

A photograph of a barbershop interior. In the foreground, a man with a beard, wearing a black polo shirt with a "Mike the Barber" logo, is handing a stack of banknotes to a customer. In the background, a woman in a black top and apron is working on a customer's hair. A neon sign on the wall reads "Welcome to the barbershop".

CONSUMER COUNCIL ANNUAL REPORT

2025

Begin 



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Cash drops to 9%

UK Finance reported in October that cash payments have dropped to just 9% of all transactions - down from 23% in 2019.



Resilience remains key

A blackout in Spain and Portugal caused multiple issues, including how to pay for things in an increasingly cashless society. It served as a key reminder of the importance of resilience in our payments infrastructure.



Foreword



I'm honoured to have become the Chair of the Consumer Council. At a time when there is huge change in the industry and in how we use cash, the Council has a responsibility to protect the interests of consumers in general and cash users in particular.

I came to the Council with some knowledge of LINK's work. I have acted as the Chair of the Community Cash Assessment Panel, overseeing LINK's Access to Cash Assessment rules. I am also LINK's Independent Assessor, a final point of appeal for communities concerned about LINK's access to cash decisions.

While those roles look at cash access through a specific lens, the Council's remit is rightly wider. The group therefore focused strategically on the role we want the Consumer Council to play, and identified key themes to consider:

- Tackling **any premium paid** by consumers through cash
- Assessing the impact of **loss of cash acceptance** on cash viability
- Improving **digital payments inclusion**
- An **inclusive payments** landscape

From looking at the UK's digital payments habits to researching cash acceptance trends among retailers, and from analysing pay-to-use transactions at LINK ATMs to considering the future of the payments infrastructure, the work of the Council has been thorough and timely, and made progress on all of these themes.

This report gives some insight into the work we've done on each theme, but it cannot capture the depth and quality of discussions we have had as a group, and for that I must thank the members of the Council. They make it a formidable group, with expertise to shape an inclusive future for cash users. I have been pleased to welcome Professor Martin Coppack and Martin McTague to the membership, bringing new expertise in inclusive design and small businesses to bolster our expertise.

At the end of the year, we wished Margaret Bloom CBE well as she retired from the Council. An expert in competition law and consumer protection, Margaret's insights have supported the Council for 20 years, and she will be sorely missed.

In 2026 I look forward to ensuring that it remains a relevant, insightful and consumer driven force for good in a changing industry.

Joanna Wallace Chair, LINK Consumer Council

Financial Inclusion in Numbers in 2025

We track a huge number of stats as part of our Financial Inclusion Programme. They all add up to one conclusion: despite a rapid shift away from cash usage, the Programme is delivering for consumers.

£1,350
average amount withdrawn by a UK adult in 2025

3,710
ATMs receive a financial inclusion subsidy

99%
high streets with reasonable free cash access

210%
increase in traffic to the Cash Locator

2,377
deprived areas with good access to cash

3,139
protected ATMs

350
site visits completed

96%
of people within a reasonable distance of free cash access

£17m
invested in financial inclusion subsidies

£1.48BN
withdrawn from ATMs per week

The UK may be digital by default, but cash remains key

Cash withdrawals on the LINK network have continued to decline, driven by rapid developments in the way we pay.

LINK regularly commissions research to inform policy development and support discussions at the Consumer Council.

This year, its report

"TAPPING INTO TROUBLE?" painted a clear picture about the pace of change.

**THE OLD SAYING
"CASH IS KING" MAY
STILL HOLD TRUE FOR
SOME, BUT TODAY, IT'S
CONVENIENCE THAT
WEARS THE CROWN**

Adrian Roberts discussed it with the Council. He said: "Our research found that digital is now the default to such an extent that fewer than half of people typically leave the house with a wallet. This works well for millions of people, but what happens if systems go down? What happens if you run out of battery? The truth is, digital reliance comes with a risk."

The numbers in the report are eye-opening:

- **61%** of people have experienced a payments failure.
- Fewer than half of UK adults own a physical wallet that they consider essential to their day-to-day lives. **Just 38% of 18-24 year olds do.**
- As a median average, **people carry as little as £20 with them** when they leave home, and keep just £10 at home.

