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Opinium
What people think, feel and do

Financial security through COVID-19

Key Findings
November 2020

Contents

Financial security through COVID-19

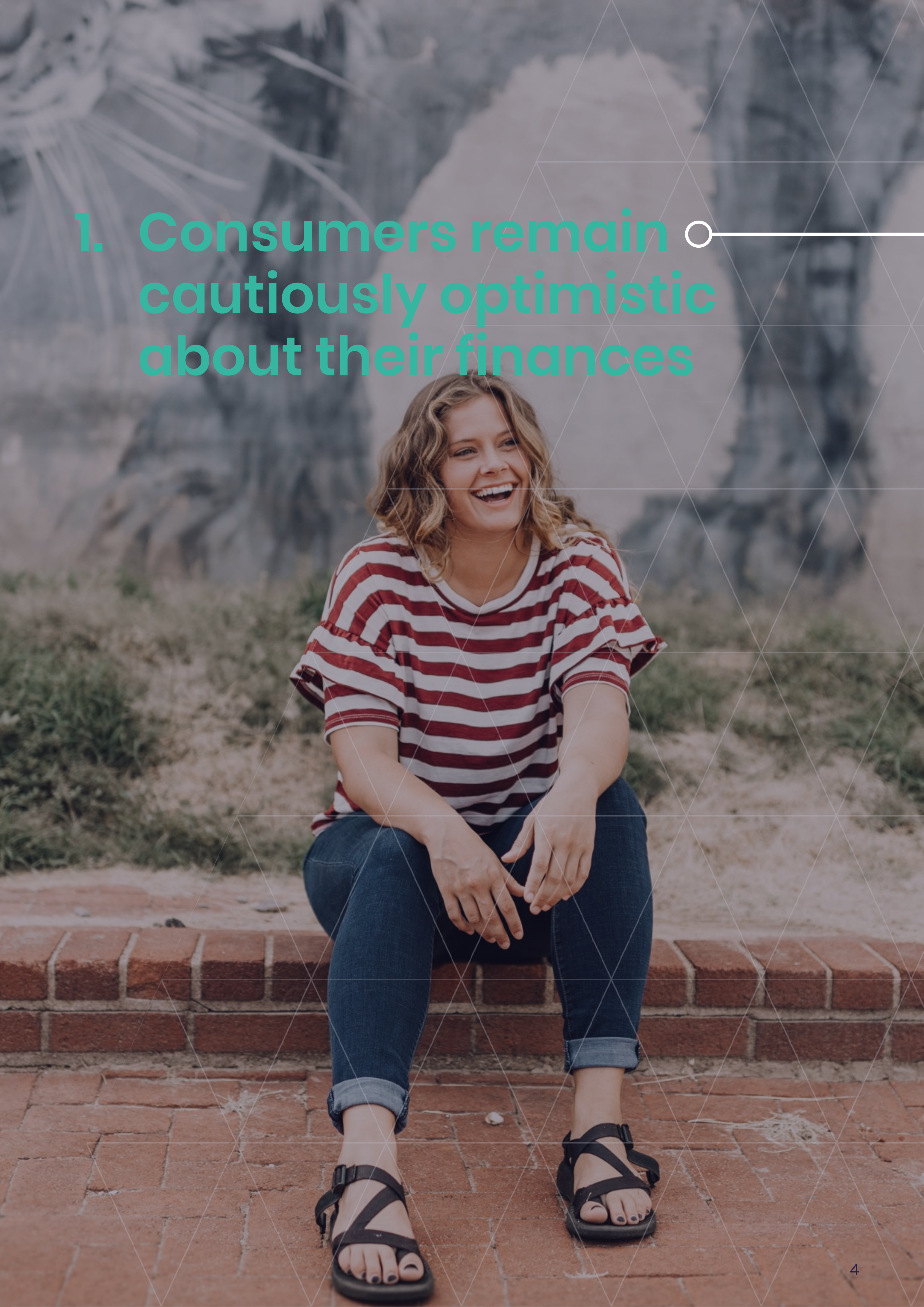
Introduction

To better understand how changes in the ongoing coronavirus crisis will impact the way people feel about their current finances and long-term financial security, Lansons partnered with research house Opinium for its study **Financial Security through COVID-19: How the crisis has changed perspectives on our finances.**

At a time of anxiety and financial uncertainty for the nation and the impact of economic recession starting to take hold, we unveil five key takeaways from our research, conducted among 2,000 UK adults, in two waves – May and August 2020.

1. **Consumers remain cautiously optimistic about their finances**
2. **Financial stability is more favourable than rapid growth for investors**
3. **Consumers look to shore up their financial futures**
4. **A reputation restored for the banking sector?**
5. **Re-imagining a 'good' return**

