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O'Sullivan Financial Planning

SMART goals: 5 steps to effective financial planning

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Planning your finances without clear goals is like setting off in your car without a destination – you might be able to keep moving, but you can't be sure you're heading in the right direction.

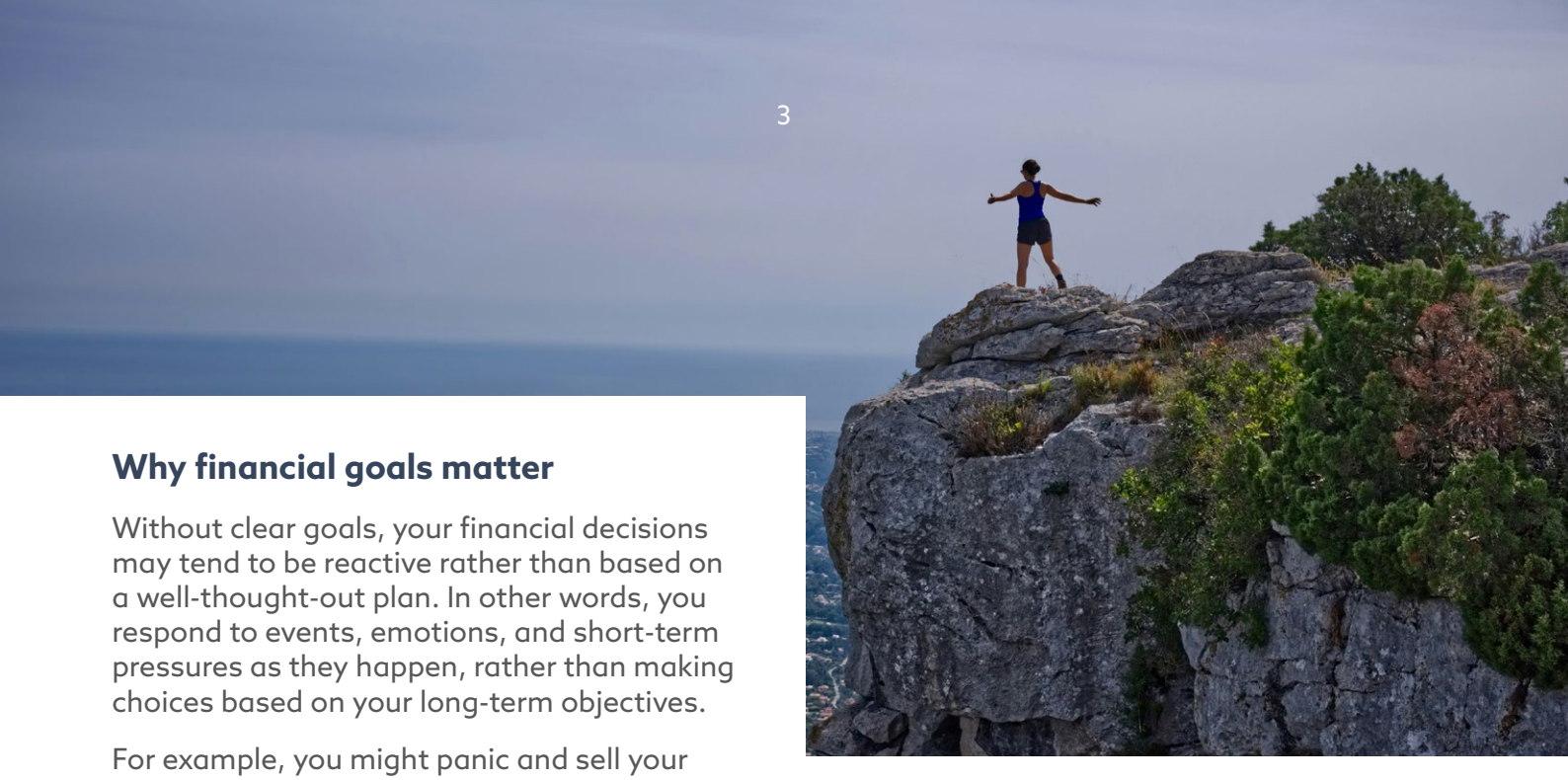
That's why goal-setting is at the heart of effective financial planning. However, not all goals are created equal.