The report included handy hints for consumers, and covered the work being done by the Bank of England to make the payment system more resilient.

Through its discussions, the Consumer Council has focused on making sure the payments system being developed through the National Payments Vision is designed with digital inclusion at its core. The Council heard from Joanne Dewar, Project Lead at Project Nemo, who discussed the work being done to develop truly inclusive banking apps. The Council noted that we should focus on a payments system that works for 100% of consumers, not just those who are digitally savvy. As well as protecting access to cash as an option for everyone, we need to focus on digital inclusion as well.

8%
reduction in ATM transactions in 2025

"DO YOU STILL CARRY A PHYSICAL WALLET, OR ARE YOU DIGITAL BY DEFAULT?"

Check out our handy hints and tips **HERE** to make sure you can always pay

Financial Inclusion Programme

LINK's Financial Inclusion Programme was created in 2006 to protect cash access across the UK. Despite the enormous change in how we pay since then, the programme continues to serve consumers across the UK.

In 2025, LINK has directed over £1.4m a month towards ATMs in the financial inclusion programme. These machines are serving the most rural and deprived areas of the country and guaranteeing access to cash, free of charge, on high streets across the UK.

Spotlight on Protected ATMs

LINK has protected the ATM network since 2018, reporting progress to the PSR throughout.

The PSR withdrew Specific Direction 12 in 2024, as the FCA started regulating access to cash more broadly.

LINK maintained its commitment to the protected ATM footprint the same as it had been, meaning that the last machine for 1km remains protected by LINK, the protected ATM footprint continues to grow, and financial subsidies to operate the last machine in town remain in place.

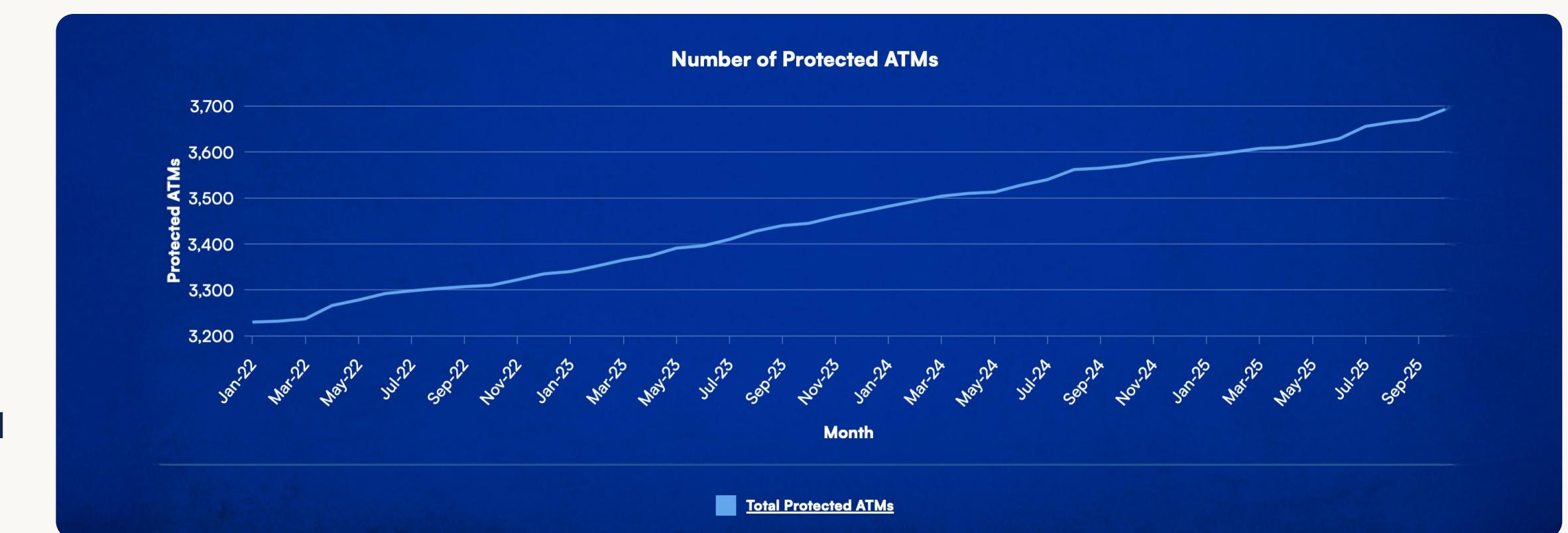
LINK CEO John Howells said: "We're proud to maintain the commitment we made to the ATM footprint in 2018. Cash withdrawals continue to fall, but by protecting the ATM network, consumers can still access their cash across the UK."

