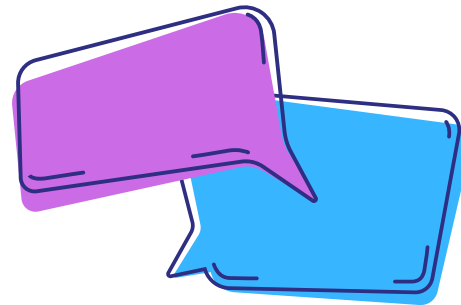


# Critical Thinking Report 2026

Inspiring Innovation in Protection:  
Critical Illness Cover and  
Income Protection





# ***Critical Thinking***

from CIEXPERT

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The most comprehensive research into the UK's Critical Illness Cover & Income Protection markets

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# Study demographics

The Critical Thinking report reveals trends & insights from the most comprehensive research into the UK critical illness & income protection markets.

## Consumer insights IP | CIC



Research among 5,000 **IP** | 5,000 **CIC** UK consumers



Consumer research was carried out for CIExpert by Opinium Research



Conducted in December 2025 and January 2026



**IP:** 45% male, 55% female | **CIC:** 44% male, 56% female



**IP:** 13% Gen Z, 25% Millennials, 29% Gen X, 30% Boomer  
**CIC:** 14% Gen Z, 26% Millennials, 28% Gen X, 29% Boomer



**IP:** 62% homeowners, 30% rent, 8% other  
**CIC:** 63% homeowners, 30% rent, 7% other



**IP:** 18% have taken advice on IP | **CIC:** 19% have taken advice on CIC

## Adviser insights



Research among 225 advisers; across all distribution



Conducted in December 2025 and January 2026



70% male / 30% female, UK wide



Protection knowledge:

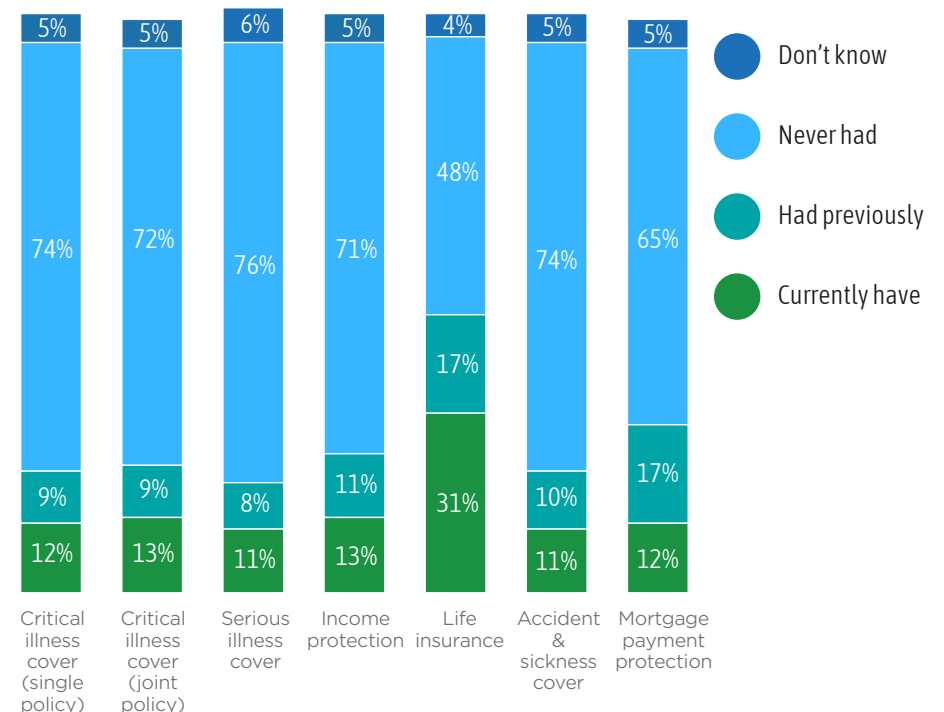
**IP:** 31% very high, 51% high | **CIC:** 34% very high, 51% high

## Definitions

**Critical Illness Cover (CIC)** - Throughout the report is defined as including all Critical Illness & Serious Illness policies

**Gen Z:** 18 to 29 year olds | **Millennials:** 30 to 45 year olds | **Gen X:** 46 to 61 year olds | **Boomers:** 62 to 80 year olds

## Do you have, or have you ever had, the following insurance products?



# Introduction

## Why do research



## Alan Lakey

Director and founder, CIExpert

*“We assume interest and understanding, yet the evidence tells a different story.”*

Since publishing the inaugural Critical Thinking report in 2024, we have been encouraged by the response across the industry. The findings sparked debate, reflection and, in some cases, drove tangible change. Product design and marketing strategies were reconsidered, and the “Single is Best” campaign demonstrated that when advisers are equipped with clearer insight and confidence, long-standing assumptions can be challenged and behaviour can shift.

With Critical Thinking 26, we are building on that foundation. Rather than simply revisit previous insights in search of change, we have examined consumer attitudes and beliefs in greater depth. The scope now incorporates Income Protection alongside Critical Illness Cover enabling a broader

assessment of protection understanding, balanced throughout with adviser perspective.

Looking at both products together exposes the true scale of confusion. Many consumers remain unaware of both Income Protection and Critical Illness Cover as distinct solutions. More striking still is the level of uncertainty: across many areas, over half of respondents either have no opinion or simply do not know the answer. Where awareness exists, understanding is too often shaped by ill-informed assumptions about cost and relevance rather than clear knowledge.

Yet beneath this sits a more complex picture. A more health-conscious younger generation, changing working patterns, pressure on the NHS

and delayed home ownership all signal a need to rethink how protection is positioned and discussed.