You can probably call to mind a time you set a resolution or objective with the full intention of keeping it, only to give up after a few weeks. This probably had little to do with your self-discipline and commitment, and a lot to do with how you structured your goals.

Did you have a laser focus on what you wanted to achieve and why? Or were you working towards vague, overly ambitious intentions that you were only too glad to abandon?

The truth is that setting goals you'll actually stick to and that will get you where you want to be is a skill like any other.

Thankfully, there's a ready-made goal-setting framework that could transform your approach to financial planning. If you want to turn vague intentions into clear plans, consider following the five steps of SMART goal-setting.



Why financial goals matter

Without clear goals, your financial decisions may tend to be reactive rather than based on a well-thought-out plan. In other words, you respond to events, emotions, and short-term pressures as they happen, rather than making choices based on your long-term objectives.

For example, you might panic and sell your shares when they dip in value, rather than following a sustained investment strategy over time. Or perhaps you make impulsive spending decisions, then scramble to save what's left in your account at the end of the month.

In contrast, creating a financial plan that's guided by clear goals could replace reactive decisions with deliberate, informed ones. As such, you'll be better placed to respond to changes in a calm and considered way, rather than impulsively.

Here are a few key reasons why setting financial goals is important:

A clear direction – Goals help you understand what you're working towards, which can be a great motivator.

Better decision-making – Knowing what you want to achieve allows you to prioritise your goals and make informed choices about how to manage your money.

Measurable progress – Goals allow you to monitor your progress, celebrate key milestones, and quickly spot if you're veering off course so that you can take corrective action.

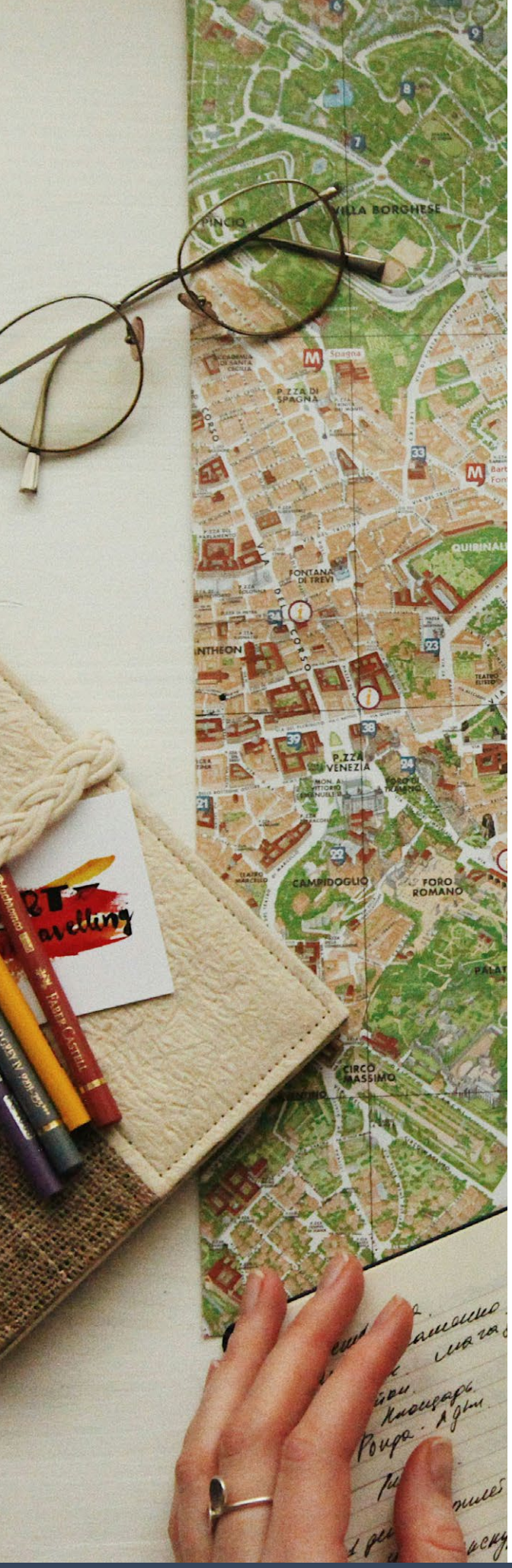
Improved financial wellbeing – Having clear objectives and a robust plan for achieving them could bring invaluable confidence and peace of mind.