Spotlight on serving deprived areas

The 2,805 areas which are the focus of the Financial Inclusion Programme have continued to be well served by free access to cash.

There are 428 areas where fewer than 95% of people are within 1km of free access to cash, a number which has remained stable for two years despite the overall footprint of free ATMs falling by almost 10% in the same time.

LINK's commitment to the financial inclusion programme is a key factor in achieving the Government's target, to ensure that at least 95% of people live within a reasonable distance of free access to cash. As of December 2025, 96% of people live within the relevant distance of free access.





Research to support financial inclusion

Cash Acceptance

Access to cash has been a joint effort across industry, regulators and Government, with a key role for the Financial Inclusion Programme. The work being done to protect access to cash is making sure businesses and consumers can still withdraw and deposit cash on the high street.

But a detailed report from the House of Commons Treasury Select Committee published in April 2025 warned of declining cash acceptance.

“DECLINING CASH ACCEPTANCE COULD LEAD TO A TWO-TIER SOCIETY WITH THE MOST VULNERABLE BEARING THE COST.”

The Report took a detailed look at cash acceptance in the UK, but noted that “the lack of consistent evidence makes it difficult for anyone, including the Treasury, to determine the state of cash acceptance in the UK.”

The Consumer Council discussed this challenge and recommended that LINK conduct research to find out more, and help fill in the gaps. LINK commissioned a poll of high street retailers to understand their approach and attitude to cash acceptance, featuring detailed interviews with retailers as part of it. Consumer Council members have fed into the project to add their expertise and knowledge. The report aims to improve the evidence base for policy makers looking at cash acceptance on the high street.

The use of cash on six high streets

LINK also published some key research which found that place has a huge role in understanding spending habits.

Featuring data analysis of withdrawals and demographics, a nationally representative survey, and surveys carried out on six different high streets, the research took the learnings from the financial inclusion programme to a local level.

The research found that in each town, the ATM infrastructure had changed over time, and the number of withdrawals had gone down as well.

Despite that, 38% of shoppers on the high street were planning to manage their cash on their visit to the town, either through an ATM, post office or bank.

It also found that each place had a unique relationship with cash and digital payments. The take-up of digital payments varied more by location than it did by the affluence or age of the people surveyed.

The research backs up the key insight which underpins LINK's work on financial inclusion, which is that each location is unique and needs to be treated individually as much as possible.





Engaging with communities

LINK continues to work with communities to make sure they are aware of what options they have.

Community Requests

LINK works with a range of live data sets to monitor access to cash on every high street in the UK. If any services change, it will be analysed and considered as part of its regulated process. However, there is no substitute for local knowledge, and LINK encourages people to get in touch and raise issues about local services directly.

In 2025, LINK has analysed around 50 communities a month as a result of consumers getting in touch. In many cases, good services are identified that meet local needs, but LINK has recommended improved services in 29 communities as a result of those requests.

Communities highlighting issues continue to be a key aspect of LINK's work to protect access to cash.

50,000 ways to access your cash

The Cash Locator continues to be a key tool to help people understand where they can get hold of cash.

It now has over 50,000 access points for consumers to choose from, since bank branches and banking hubs were added to the data on the site.

LINK worked closely with its members to make sure that people know all about their options locally, and also asked Cash Locator users to feedback on how it works for them.

The tool is a handy way to make sure that you can access cash when you need it, and will continue to be a key part of how LINK supports good cash access for consumers.

Bios

Joanna Wallace

The first part of Joanna's professional career was in healthcare management and leadership. After working in management consultancy and in the USA, she held NHS Chief Executive posts from 1997 to 2005, when she became Chief Executive of a UK subsidiary of Astra Zeneca PLC. She made a career change in April 2013 becoming the Independent Case Examiner for the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), a role she was reappointed to in 2019, and still holds. She has NED experience in higher and further education and was a member of the National Sentencing Advisory Panel within the Ministry of Justice. She has a BSc(Hons) in Architecture from UCL, and an MBA from the University of California, Berkeley.