1. Consumers remain cautiously optimistic about their finances

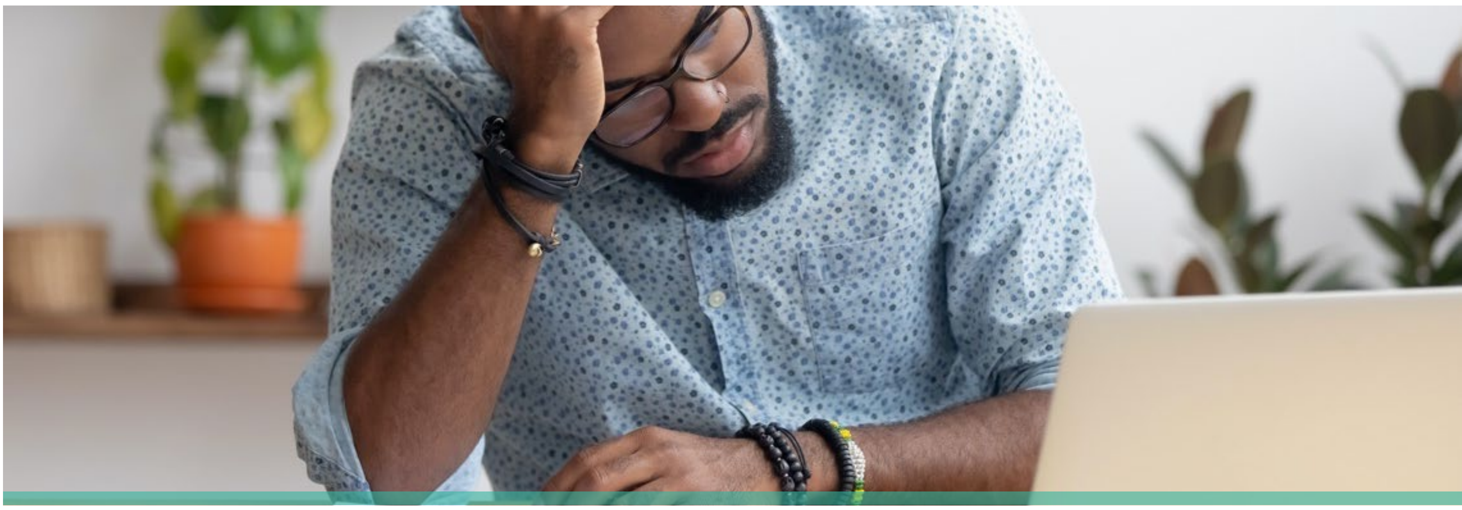


1. Consumers remain cautiously optimistic about their finances

After the intensity of the first national lockdown and ongoing measures to restrict people's movement, interactions and the spread of Covid-19, our study found the nation to be cautiously positive about its finances, both at the height of the first lockdown but even more so during August, rising from 38% in May to 43% in August, despite the country officially entering economic recession in that time.

People feeling informed about their financial situation and in control of their finances goes some way to explain why this positivity has increased, with many able to save more during the crisis and reduce their reliance on debt.

However, despite the nation feeling more informed and in control, scratching beneath the surface reveals that the outlook isn't all rosy, as a significant proportion of the population are feeling anxious about their financial security.



1. Consumers remain cautiously optimistic about their finances

This is particularly true of the younger generations aged 18-24 who are most likely to have been furloughed or made redundant and are twice as likely to be feeling anxious about their financial situation compared to their older counterparts at retirement age.

Similarly, looking at income shows a big divide into how the nation are feeling about their finances, with those from lower income households feeling more anxious, pessimistic and negative about their financial security compared to higher income households.

Despite this, what is encouraging is that almost half of the nation feel “looked after financially”, a sign that the efforts of the Government and the nation’s financial services providers have made a positive impact on consumers at a time when support and communication mattered most.

How financial providers are perceived will only become more important as we experience the economic downturn. It is positive to see that many providers have stepped up to the plate but now is the time to maintain this momentum, continue to win over their customer’s trust and ensure they retain customer loyalty as an even tougher period approaches.

1. Consumers remain cautiously optimistic about their finances

Opinium research:

43% — are positive about their current financial situation

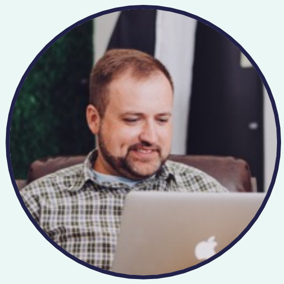
40% — are positive about their long-term financial security

49% — feel relaxed about their financial security, but 34% are feeling anxious, increasing to 42% amongst those aged 18-24 and 39% amongst those from household incomes of less than £20K

1. Consumers remain cautiously optimistic about their finances

Opinium research:

59% feel informed about their finances compared to just 19% who feel uninformed



47% feel looked after by their financial provider, compared to 25% who do not

“Given widespread job losses in the hospitality sector, it is the young who have been impacted the most.”

1. Consumers remain cautiously optimistic about their finances

Other supporting facts:

The latest data for July to September 2020 show's the UK's economy **bounced back from recession with record growth of 15.5%.** However, the country's economy is **still 8.2% smaller than before the pandemic struck** (ONS). Analysts warn it will **shrink again** in the final three months of the year due to **impact of renewed local lockdowns.**

Research by Consumer Intelligence (for Money Mail) found **16 per cent of people feel financially better off, with 38 per cent saving more (June 2020).**

1. Consumers remain cautiously optimistic about their finances

Other supporting facts:

Households' deposits increased by £6.8 billion in September 2020, but remained below the average of £17.3 billion between March and June. This compares to additional deposits of £5.5 billion in August, and was slightly higher than the average in the six months to February 2020 (£5.0 billion). The strong flow of deposits in September can be accounted for by deposits into instant access accounts (Bank of England).

Households cleared an astonishing £5.0 billion of credit-card debt in April, which was more than double the previous record of £2.4 billion paid off in March. In a standard month the nation would usually clear £300 million of credit-card debt (Bank of England).

