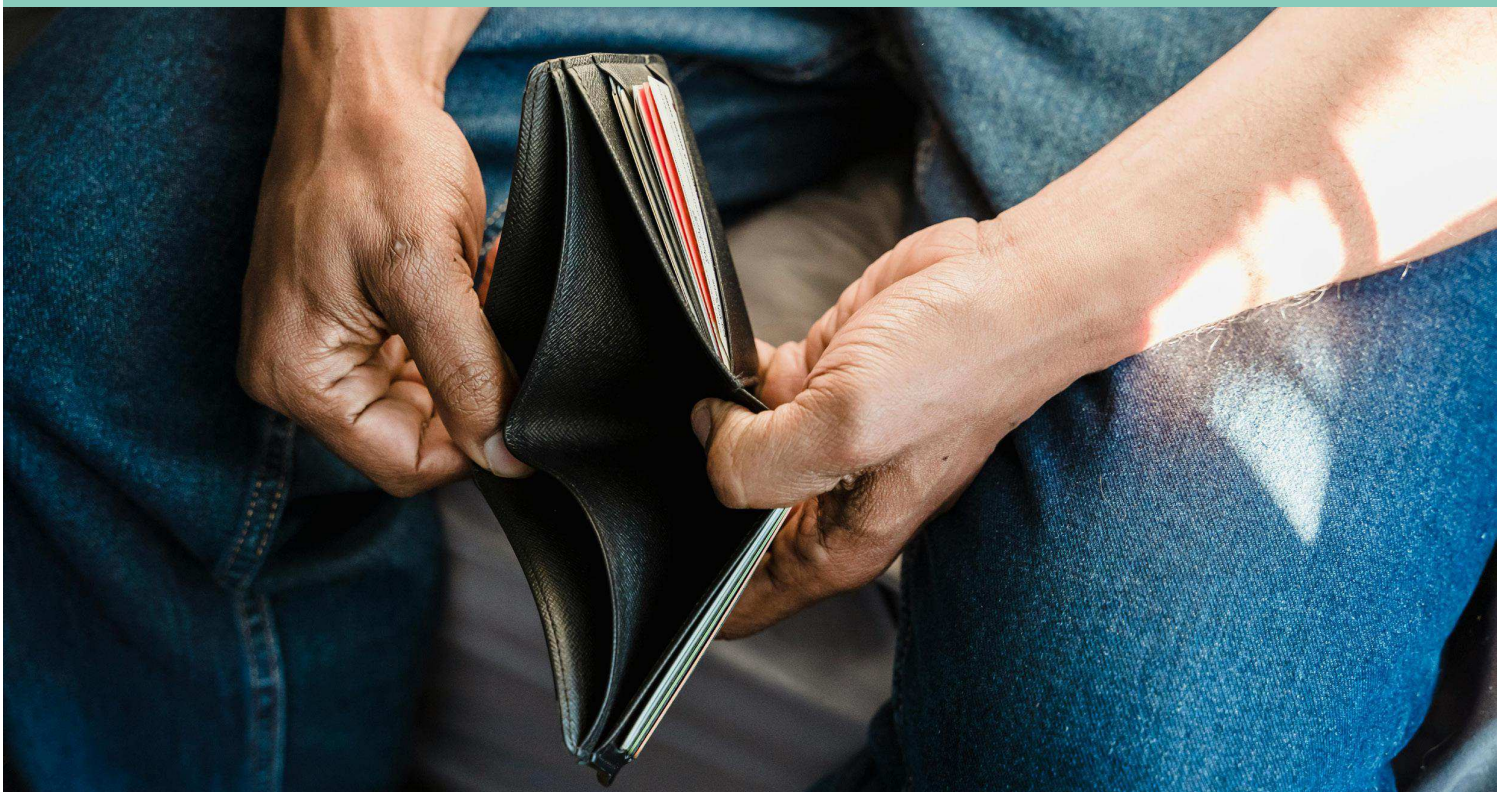
Cadent came to Mental Health Innovations wanting to offer mental health support to its customers living in vulnerable situations. Through Cadent's Vulnerability and Carbon Monoxide (VCMA) projects, it has seen an increased number of people in need seeking support with their energy bill, with inefficient gas appliances, or at risk of carbon monoxide poisoning.

Cadent commissioned a keyword which their customers can use to access the Shout text messaging support service. Cadent's gas engineers visit homes and regularly come into direct contact with individuals who may be vulnerable, so they can directly hand them details of its Shout keyword.

***"Services like Shout can act as a lifeline to a person experiencing difficulties with their mental health. Shout's text message support offers our customers and colleagues who would not normally be comfortable speaking with a mental health advisor a way to seek help via an anonymous service."***

**Sam Graham, Technical Manager, Cadent Gas**





## Conclusion

These are challenging and turbulent times for many of us in the UK, but those hardest hit by the cost of living crisis have the additional pressures of struggling to put food on the table and heat their homes. A negative impact on mental health can, sadly, be a consequence. Awareness about supportive charities such as Shout, where people can reach out and talk through their fears and anxieties with compassionate and non-judgemental volunteers who are mindful of the broader picture of what is going on in society, is critical for the mental health of the public.

As we continue to monitor this situation, each conversation widens our understanding about the language people are using to describe their distress; what challenges are affecting which demographics; how homelessness is changing and who is being impacted; where people are finding support; and the exacerbation of existing mental health challenges and signs of the emergence of new ones.

Our data will provide us, our partners and funders, academics, charities and statutory services with information that will be critical in informing responses to the cost of living challenges we are currently facing. Simultaneously, our data insight will increase our volunteers' and clinicians' understanding of the unfolding situation and their ability to support our texters with updated resources and specialised support.



If you'd like to find out more  
about supporting your  
audiences with Shout, contact  
[caroline.westley@mhiuk.org](mailto:caroline.westley@mhiuk.org).

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