The clearest message from this research is stark: we are too quick to assume both interest and understanding. In reality, significant work remains to educate and guide consumers on how best to protect themselves and their families.

This report focuses on opportunity not just the problem. Understanding the drivers, hesitations and misconceptions that shape protection decisions allows advisers and insurers to adapt how products are positioned and discussed. If awareness is low, the opportunity lies in clarity. If assumptions are flawed, the opportunity lies in better articulation.

# Did we have an impact?

## Reflecting on progress

With five major insurers sponsoring the original study, Critical Thinking 2024 (CT24) generated over 8,000 downloads and featured in more than 60 live events nationwide, reaching over 6,000 advisers. But awareness alone was never the objective. We wanted to see whether research insight could translate into tangible change.

Following the launch of CT24, we introduced the “Single is Best” campaign, encouraging advisers to recommend individual protection policies as standard and require specific justification for joint life first event cover.

We asked for pledges to advocate for, and actively encourage, the recommendation of Single plans. The response has been significant: more than 235 individual pledges and 100 company commitments.

More importantly, Critical Thinking 2026 now shows measurable behavioural change. Almost a third of advisers (29%) say the campaign has directly influenced how they recommend Critical Illness Cover.

This demonstrates that when advisers are equipped with evidence, clarity and confidence, long-standing defaults can shift. Yet confusion and misunderstanding remain widespread. The challenge now is not whether change is possible, but how the industry sustains and accelerates it.

**8,000+**  
downloads



**60+**  
live events



**6000+**  
advisers reached



### Single is Best Commitments

**235+**  
individual pledges



**100**  
company commitments



**29%**  
of advisers say the campaign  
changed how they recommend CIC



## Consumers assumptions have they changed? Single vs Joint

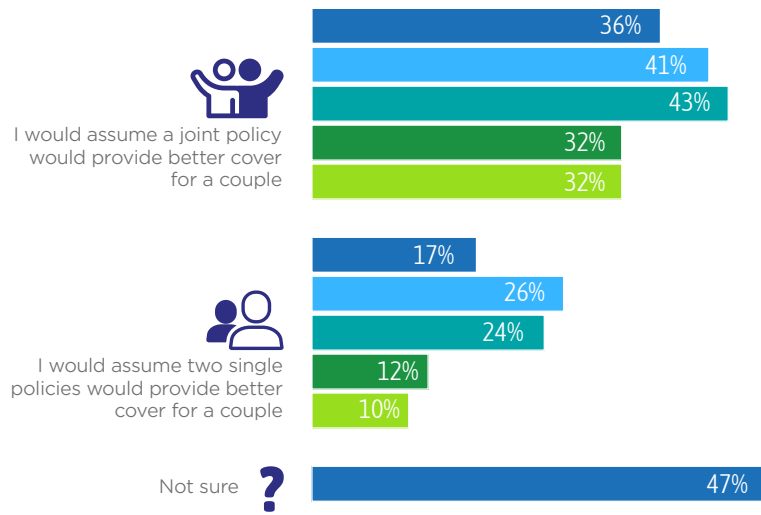
In our new study, when couples are first asked which type of Critical Illness Cover provides the best protection, joint cover is the instinctive choice. Among those expressing a view, 68% assume it offers better protection for a couple, despite only 12% saying they understand the difference.

This reflects limited awareness of how joint policies operate at key life events, including a first claim, separation or divorce, and protection for children. These differences are rarely considered until they are explicitly explained.

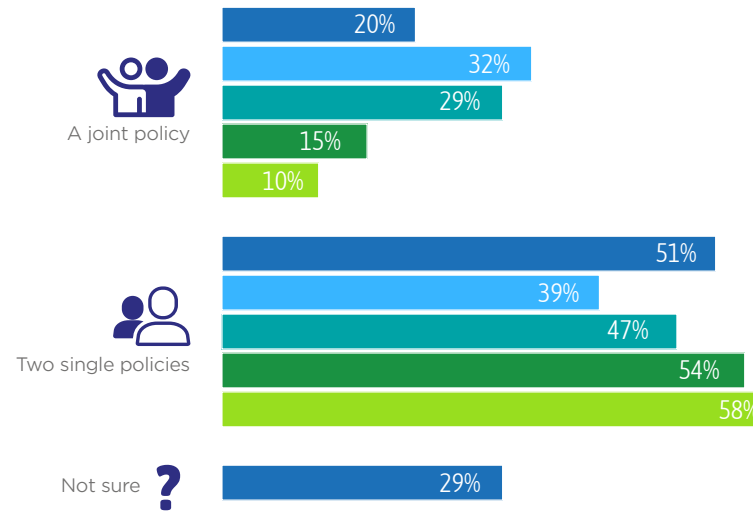
After a simple explanation of these aspects, and learning that two single policies typically cost only slightly more while providing separate cover for each person, 51% say single policies offer better overall protection and value.

Taken together, this highlights the importance of clearly articulating the practical differences between joint and single cover in order to overcome consumer assumptions that joint is cheaper or better.

### Before today, which option would you have assumed would provide the best cover for a couple?



### Now that you know these facts are true, which option do you believe provides the better overall protection and value for a couple?



**Initial preference for joint cover gives way to single policies once the differences are explained**



## Have adviser recommendations changed?

The “Single is Best” campaign provides clear evidence that awareness and discussion can lead to meaningful changes in behaviour. Almost three in ten advisers (29%) say the campaign has changed how they recommend Critical Illness Cover (CIC), either in some cases (14%) or routinely (11%), with additional influence extending beyond individual advice into colleague discussions and internal processes.