Sian Williams

Sian is CEO of Switchback, a charity that supports young men to find a way out of the justice system and build a stable, rewarding life they can be proud of. Prior to joining Switchback, Sian was Director of Innovation and Policy at Toynbee Hall in London's East End, where she led work to ensure people with lived experience of exclusion and hardship are involved in shaping policy and practice solutions. She is also Chair of the new economy think tank Positive Money and Vice-Chair of the Financial Inclusion Commission.

Sian also represents the interests of people at risk of exclusion on the Pay.UK End User Council and Community Cash Access Panel.

Christopher Brooks

Chris is Head of Policy at Age UK, the national charity for older people. He leads Age UK's public policy work on all areas relating to money, utilities, consumers, housing, and rights, and has a particular interest in private pensions, banking, and employment. This involves representing the interests of consumers and older people to government, regulators and industry. Chris has worked at Age UK since 2010, prior to this he worked at the awarding body City & Guilds, where he managed its Parliamentary and public policy activity. Chris also sits on the Nest pension scheme's Members' Panel, representing the interest of its members.

Sean Breen

Sean is Director of Financial and Postal Services at the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland, responsible for leading the illegal money lending and financial inclusion policy. Sean's experience prior to joining the Consumer Council involved 16 years working in the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland.

Lady Margaret Bloom CBE

An economist and Honorary Professor at King's College London, Margaret's experience and expertise in financial consumer and small business issues particularly concerns access to cash, financial inclusion, regulation, lending standards and indebtedness.

Adam Bailey

Adam is Head of Access to Cash Services for NatWest Group. He has 24 years' experience in the cash and ATM marketplace and is accountable for the bank's ATM estate, branch cash automation and the support of operations of ATMs at Tesco stores

Bios

Professor Martin Coppack



Martin uses research and advocacy to create change for consumers. He's held a range of positions, all with the common objective of placing low income and vulnerable consumers at the heart of policy-making within essential services. He is the Professor of Practice in Financial Inclusion and Consumer Policy at CHASM, University of Birmingham. Martin is a member of the government's Financial Inclusion Committee and is regularly consulted by regulators, government departments, MPs, political advisers, businesses, and civil society organisations.

Martin McTague OBE



Prior to becoming National Chair in 2022, Martin served as National Vice Chair, Policy & Advocacy, and has been a volunteer with FSB for more than 20 years. As National Chair, Martin works closely with Government and opposition leaders, working to ensure that FSB members' views are represented at the most senior levels. He has been running his own business for 35 years and currently owns and manages three businesses, offering public policy, engineering and IT consultancy services.

Ross Borkett



Ross is the Financial Services Director at the Post Office. He is responsible for all aspects of the organisation's cash services, delivered through a network of 11,500 branches operated by local Postmasters, which play a vital role in maintaining Access to Cash, as well as leading the delivery of banking hubs in partnership with Cash Access UK. He is a member of the Bank of England's Retail Payments Infrastructure Board.

Tim Allen MBE



Tim is Director of Access to Banking and Branch Services at Barclays, responsible for delivering sustainable access to cash and physical banking services. He has 24 years' experience in financial services and has served as a director of the LINK ATM Scheme and Community Access to Cash Pilots Boards. He is currently a Non-Executive Director of Cash Access UK Ltd, overseeing the roll-out of Banking Hubs and new cash deposit solutions.

Nick Wiles



Nick Wiles is currently Chief Executive Officer of PayPoint Plc, having previously chaired the business in a non executive and then executive capacity between 2015 and 2020. Earlier in his career Nick was an investment banker for almost 30 years, with the majority of that time at Cazenove advising UK and overseas corporates on a range of issues including strategy, investor engagement and m&a execution.

If you'd like to know more about the Consumer Council, contact:

Nick Quin
Chief Corporate Affairs Officer, LINK
NQuin@link.co.uk





LINK

Link Scheme Holdings Ltd

RSM Central Square

5th Floor

29 Wellington Street

Leeds

LS1 4DL

link.co.uk