1. Consumers remain cautiously optimistic about their finances

Expert commentary from Jeff Prestridge, personal finance editor, Mail on Sunday:

“Those in employment are more optimistic about their finances than maybe we would expect them to be. **Remote working has enabled many households to save on work travelling costs and big ticket expenses such as holidays.** This has enabled them to save and pay down mortgage debt.

Yet it is a more divided nation than before the pandemic – with **households that have suffered job losses suffering badly.** This division will widen as unemployment rises and if a second nationwide lockdown is forced on the nation.

Given widespread job losses in the hospitality sector, it is the young who have been impacted the most.

With regards to financial services companies, **it’s correct that most product providers have shown a sensitive side, but primarily in response to direction from the regulator**. Whether this is sustained remains open to debate. If the economy deteriorates further, we could see a sea change with banks protecting their own financial interests.”

1. Consumers remain cautiously optimistic about their finances

What to do next?

Tone is everything. Financial services brands can explore more upbeat and positive communication that tunes into current customer optimism. However, stay close to the mood to carefully judge the balance of positivity with realism, particularly as the recession takes hold.

- **Insight is critical.** Ask, listen and adapt in response to what customers want and need.
- **Keep it real.** Use human stories to explore what opportunities could lie ahead.
- **What next?** What other ways can financial services organisations demonstrate they are "looking after" customers, when the Government schemes and holidays end? What matters to them?

2. Financial stability is more favourable than rapid growth for investors

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Despite cautious optimism towards current financial security, concern around the future of savings, investments and protection/personal insurance are high.

Against this backdrop, the study reveals financial stability takes precedence over rapid wealth accumulation.

The crisis has galvanised investors to review their portfolios as concerns about the long-term value of their investments become heightened. A "health over wealth" mentality could see many changing strategies as shallow but more stable growth becomes more important than higher risk investment opportunities.

But as investors become more active, they are not shying away from investing altogether, as "investing more in 2020" remains a top priority for many. Against this backdrop, opportunities exist for both advisers and providers alike to engage and support their clients, as they better align their investment goals and products with the changing economic landscape.

2. Financial stability is more favourable than rapid growth for investors

Opinium research:

61% value health over wealth when it comes to their finances

17% of investors are reviewing their investments in 2020

16% plan to invest more in 2020 as one of their top financial priorities

41% of investors are more concerned about long term value of investments

2. Financial stability is more favourable than rapid growth for investors

Opinium research:

21% are feeling more concerned about their level of personal insurance

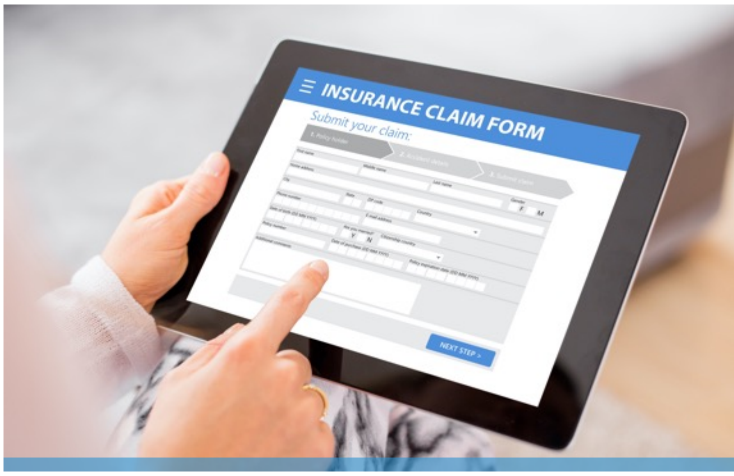
36% look for stability as the most important trait for a financial services provider

“The market correction has caused many to review, rebalance and reposition.”

2. Financial stability is more favourable than rapid growth for investors

Other supporting facts:

Insurance giant Zurich expects to pay more than £15 million in claims related to Covid-19. It paid out £154.2 million on 3,200 life, critical illness and income protection policies in the first half of 2020 – compared with £140 million in the same period last year – with Covid-19 accounting for around a third of the increase.



A St James's Place 'Value of Advice' report found **one consequence of the global pandemic has been recognition of the value of expert financial advice** and one of the main reasons people turned to advisers was for a financial review (58 per cent).

2. Financial stability is more favourable than rapid growth for investors

Other supporting facts:

Opinium's 'Impact of Covid-19 on the Investment landscape' report (25th – 29th May 2020) revealed **56% of advisers are optimistic about the demand for financial advice over the next 12 months.**

This Opinium report also found **25% of investors have rebalanced their portfolio and 29% diversified their investments since the outbreak of Covid -19.**

2. Financial stability is more favourable than rapid growth for investors

Expert commentary from Jeff Prestridge, personal finance editor, Mail on Sunday:

“I think the stock market’s recovery from the sharp falls of February and March has helped keep investors’ faith in long-term wealth generation – this is **despite dividend cuts.** Yet the market correction has caused many to review, rebalance and reposition. **A low interest environment has also maintained investors’ interest in equities.”**

2. Financial stability is more favourable than rapid growth for investors

What to do next?

The crisis has galvanised investors to review their portfolios as concerns about the long-term value of their investments become heightened.

- **Providers can help investors** by offering insight, support and education to help and reassure them with both their short and long-term goals.
- The pandemic has revealed myriad vulnerabilities, especially physical health and financial provision. **Asset managers must act responsibly when it comes to risk and reward.**
- The direct investment and advice market **must support investors reviewing their investment goals** and products to better align with their values.