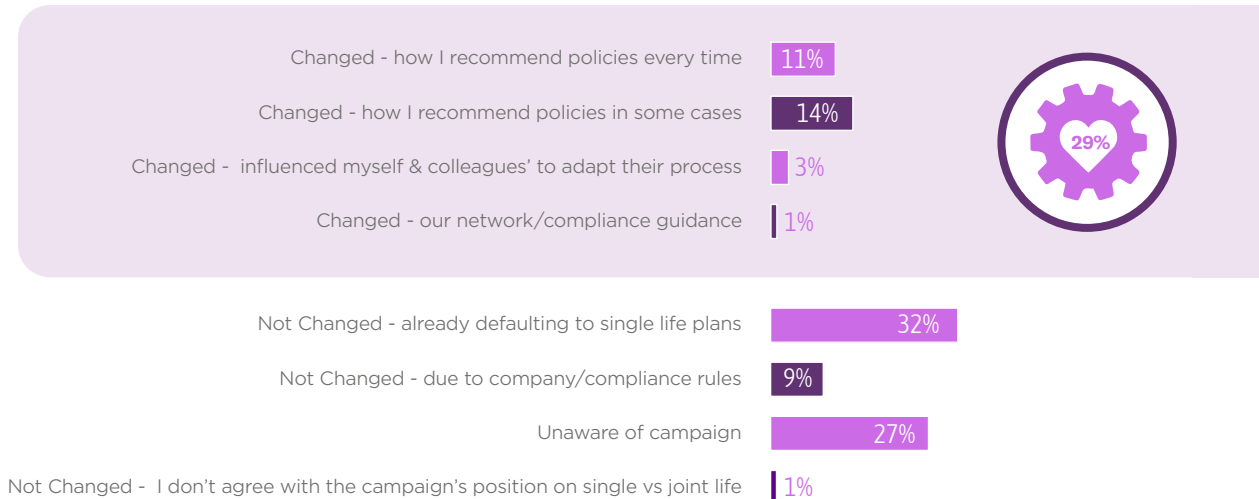
Importantly, very few advisers actively disagree with the principle of recommending single policies (1%). However, a notable minority report feeling constrained by compliance considerations, indicating that clearer guidance and support could unlock further change.

The findings also point to significant headroom for further impact. A quarter of advisers (27%) were previously unaware of the campaign, while awareness of related research into economic abuse linked to joint financial arrangements remains extremely low (3%).

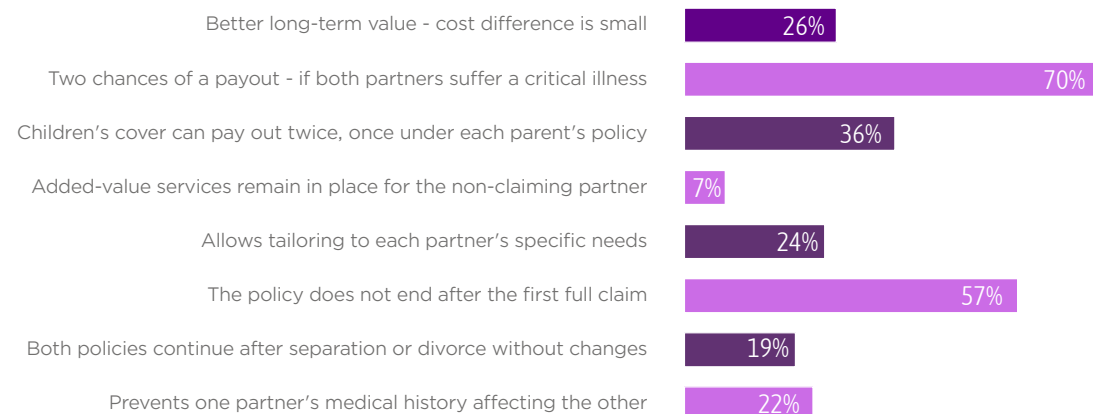
The evidence clearly shows that awareness and open discussion can materially influence advice behaviour and client outcomes.



## Has CIExpert’s “Single Is Best” campaign influenced your approach to recommending CIC?



## When recommending two Single CIC policies instead of Joint, which benefits do you most often emphasise to clients?



## Jeff Prestridge

Money Editor at Large, Daily Mail  
and General Trust



*“Are we doing our bit to spread the word about the worth of protection insurance in such a way that it compels consumers to purchase it?”*

I CAN'T remember who said it – maybe Alan Lakey – but I remember the words vividly: ‘Financial protection should always provide the foundations of a household’s finances.’

They were spoken twenty or so years ago, and they’ve stayed with me throughout my journalistic journey.

Yet, sadly, despite the best endeavours of money experts, protection specialists, and providers, we’ve failed to get this important message across.

Those households who have made protection the foundation stones of their finances are in a minority. As a result, there remains a massive financial protection gap in this country. Most households are

financially ill-prepared to withstand the disruption that serious illness would cause in the family home.

I draw two conclusions from reading CIEExpert’s excellent 2026 Critical Thinking Report. First, there is an information gap in the minds of consumers when it comes to financial protection. They’ve either not heard about it, or they don’t really understand how it works.

Worryingly, there’s also a group of consumers who believe the insurance rarely pays out. In other words, it’s not worth touching. The fact that it’s a view held by younger consumers should be of great concern to providers and advisers.

Secondly, the report identifies a disconnect between

the protection industry and consumers. The former believe they do an effective job explaining how insurance works. The latter beg to disagree: they’re left scratching their heads at what they’ve been told and end up without the cover their household desperately needs.

Of course, the cost-of-living crisis hasn’t helped matters, but this shouldn’t be used as an excuse. Whether we’re providers, advisers, or money journalists, we need to look in the mirror and ask ourselves a simple question: ‘Are we doing our bit to spread the word about the worth of protection insurance in such a way that it compels consumers to purchase it?’

The answer is a resounding no.

