Response to the Money and Pensions Service (MaPS) Early Market Engagement

Building an Inclusive National Debt Advice System

Evidence, Insight and Recommendations from British Bangladeshi Communities

July 2026

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Executive Summary

Debt Talk welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Money and Pensions Service (MaPS) Early Market Engagement on the future of nationally accessible debt advice, specialist provision and enabling infrastructure.

We support MaPS' ambition to develop a debt advice system that is accessible, collaborative, evidence-led and capable of responding to changing patterns of financial hardship. Our response focuses on an issue that remains insufficiently addressed within current provision: the persistent under-engagement of some ethnic minority communities with mainstream debt advice services.

This submission draws upon original community research undertaken by Debt Talk during 2025–26 with members of the British Bangladeshi community in London, alongside wider national evidence on poverty, financial exclusion and over-indebtedness.

Our research demonstrates that financial hardship within Bangladeshi communities is shaped not only by low income, but also by cultural expectations, faith considerations, family financial structures, stigma and limited trust in mainstream services. These factors frequently delay engagement until financial problems have escalated into crisis.

The evidence suggests that improving equality of access requires more than expanding existing provision. Future commissioning should recognise that different communities experience different barriers and that specialist, culturally competent pathways are an essential component of an inclusive national debt advice system.

Debt Talk therefore recommends that future MaPS commissioning:

- recognises culturally competent debt advice as a strategic component of national provision;
- invests in trusted community organisations as delivery partners rather than solely referral agencies;
- supports integrated pathways between national, community and specialist services;
- strengthens research into unmet need among underserved communities;
- adopts commissioning models that reward engagement, prevention and long-term outcomes alongside service volumes.

We believe these recommendations would support MaPS' ambition to deliver a genuinely accessible "no wrong door" debt advice system.

1. Introduction

Debt advice plays a vital role in improving financial resilience, reducing poverty and supporting wider health and wellbeing in East London. However, access to advice remains unequal.

Despite experiencing some of the highest rates of poverty in England, many members of Britain's Bangladeshi community continue to seek regulated debt advice only after financial difficulties have reached crisis point. This represents not only an inequality in access but also a missed opportunity for earlier intervention, improved outcomes and reduced demand on public services.

Debt Talk was established to understand these barriers and develop approaches rooted in community trust, cultural competence, and lived experience, informed by our learning from the pandemic that impacted multi-generational communities in London and beyond.

This submission presents evidence from our recent research alongside practical recommendations for future commissioning.

2. About Debt Talk

Debt Talk CIC is a community-led social enterprise dedicated to improving financial well-being and reducing debt-related inequality among underserved communities. We provide FCA-regulated debt advice.

Established in 2025, Debt Talk builds on trusted relationships developed through the successful BritBangla COVID-19 community response. Our work combines financial capability, debt awareness, research, community engagement and partnership working to improve access to financial support for those least likely to engage with mainstream services.

Our approach is founded upon three principles:

- community trust;
- cultural competence; and
- evidence-based practice.

Rather than designing services for communities, Debt Talk works with communities to identify barriers, develop solutions and evaluate impact within a multi-generation family context.

3. Research Methodology

To inform future service design, Debt Talk undertook two structured community consultations during October 2025.

More than forty-five participants contributed to the research, including:

- residents with lived experience of debt;
- advice practitioners;
- community organisations;
- health professionals;
- local authority officers; and
- voluntary sector partners.

The consultations explored:

- barriers to seeking debt advice;
- drivers of financial hardship;
- experiences of existing services;
- unmet needs; and
- recommendations for future provision.

This qualitative evidence provides insight into issues that are often underrepresented within national administrative datasets.

4. Key Findings

Poverty alone does not explain financial vulnerability

- While low income undoubtedly contributes to financial hardship, participants consistently described additional pressures arising from cultural expectations, family responsibilities and faith obligations.

- Financial decisions are frequently made collectively within extended households, creating circumstances that are not always reflected within conventional affordability assessments.

- Similarly, financial support sent to relatives overseas is often viewed as an essential family responsibility rather than discretionary expenditure.
- Future debt advice models should therefore recognise that financial resilience is shaped by social and cultural context as well as income.

Shame remains one of the greatest barriers to early intervention

- One of the strongest findings from our research concerns the role of dignity, honour and reputation.
- Participants repeatedly described delaying requests for support because of concerns about family reputation, community judgement and personal embarrassment.
- This delay frequently results in larger debts, poorer mental wellbeing and fewer available options for resolution.
- Improving access therefore requires investment in trusted relationships, confidentiality and community engagement—not simply increased service capacity.

Faith matters

- Many participants expressed concern that mainstream financial products and some debt solutions are incompatible with Islamic principles.
- Although alternative approaches exist, awareness remains limited and specialist advice is not consistently available.
- Future commissioning should support organisations capable of providing culturally and faith-informed guidance, alongside mainstream regulated advice.

Trust is infrastructure

- Community trust should be recognised as a strategic asset rather than an optional feature of service delivery.
- Our research demonstrates that trusted community organisations often act as the gateway through which individuals first disclose financial difficulties.

- Without these trusted relationships, many people do not engage with regulated advice until crisis becomes unavoidable.

Investment in community trust should therefore be viewed as investment in national debt advice infrastructure.

5. Recommendations for Future Commissioning

Debt Talk recommends that MaPS consider five strategic priorities.

Recommendation One

- Develop specialist culturally competent pathways alongside mainstream national provision where the trauma of the communities is understood.

Recommendation Two

- Recognise trusted community organisations as delivery partners rather than solely referral organisations.

Recommendation Three

- Invest in shared referral infrastructure that enables seamless movement between community organisations, specialist providers and national advice services.

Recommendation Four

- Support ongoing research into unmet needs, particularly among communities that remain underrepresented within existing datasets.

Recommendation Five

- Adopt commissioning frameworks that measure prevention, engagement, trust and long-term financial resilience alongside traditional output measures.

Conclusion

Debt Talk welcomes MaPS' commitment to creating a more connected, evidence-led and accessible debt advice system.

Our research indicates that significant inequalities in access remain for many ethnic minority communities. Addressing these inequalities will require commissioning approaches that recognise the importance of culture, trust, faith and lived experience alongside scale and efficiency.

A truly inclusive national debt advice system should combine the reach of national providers with the trust, insight and cultural competence of community organisations.

Debt Talk stands ready to contribute both specialist expertise and community evidence to help achieve this vision.

Debt Talk contact details

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