Research published by FTAdviser (9 August 2024) has revealed that 17% of UK adults have no long-term financial goals.

A study carried out by the University of Stirling (21 April 2021) found that individuals who set financial goals are more likely to be successful savers.

Please note: The value of your investments (and any income from them) can go down as well as up and you may not get back the full amount you invested. Past performance is not a reliable indicator of future performance.

Investments should be considered over the longer term and should fit in with your overall attitude to risk and financial circumstances.



SMART: A proven framework for setting goals you'll stick to

SMART goals were first introduced in 1981 by George T. Doran, an American businessman who noticed that most companies set goals that were too diffuse to have any meaningful impact.

Doran believed that focusing on five key areas could increase your chances of successfully achieving your goals.

The words in the acronym have changed over time and continue to vary. A common interpretation and one that is useful for financial planning is:

> **S**pecific – Choose one focused area to improve.
>
> **M**easurable – Use numbers and deadlines to gauge your progress.
>
> **A**chievable – Make sure your goal is challenging yet realistic.
>
> **R**elevant – Align your goals with your values and long-term life vision.
>
> **T**ime-bound – Specify the date by which you want to achieve your intended outcome.

You can use this framework to set short-, medium-, and long-term goals. For example:

> **Short-term goal** – To build a meaningful emergency fund for you and your family.
>
> **Medium-term goal** – To save for a new car.
>
> **Long-term goal** – To build the funds you need for the retirement you desire.

Please note: A pension is a long-term investment not normally accessible until 55 (57 from April 2028). The fund value may fluctuate and can go down, which would have an impact on the level of pension benefits available. Past performance is not a reliable indicator of future performance.

Here are the five steps to follow to use the SMART method to set strong financial goals that will help you plan for the life you want.

1. Specific – Set clear and meaningful goals

Be clear about what you want to achieve and why.

Statements such as, "I'll save more this year", or "I'll be better with my money" are too vague. There's no way of knowing when you've achieved these goals or what actions you need to take to do so, which makes giving up an easy option.

Instead, focus on the details. It might help to ask yourself:

> **What** exactly do I want to achieve?
>
> **Who** needs to be involved to help me succeed?
>
> **When** do I want to achieve this by?
>
> **Why** is this goal important to me?

For example, instead of "I'll save more this year", set your goal as, "I will save £500 a month into my high interest savings account, building £6,000 plus interest by the end of the year to bolster my family's emergency fund".

It may be useful to divide your goals into different categories, depending on the areas of your financial plan you want to focus on. These may include:

> Saving and investing
>
> Budgeting and cash flow
>
> Protection
>
> Tax planning
>
> Debt management
>
> Retirement planning
>
> Estate planning
>
> Business finances.

TOP TIP: ATTACH EVERY GOAL TO A REAL-WORLD OUTCOME.

For example, instead of "save more", specify what you're saving for, such as early retirement or paying the deposit on your child's first home.

Please note: The Financial Conduct Authority does not regulate tax planning or estate planning.

2. Measurable – Make sure you can track progress and celebrate your wins

Monitoring your progress and celebrating each milestone along the way can be extremely motivating. It could also help you adapt to changing circumstances and needs.

To do this, you need to make sure your goals are measurable by:

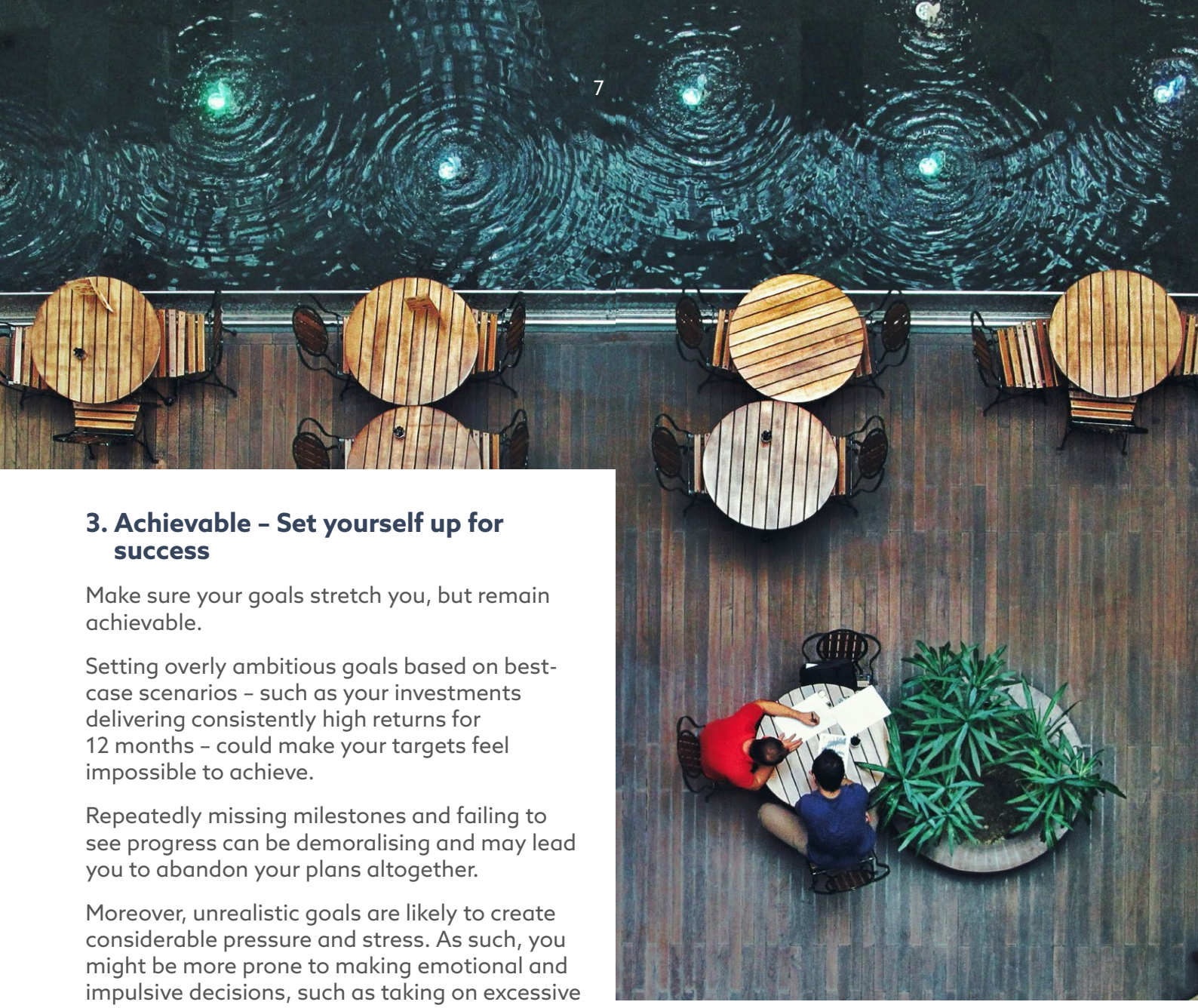
- Using numbers and percentages in your goals
- Breaking bigger goals into smaller milestones
- Setting a time frame for each milestone
- Deciding what "success" means to you (give a specific figure).

It's a good idea to put a regular date in your diary – quarterly often works well for annual goals – to review your progress. Checking too often may lead you back to reactive decision-making. In contrast, reviewing progress infrequently (or not at all) could mean that you veer off track or lose motivation.

You might also benefit from working with a financial planner who can offer an objective perspective and keep you accountable for staying the course. They can also use sophisticated cashflow modelling software to show you whether you're likely to achieve your goals by your target deadlines. If not, they can suggest changes to help you get back on track or adjust your goals if necessary.

TOP TIP: MEASURE YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS AS WELL AS OUTCOMES WHEN TRACKING FINANCIAL GOALS.

This highlights your progress even if the outcomes fluctuate, giving you a continuous sense of control and achievement which is crucial for maintaining motivation over time. Focusing on what you're putting in could also help you avoid emotional reactions, for example, panicking if there is a downturn in the markets.



3. Achievable – Set yourself up for success

Make sure your goals stretch you, but remain achievable.