# Consumer awareness and misconceptions

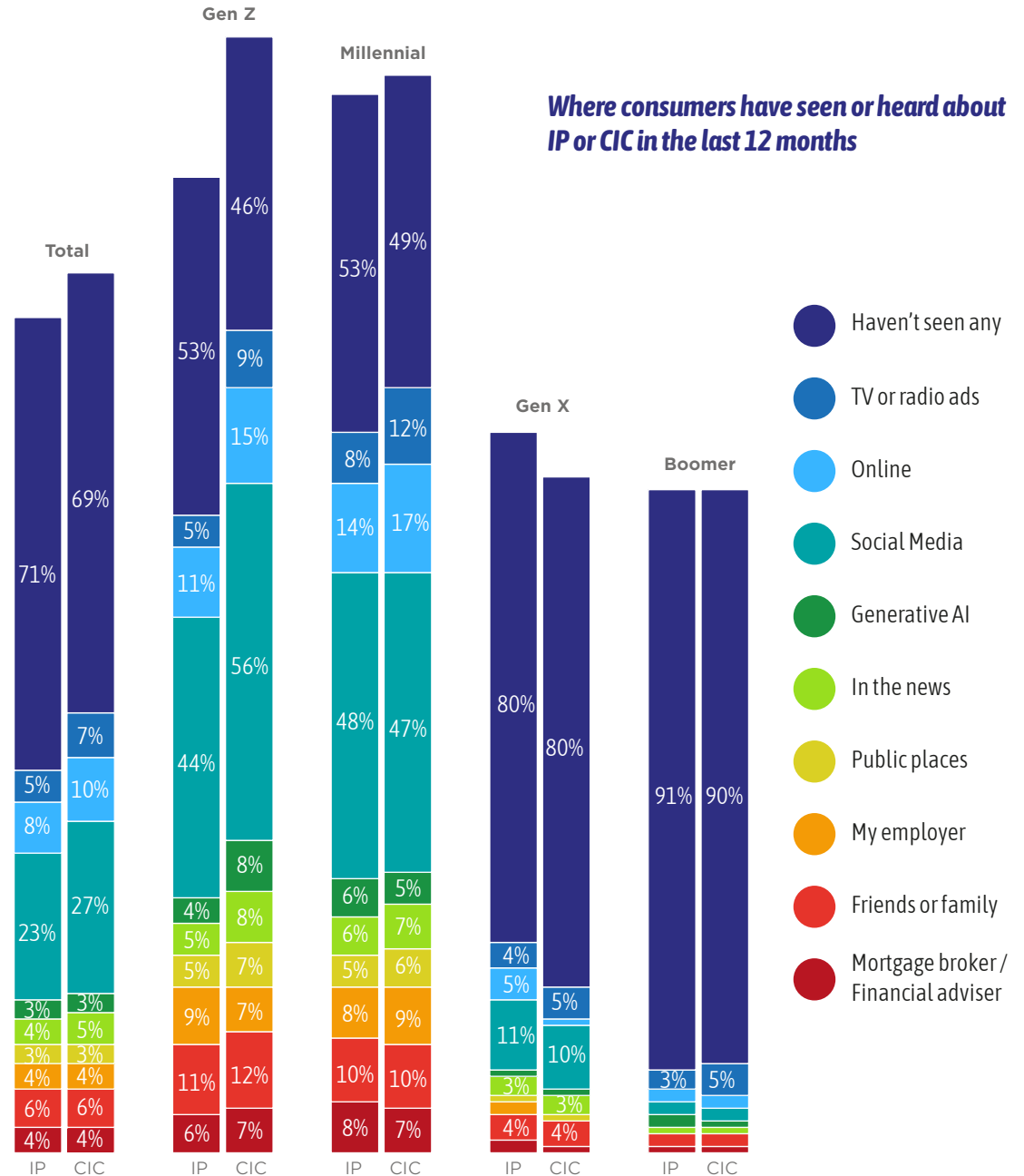
## How visible are protection products to consumers?

Protection products remain largely invisible to most consumers, with the same patterns of low visibility seen across both Critical Illness and Income Protection. Seven in ten have not seen or heard anything about either product in the last year, a position that has barely shifted since the previous study, when 70% reported no exposure to Critical Illness advertising.

Without regular exposure, awareness is difficult to build and, for many consumers, engagement never begins. This reinforces the reliance placed on advisers who, often as the first point of meaningful contact, are required not only to advise on protection but to educate consumers on why the product is needed in the first place.

Overall, the findings suggest that low visibility remains a persistent, category-wide issue, rather than a challenge associated with any single type of protection product.

**7 in 10 consumers haven't seen or heard about IP or CIC**



## What type of content resonates with consumers?

Where consumers do engage with protection information, often through advice conversations, the way it is presented plays a critical role.