3. Consumers look to shore up their financial futures

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The pandemic bought about an enforced “pause” in people’s lives, and the devastating impact of the coronavirus on people’s health, wellbeing, and financial stability, caused many to reflect and take stock.

In many ways, the pandemic has been a stark reminder of our financial vulnerability and has placed a renewed emphasis on financial future-proofing – not just for the sake of ourselves, but for our loved ones too.

As people have navigated working from home, changes to the furlough scheme, pay cuts, reduced hours and – in an increasing number of cases – redundancy, the research shows people have, until now, prioritised getting a handle on their immediate debts.

But people’s focus is now turning towards shoring up financial assets, with renewed emphasis on long term savings and investments. This resolve appears to be strengthening as saving becomes a top financial priority for 40% of consumers in August compared to 36% in May.

While saving is a prime focus for many segments of the population, this intention will be easier to realise for some more than others. Our study shows that saving is less of a priority for lower income households who are more likely to be feeling the financial impact of the crisis and have less disposable income.

This reality clearly shows the mixed experiences felt across the nation. Financial providers need to think hard about how they communicate and engage with consumers to balance and reflect their very different financial circumstances and needs.

3. Consumers look to shore up their financial futures

Opinium research:

#1

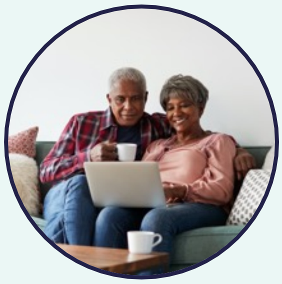
Cash savings and a rainy-day fund are key priorities for people (48% and 40% respectively)

20%

are prioritising paying off their debt in 2020

37%

say that their pension matters most when it comes to their finances



3. Consumers look to shore up their financial futures

Opinium research:

39% are prioritising owning a home and 38% are prioritising their family's future financial security

35% are more concerned about long term value of savings with 40% saying saving is top priority in 2020 increasing from 36% in May

"Protection is a big theme to come out of the pandemic. It has focused households' minds on ensuring they have built an adequately fortified financial castle."

3. Consumers look to shore up their financial futures

Other supporting facts:

More than 9.6 million jobs at more than 1.2 million companies have been furloughed since the launch of the government's wage subsidy scheme in March.

While the much-welcomed Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, or furlough, has been extended until the end of March 2021, with a review in January, experts still warn that **furloughs could become permanent redundancies**.

3. Consumers look to shore up their financial futures

Other supporting facts:

The Office for Budget Responsibility has said **unemployment could more than double by the end of 2020** to the highest levels since the 1980s. Aviation, retail, hospitality and leisure are among the hardest-hit sectors.

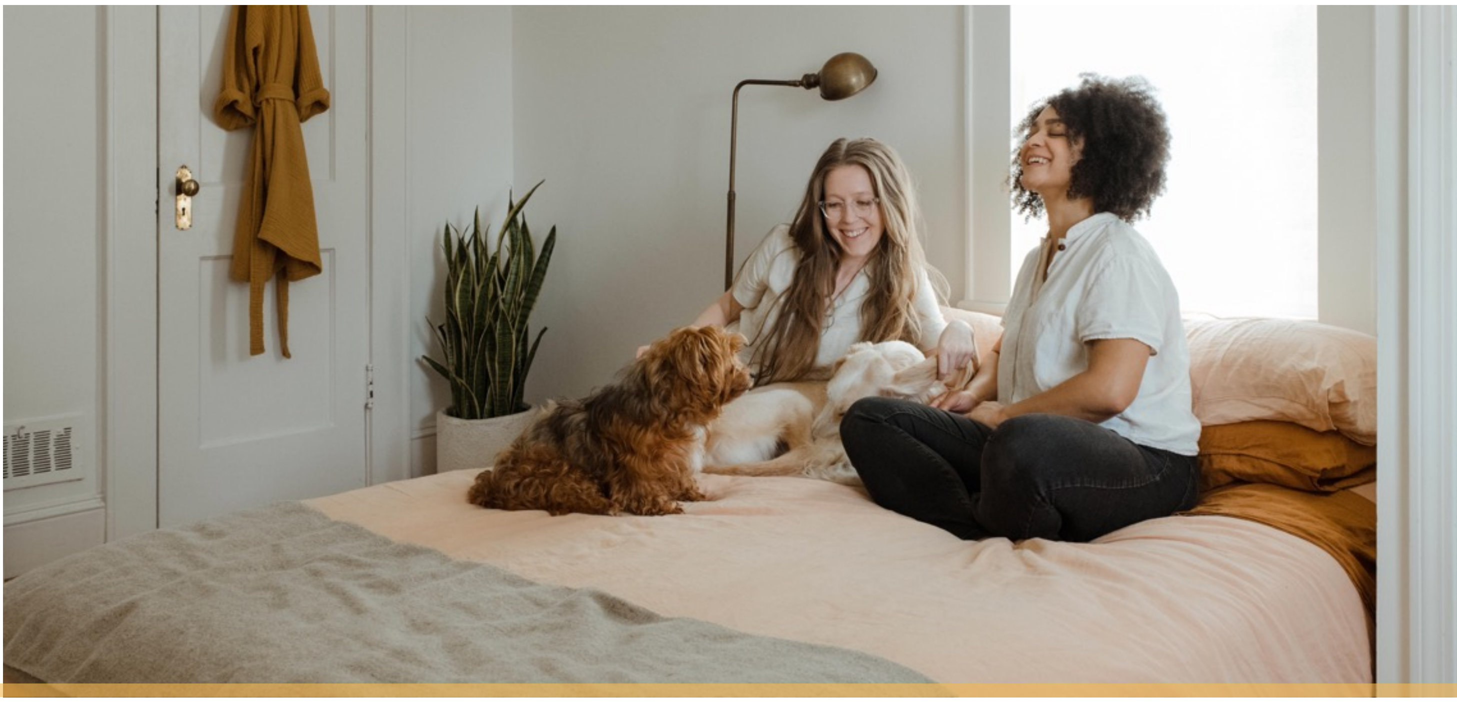
Since Rishi Sunak's stamp duty holiday was announced, the number of homes selling within a week of being listed hit a 10-year high and, according to Rightmove, **more properties are selling now than at any time over the past 10 years** (in which Rightmove has been tracking the data).