Setting overly ambitious goals based on best-case scenarios – such as your investments delivering consistently high returns for 12 months – could make your targets feel impossible to achieve.

Repeatedly missing milestones and failing to see progress can be demoralising and may lead you to abandon your plans altogether.

Moreover, unrealistic goals are likely to create considerable pressure and stress. As such, you might be more prone to making emotional and impulsive decisions, such as taking on excessive investment risk.

To avoid such pitfalls, make sure your goals set you up for success by considering:

> Your income and expenses
>
> Significant one-off costs, such as contributing to your child's wedding
>
> Other financial commitments, including debts.

Remember to build some flexibility into your plans to allow for life's uncertainties. For example, the markets might dip, you may lose your job, or you could face unexpected expenses.

TOP TIP: ASK YOURSELF, "COULD I ACHIEVE THIS IN MY WORST-CASE YEAR, NOT MY BEST ONE?"

This encourages you to stress-test your goals, account for setbacks, and build in buffer time for achieving key milestones, all of which could help you create achievable goals that build – rather than erode – your confidence and your wealth.

4. Relevant – Connect your goals to your big-picture life vision

As you saw in step one (being "specific"), identifying the "why" behind your goals is a powerful way to make them more meaningful and less easy to give up on.

Try to connect each one of your financial targets or milestones to your big, overarching goal. This might be to retire early, build security for your family, support causes you care about, or something else.

If a goal isn't relevant to your core values and priorities, it's just numbers on a page which are easy to disregard when life gets busy or conflicting needs arise.

You might find it helpful to:

> Tie every goal to a clear "why"
>
> Identify what "success" looks like to you
>
> Avoid goals driven by comparison with others (focus on what's relevant to you)
>
> Talk to your partner and family about your goals and how they fit with your lives.

Once you understand the relevance of your goals to your broader life plans, you can list them in priority order. This could make financial decisions clearer and less stressful.

TOP TIP: REVIEW YOUR GOALS REGULARLY TO ENSURE THEY REFLECT WHAT MATTERS TO YOU MOST.

Your needs and priorities are likely to change over time; careers evolve, relationships change, and your health status may fluctuate. Reviewing your financial goals regularly can help you adapt to unexpected events and ensure your goals align with your current situation in life – and the future you want to build.

5. Time-bound – Set yourself deadlines for achieving key milestones

Setting timelines for achieving your financial goals is vital. Missing this step could lead to endless procrastination, a lack of focus, and poor planning.

Indeed, without a clear endpoint to work towards, your goals may quickly fade into the background as other demands on your time and money take priority.

In contrast, giving yourself a time frame for each goal helps to create a sense of urgency and keep you accountable.

Here are a few practical strategies for setting time-bound goals:

> **Use a specific date or age** – Be precise about timing rather than using vague phrases such as "in the future".
>
> **Match the deadline to the goal** – For example, investing goals may suit a longer time frame than cash savings goals.
>
> **Build in flexibility** – You may need to adapt your goals or your timeline if your circumstances or aspirations change.

TOP TIP: INCLUDE REGULAR REVIEW POINTS AND MILESTONES ALONG THE WAY.

This could help you monitor your progress and stay motivated, especially when working towards long-term goals over years, or even decades. Checking in periodically also allows you to adapt your plans so that your goals remain relevant and realistic if life takes an unexpected turn.

We can help you set SMART goals and keep you accountable for achieving them

Setting goals that are both meaningful and realistic, while also factoring in enough flexibility to allow for unexpected life events, is no mean feat.

We can provide a fresh perspective on your finances and help you to:

- Turn vague dreams and ambitions into SMART, actionable goals
- Develop tailored action plans for achieving your goals
- Stress-test your plans to ensure they're realistic
- Keep you on track over the long term.

We can use sophisticated cashflow modelling software to give you a clear picture of where you are financially now and where you want to be in 5, 10, 20 years, or more.

If it looks like you might fall short of achieving your goals, we can support you in reviewing your priorities and exploring alternative strategies for building the life you want in the short and long term.

If you'd like to know more about how we can help you plan financially for achieving the goals that matter to you, please get in touch.

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Please note: This guide is for general information only and does not constitute advice. The information is aimed at retail clients only.

All information is correct at the time of writing (March 2026) and is subject to change in the future.

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