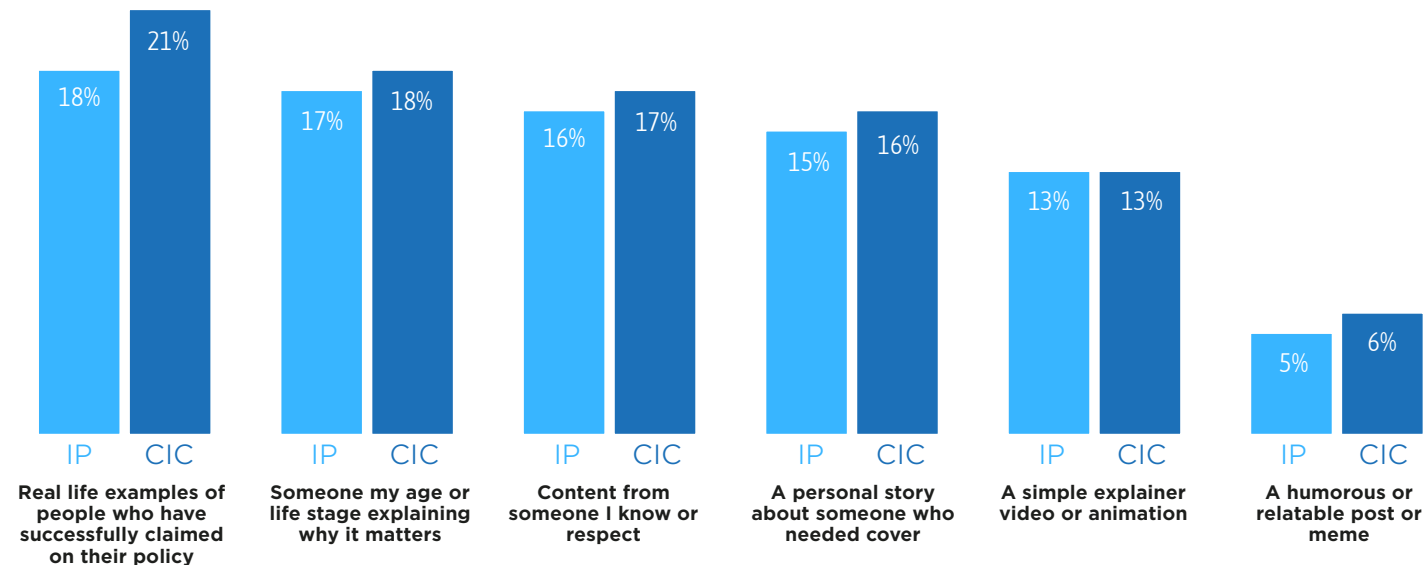
Consumers show a clear preference for more relatable forms of communication. Real-life claims examples are seen as the most helpful way of understanding why protection matters (18% for IP and 21% for CIC), followed by hearing from people at a similar life stage explaining its relevance (17% for IP and 18% for CIC), and content from people they know or respect (16% for IP and 17% for CIC). This sits alongside low levels of trust in information sources more broadly, with around a quarter of consumers saying they would not trust any common source

for either Income Protection or Critical Illness Cover.

Newer digital tools are not filling this gap. Trust in AI-based tools remains extremely low, with just 4% saying they completely trust information from AI tools when researching protection products.

Taken together, the findings suggest that relevance is more likely to form when protection is explained through real lives and real experiences, rather than abstract descriptions or tools.

## Which type of online content would (or has) most motivate you to look into CIC or IP?



**Real-life examples matter more than channels**

## Do consumers trust AI?

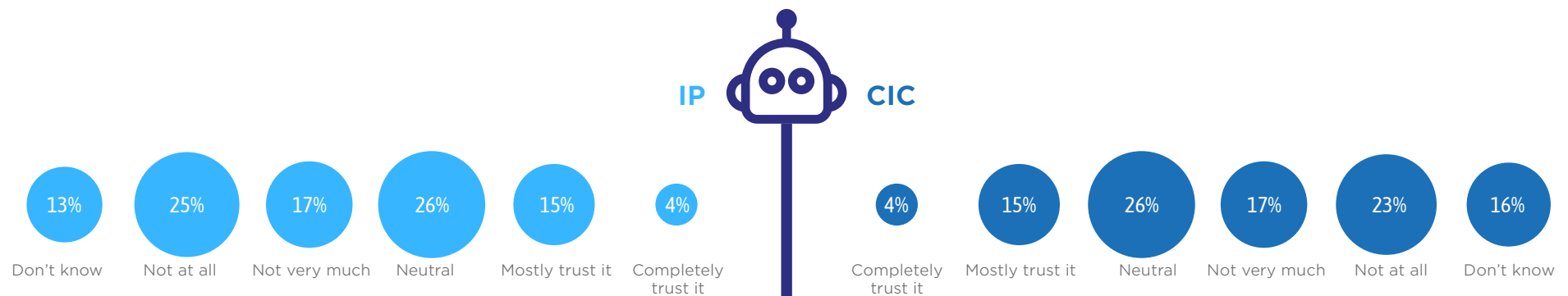
While AI is increasingly discussed as a way to improve engagement and access to information, the data suggests it is not yet seen as a trusted solution to overcome awareness gaps or misconceptions.

Trust in AI-based tools remains very low across both Income Protection and Critical Illness Cover. Just 4% say they completely trust information from AI tools when researching protection products. A far larger proportion either only partly trust AI-generated content or do not trust it at all.

Where understanding is already fragile, trust remains fundamental. Technology alone does not appear to substitute for clear explanation and credible human guidance.

**Only 4% of consumers completely trust AI**

### How much do you trust information from AI tools when it comes to researching IP & CIC?



**26% say CIC isn't relevant because they don't have a mortgage**

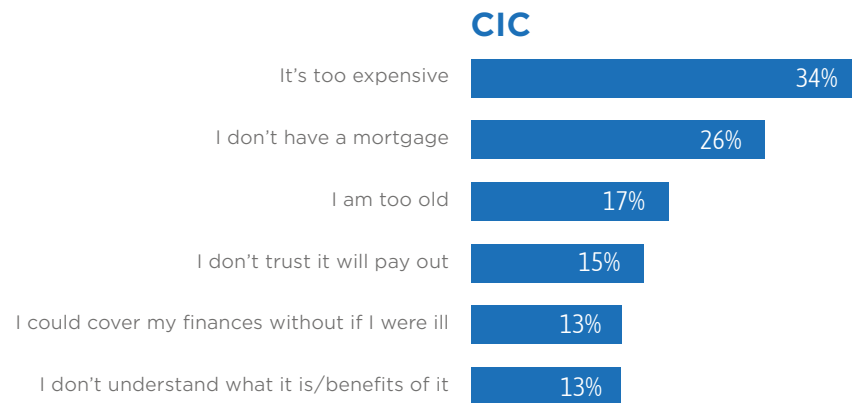
## Why don't consumers have CIC or IP?