3. Consumers look to shore up their financial futures

Expert commentary from Jeff Prestridge, personal finance editor, Mail on Sunday:

"Protection is a big theme to come out of the pandemic. It has focused households' minds on ensuring they have built an adequately fortified financial castle – one held together with an emergency cash fund, where debt is minimised and if possible being paid down and where financial protection is in place.

But of course, this is not a homogenous response – **many households are fighting for financial survival."**



3. Consumers look to shore up their financial futures

What to do next?

There are anxious and uncertain times ahead for many; the impact of economic recession is deep-rooted and long-standing.

- **Financial services providers have a responsibility to support staff and colleagues as well as customers** during times of recession and hardship.
- **Business preparation and continuity planning**, to manage a long period of economic uncertainty, is crucial.
- The toughest period **may still lie ahead.**

4. A reputation restored for the banking sector?

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Just over a decade ago the banking sector was seen as the perpetrator of the global financial crisis, and with it came long-lasting mistrust and customer contempt.

Today, we are facing another economic crisis, yet this time financial providers are cast in a much more positive light.

The study found consumers feel positive towards their bank and approval has increased during the pandemic. And it poses a unique opportunity to build or rebuild trust that was previously eroded and to build better, lasting connections with customers.

As uncertainty continues and the recession bites, honesty, transparency, and perceived fairness will become increasingly important in the relationships financial services brands hold with their customers and clients. But as initiatives put in place by banks come to an end, actions and words in the next phase (which build on, rather than contradict, the support and reliability demonstrated over the next few months) will be critical to optimising this opportunity.

4. A reputation restored for the banking sector?

Opinium research:

48% feel positive towards their bank compared to just 10% who feel negative. This has increased from 41% in May

+24% say they approve of their bank since the coronavirus pandemic took hold

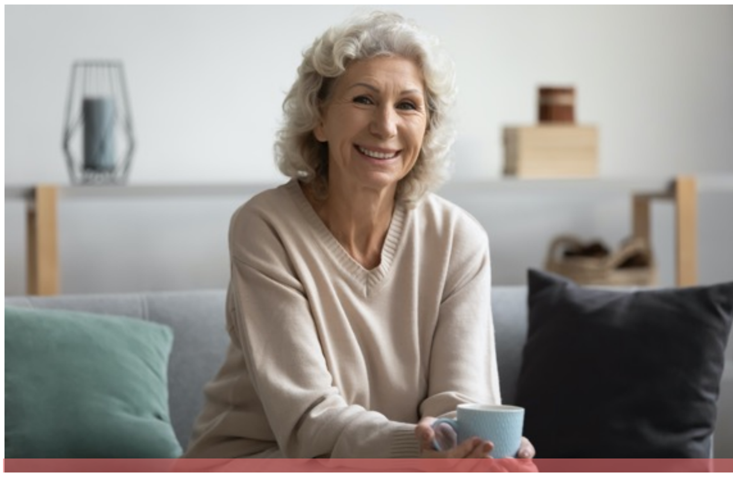
45% the second most important trait consumers value in financial services providers is honesty

27% value fairness in financial services provider

4. A reputation restored for the banking sector?

Other supporting facts:

1.9m customers – equivalent to 1 in 6 UK mortgage holders – **took advantage of the Chancellor's mortgage payment holiday scheme** (UK Finance).

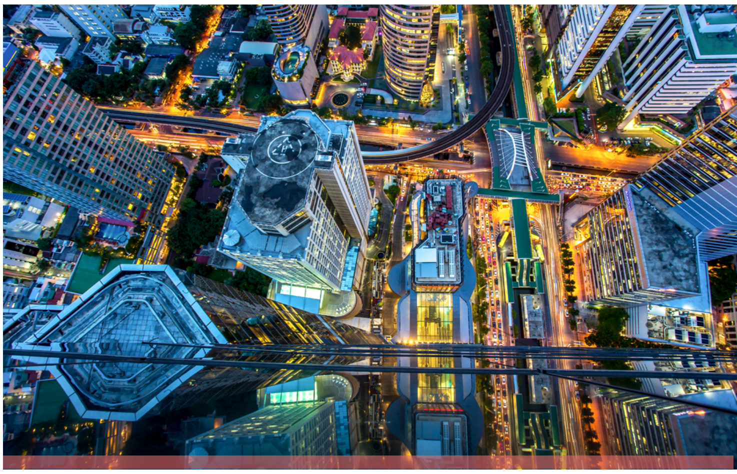


The FCA has told banks to offer a range of "tailored" repayment options to mortgage borrowers hit by coronavirus when the ability to claim three-month payment holidays is withdrawn at the end of October (FT).