When consumers are asked directly why they do not have Income Protection (IP) or Critical Illness Cover (CIC), the reasons they give reflect uninformed assumptions rather than considered rejection.

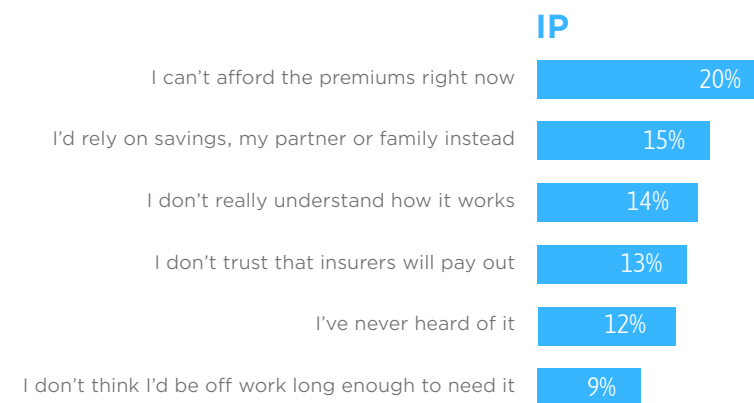
For IP, affordability is the most commonly cited single reason, with 20% saying they cannot afford premiums at present. However, many also point to savings or reliance on a partner (15%), despite often offering limited long-term resilience. Gaps in understanding and trust remain prominent, with 14% saying they do not understand how IP works and 13% not trusting insurers to pay out. A further 12% have never heard of IP.

For CIC, relevance is still widely interpreted through a mortgage lens. Over a quarter (26%) rule out CIC because they don't have a mortgage, demonstrating that the product remains anchored to home ownership rather than protecting income. This narrow framing excludes entire market segments - renters, mortgage-free homeowners, and those whose financial resilience doesn't hinge on property debt - despite many facing significant financial exposure if unable to work due to serious illness. Taken together, low take-up reflects perceived irrelevance and unchallenged assumptions, often with assumed cost used as a defence, rather than outright rejection.

### Which, if any, of the following are reasons you do not have CIC?



### Which, if any, of the following are reasons you do not have IP?



## Do consumers understand products?

A lack of understanding emerges as a shared and fundamental barrier across both Income Protection (IP) and Critical Illness Cover (CIC). When consumers are asked to assess statements about how these products work, many express confident but incorrect beliefs, alongside high levels of uncertainty.

For IP, misunderstanding centres on how the product operates. Over a quarter believe it pays a lump sum for serious illness (27%), while almost a third believe it pays out if someone is made redundant (32%). Confusion also extends to employer sick pay, with a fifth (19%) believing it removes the need for IP (rising to 27% of Gen Zs) or prevents them from buying it at all (15%). Perceptions of relevance remain narrow, with 25% believing IP is only for people who are self-employed or have no sick pay.

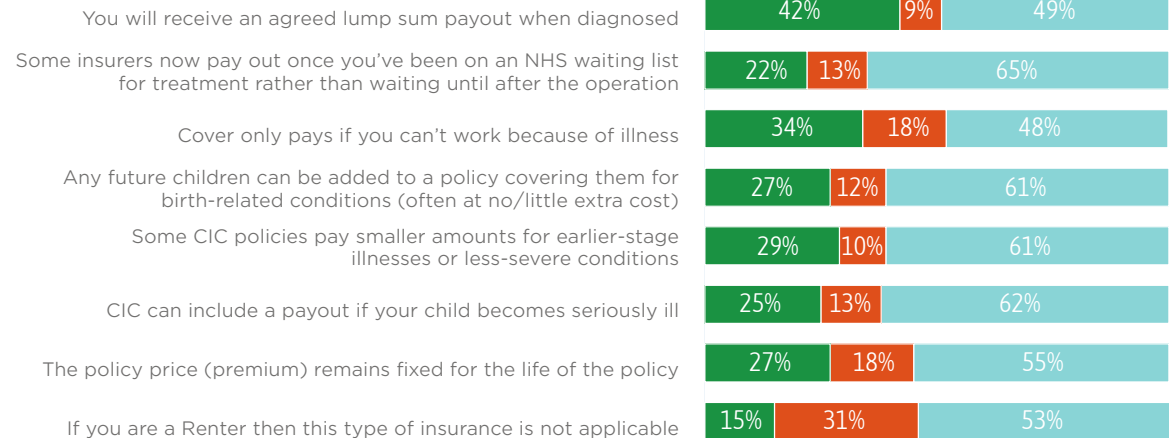
For CIC, misunderstanding relates more to purpose. Some believe payouts can only be used to pay off a mortgage (17%), while 34% believe CIC only pays if someone cannot work, suggesting ongoing confusion with IP. Uncertainty remains high, with many unsure whether claims are typically paid.

Taken together, both products are being undermined by misconceptions and false confidence, rather than rejected through informed judgement.