4. A reputation restored for the banking sector?

Other supporting facts:

The Monetary Policy Committee at a special meeting on 19th March voted **to cut the Bank rate to 0.1%, designed to in turn ensure the interest rates charged by banks was reduced.**



Among a series of measures implemented by the Bank of England, **UK banks agreed they would not pay any dividends to their shareholders that were still due from 2019 and will not pay any new dividends until the end of 2020.**

4. A reputation restored for the banking sector?

Expert commentary from Jeff Prestridge, personal finance editor, Mail on Sunday:

“Banks have had a ‘good’ pandemic but let’s not lavish too much praise on them. Most of the ‘good’ has come as a result of instruction from the regulator**. I detect cracks in reputational restoration** – banks no longer accepting applications for new business accounts (how crazy), yet more branches being shut.

And of course, **there would be outrage if the banks responded to negative interest by charging savers.”**

4. A reputation restored for the banking sector?

What to do next?

The nation's banks still carry a legacy from the Great Financial Crisis and last recession, but there is a unique and unexpected opportunity to turn the tide on the reputational challenges of recent years

- **Reputations take a long time to build but moments to destroy.** The action financial services organisations take now will determine their reputational path for the next decade. Reputation management must be a board-level concern as financial services providers look to rebuild and recover.
- **Embrace change.** Pressure will remain on financial services providers to continue delivering for customers and colleagues alike. Scrutiny will remain over how profits are made and whether brands are living up to their Covid-19 legacy. Organisations need to be bold in considering what their transformation needs to look like, to build on this momentum.
- **Reset the narrative.** This is the time to reposition for a new future, based on greater trust and goodwill.

5. Re-imagining a 'good' return

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The coronavirus pandemic has created a new interest in and greater importance (in the mind of consumers) on the role of businesses in society; how they are governed, how they behave and how they address society's biggest issues, including climate change and inequality.

It is a light which now shines more intensely on the financial services industry than ever before. Customers know and care about the way companies have treated and supported their staff during the pandemic. They seek evidence that the brand they trust with their money is principled and reliable. They are showing greater interest in where their savings and pensions are invested.

This trend is most evident within the investment sector as it renews focus on ESG and impact investing. The Woodford scandal has set the scene for more scrutiny on ESG metrics and the pandemic has only intensified this resolve.

With interest growing particularly with younger age groups, increased opportunities exist for providers to engage and influence the next generation of investors.

5. Re-imagining a ‘good’ return

Opinium research:

58% want their bank / building society to invest their savings in a way that is good for the environment and 32% hold this view more strongly since the Covid-19 outbreak

38% of consumers value responsibility from their providers

27% are more interested in sustainable investments since Covid-19 rising to 41% amongst 18-34 year olds

48% the most important trait people want from their financial services provider(s) is reliability

5. Re-imagining a 'good' return

Opinium research:

14% value authenticity from their financial provider

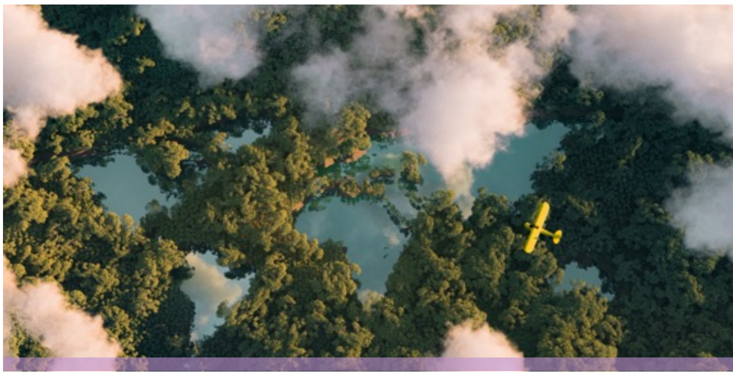
36% say being principled is a main consideration for their financial security

"Consumers want financial providers to do the right things – run their businesses in the right way. It's a trend that is here to stay and rightly so."

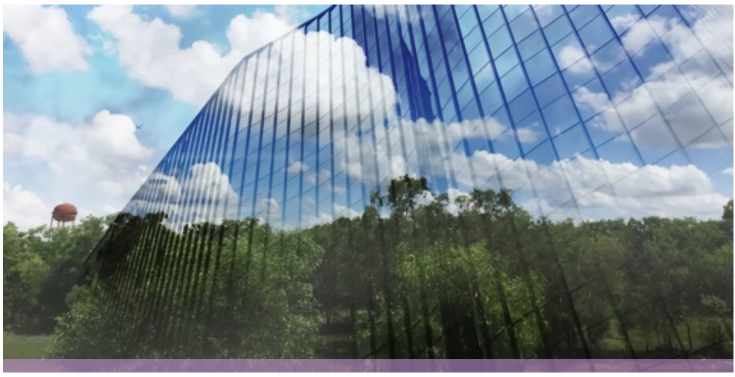
5. Re-imagining a 'good' return

Other supporting facts:

UK fund flow data from transaction network Calastone found that the amount of new money invested in ESG equity funds between April and July **exceeded the combined flows for the previous five years.**



A recent study by Morningstar found most sustainable funds have beaten traditional funds even excluding 2020's unusual market conditions. **6 out of 10 sustainable funds delivered higher returns than equivalent conventional funds over the past decade,** undermining claims that investing based on environmental, social and governance principles hampers performance (Morningstar, FT).



ESG funds' low exposure to oil and gas helped them to **outperform the wider stock market during the March coronavirus sell-off.**

5. Re-imagining a 'good' return

Expert commentary from Jeff Prestridge, personal finance editor, Mail on Sunday:

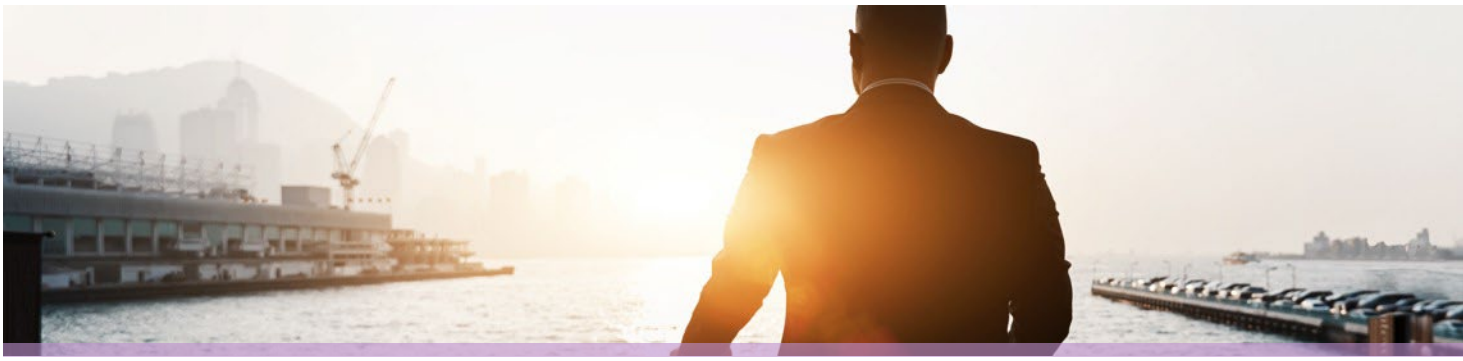
"I think it's great that **customers are being more demanding of their financial product providers.** They want them to do the right things – run their businesses in the right way. **It's a trend that is here to stay and rightly so."**

5. Re-imagining a 'good' return

What to do next?

Purpose matters. Identifying purpose in a post-Covid world – and identifying how that will impact governance, customer service, treatment of employees and shareholder returns – should be top priority for the financial services industry. But it has to be more than words on a wall.

- **Covid-19 has shifted perceptions of what matters and what people care about.** Multiple stakeholders will place greater importance on a company's behaviours and principles. Purpose must be articulated, then embedded in the fabric of how the organisation is run.
- **Sustainability is critical** and should be aligned – if not embedded in – purpose.
- **But reputation comes from action and words.** Purpose requires commitment to change and trust comes from demonstrating that commitment. Tangible goals, aligned with purpose should be identified, monitored and reported on.



Conclusion:

What next for financial services brands?

As we continue to live through rapidly changing and uncertain times, long term financial security and protection will remain a priority. And reputation really matters. The critical currency is trust. Equity comes from track record – particularly evidence of action during Covid-19, demonstrating understanding and empathy, showing principles and putting words into action. Listening, engaging and being willing to adapt and change will be fundamental for those financial services brands which can take greatest advantage of this unique opportunity to turn the tide, especially on the "bank bashing" of the last 10 years.

The study highlights five priorities for financial services providers in a life after Covid-19.

If you would like to speak to a member of Lansons' specialist asset management, corporate reputation, employee engagement or marketing communications teams about any of these issues, please get in touch.

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Tone is everything. Financial services brands can explore more upbeat and positive communication that tunes into current customer optimism. However, stay close to the mood to carefully judge the balance of positivity with realism, particularly as the recession takes hold.

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- **Keep it real. Use human stories to explore what opportunities could lie ahead.**

- **What next? What other ways can financial services organisations demonstrate they are "looking after" customers, when the Government schemes and holidays end? What matters to them?**

Conclusion: what to do next?