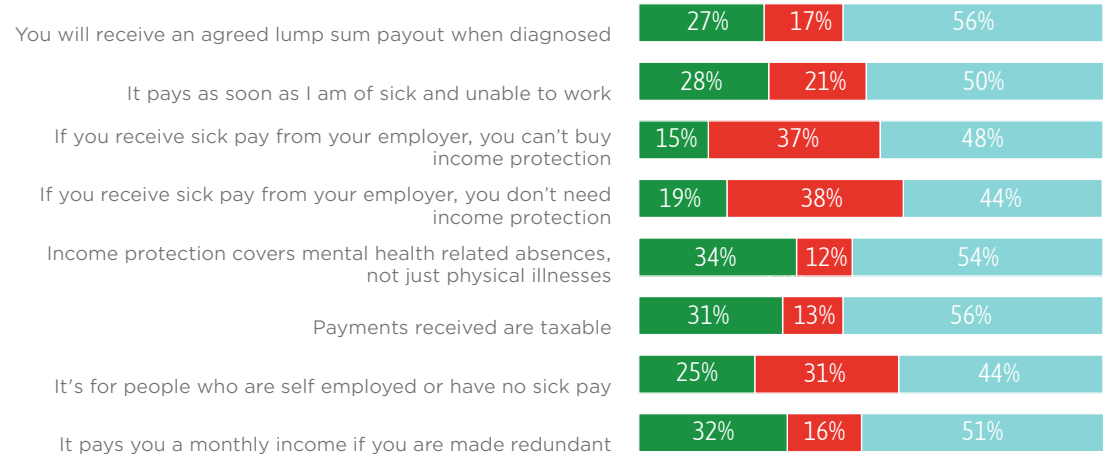
### Which of the following statements are true or false?

✓ True
✗ False
? Don't know

#### CIC



#### IP



76% of clients have little or no understanding of IP

## Consumers' understanding – an adviser view

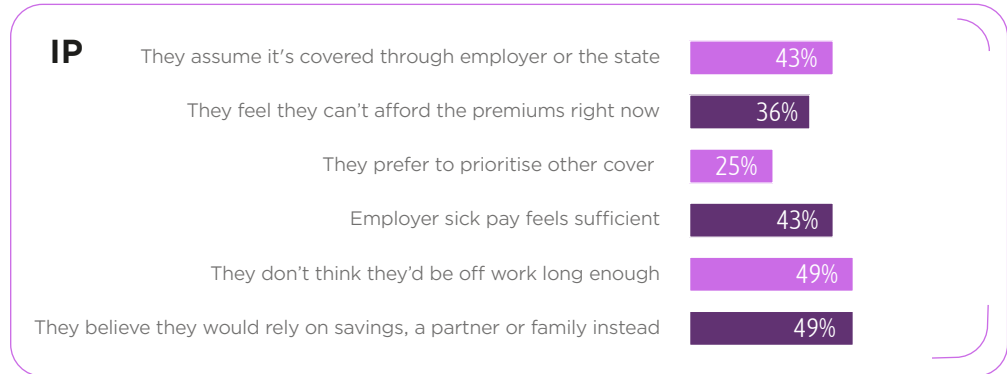
Adviser insight reinforces the scale of misunderstanding seen in the consumer data. Before advice begins, 49% of advisers say that only 0–24% of clients already own or understand Critical Illness Cover (CIC), rising to 76% for Income Protection (IP), highlighting how limited baseline understanding is, particularly for IP.

The objections advisers encounter differ by product. For CIC, cost is the dominant barrier - 82% report that clients view premiums as too high. Perceived invulnerability is another hurdle: 44% say clients do not believe a serious illness will happen to them.

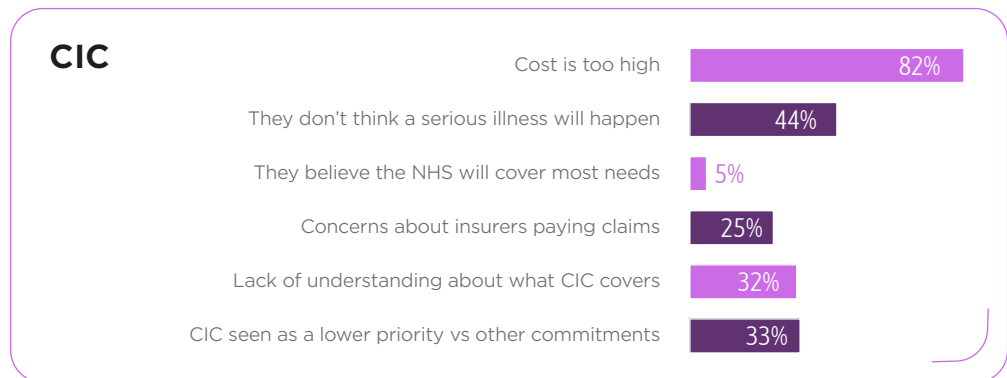
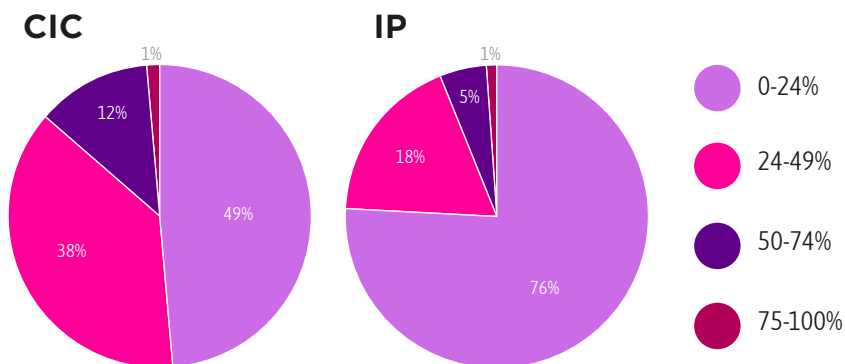
For IP, objections focus on perceived adequacy of alternatives. Advisers report that 49% of clients expect to rely on savings, a partner or family, while 49% believe

they would not be off work long enough to need cover. Employer provision plays a central role, with 43% feeling sick pay would be sufficient. Taken together, adviser feedback suggests that objections reflect a tendency to defer or avoid thinking about real risks and financial resilience, rather than a considered assessment of need.