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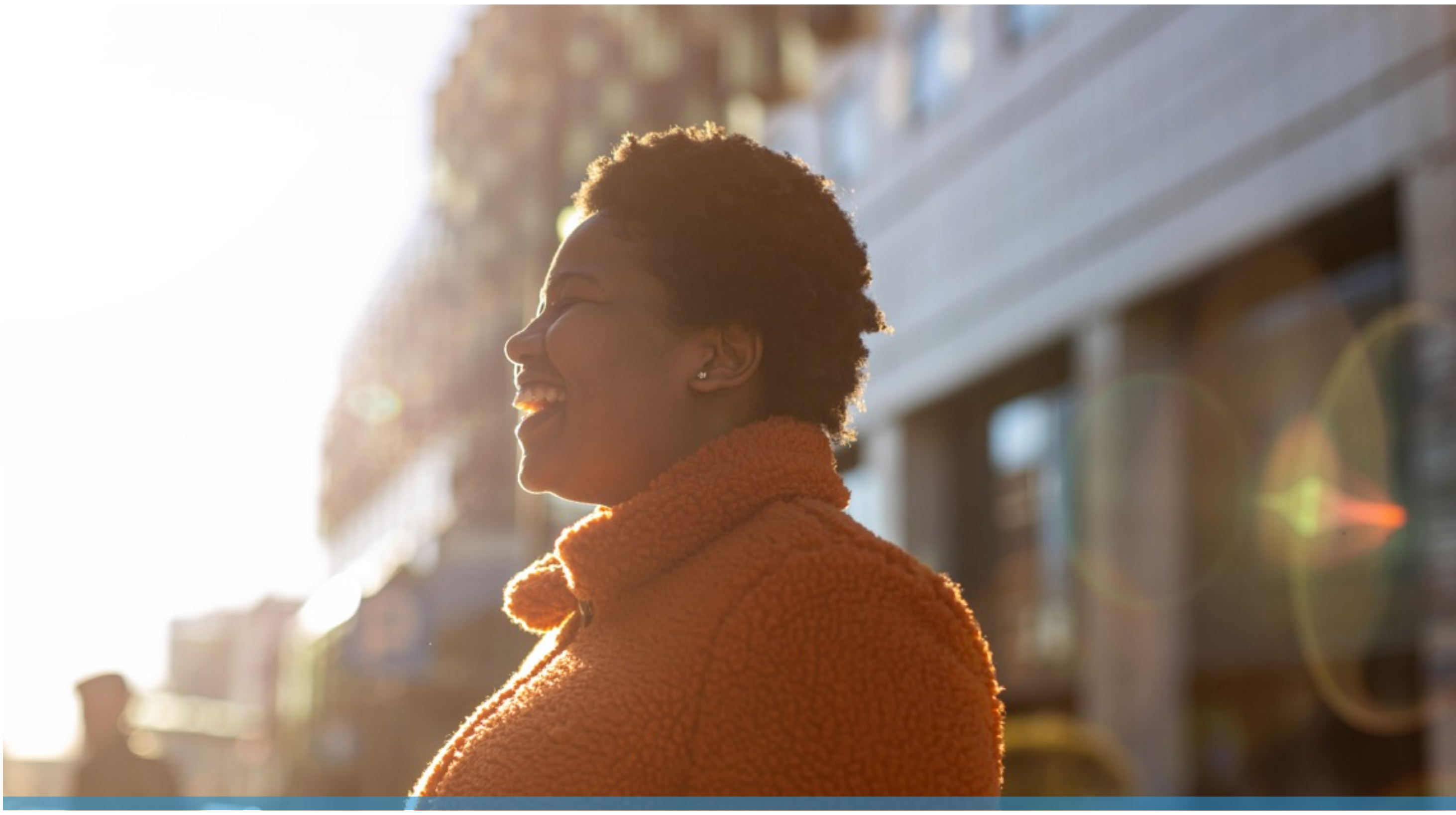

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- **The toughest period may still lie ahead.**

Conclusion: what to do next?

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- **Reputations take a long time to build but moments to destroy. The action financial services organisations take now will determine their reputational path for the next decade. Reputation management must be a board-level concern as FS providers look to rebuild and recover.**

- **Embrace change. Pressure will remain on financial services providers to continue delivering for customers and colleagues alike. Scrutiny will remain over how profits are made and whether brands are living up to their Covid-19 legacy. Organisations need to be bold in considering what their transformation needs to look like, to build on this momentum.**

- **Reset the narrative. This is the time to reposition for a new future, based on greater trust and goodwill.**

Conclusion: what to do next?

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About the authors

Katherine Hobby

Katherine is a Board Director and Partner at **Lansons**. She advises financial services clients on integrated campaigns to drive brand awareness and customer acquisition.

Katherine has extensive experience advising online consumer finance brands including price comparison website MoneySuperMarket and M&S Money, and she has devised and directed campaigns for Metro Bank, Wealthify, Nutmeg, Investec Click & Invest, Barclays Stockbrokers, J O Hambro Capital Management, JP Morgan's Investment Trusts and funds businesses, BNY Mellon and Franklin Templeton Investments (including the Templeton Emerging Markets Investment Trust).

She also launched JP Morgan's direct to consumer business, and has provided CEO-level counsel to organisations including RWC Partners and Borro. She has also worked with the Isle of Man Government Department for Enterprise on positioning within the UK media to encourage inward investment to the Island across key sectors including finance, manufacturing, aviation and aircraft, eGaming, and ICT.

About the authors

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Alexa is a Research Director and Partner at **Opinium** and heads up the financial services division. Her experience comes from across the financial services category working across consumer and business audiences, to help shape brand and communication strategies, evaluate market trends and increase the strategic responsiveness of organisations.

Jeff Prestridge, personal finance editor, Mail on Sunday

Jeff Prestridge has been Editor of the **Mail on Sunday** for more than 20 years, and writes regularly for Financial Adviser magazine. Throughout his career Jeff has won numerous awards for his campaigning work, across a range of personal finance issues, from the impact of bank closures on local communities through to fighting for justice on behalf of consumers.

He is a regular commentator and a go-to voice for financial issues in the UK, famous for his no-nonsense approach and calling out big companies and chief executives for foul play.

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About Lansons

Based in London and New York, Lansons is a leading independent reputation management consultancy, 100% owned by people working in the business. It has been voted agency of the year twenty-five times since it was established in 1989 by its Chair, Clare Parsons and Chief Executive, Tony Langham. Lansons has over 100 people (35 of whom own the Limited Liability Partnership), has won over 90 major awards, and works for more than 100 national and international clients. Through its membership of the international networks PROI Worldwide and Global Communication Partners (GCP), Lansons delivers global expertise and strategic advice.

At the same time Lansons has been featured in the **Great Place to Work®** 'Best Workplace' rankings for each of the past sixteen years. Lansons' consultants are experts in media, investor, political, regulatory, employee and change, crisis, digital and international communications. In 2019, Lansons announced its acquisition of Intermarket, the specialist strategic communications consultancy based in New York.

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