### What are the main objections clients raise?



### What percentage of new clients already own or understand CIC & IP before you introduce or explain these products?



Over 70% regularly discuss added value services

## Consumers' motivations – an adviser view

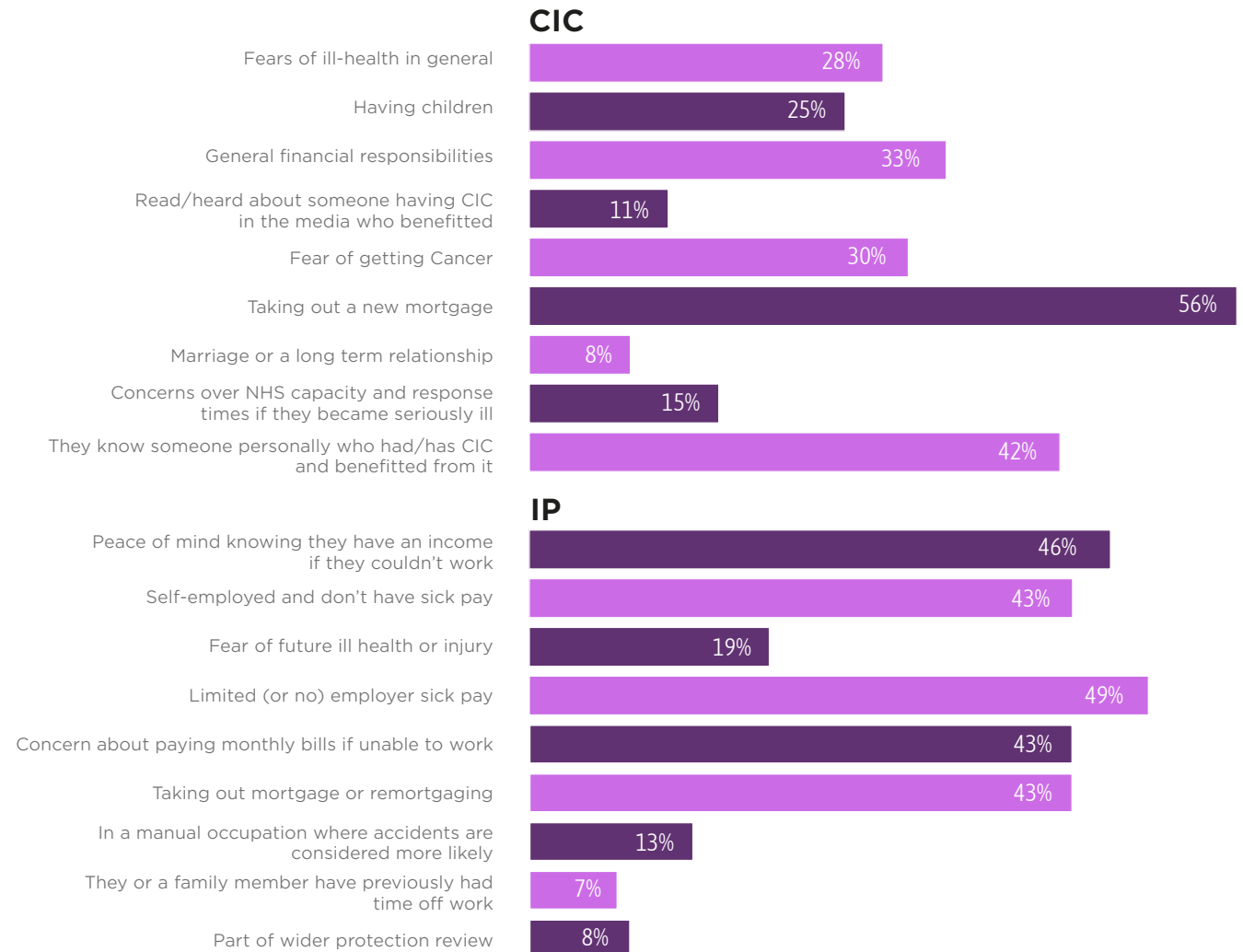
From an adviser perspective, decisions to take out protection are rarely proactive. Instead, they are typically triggered by specific life events or moments when financial exposure becomes more visible.

For CIC, housing remains the dominant trigger. Advisers report that 56% of clients take out CIC when arranging a new mortgage, reinforcing the strength of mortgage-led framing. Broader responsibility cues also play a role, with 25% motivated by having or planning to have children, alongside growing concern about NHS pressures, with 15% citing worries about NHS capacity and response times. These factors tend to outweigh general health anxiety as motivators.

For Income Protection, motivations are more closely tied to income vulnerability. Advisers most commonly cite limited or no employer sick pay (49%), followed by the desire for peace of mind about maintaining income if unable to work (46%). Housing and employment status also act as triggers, particularly for self-employed clients without sick pay.

Taken together, adviser insight shows that protection decisions are driven by moments of tangible financial exposure, rather than abstract awareness of risk.

### What are the main reasons clients choose to take out a CIC or IP policy?



# CIC: Opportunities to reframe

## Why consumers don't have CIC

When consumers explain why they do not have Critical Illness Cover, cost remains a factor, but it is not the only barrier. A significant proportion frame CIC as relevant only to specific life stages or circumstances.

26% say they do not have a mortgage, positioning CIC as something tied to home ownership. A further 10% say they do not have children, reinforcing the perception that CIC is primarily for those with dependents. Others cite age as a reason it does not apply to them. This suggests that CIC is frequently viewed as conditional protection rather than a broader financial safeguard.

Trust and understanding also feature. A notable minority question whether policies would pay out or admit they do not fully understand how the product works. When protection is mentally tied to mortgages or particular life stages, its wider purpose is easily overlooked.

## Which, if any, of the following are reasons you do not have CIC?



**26% cite not having a mortgage as reason for not having CIC**

## Are we still trapped in mortgage framing?

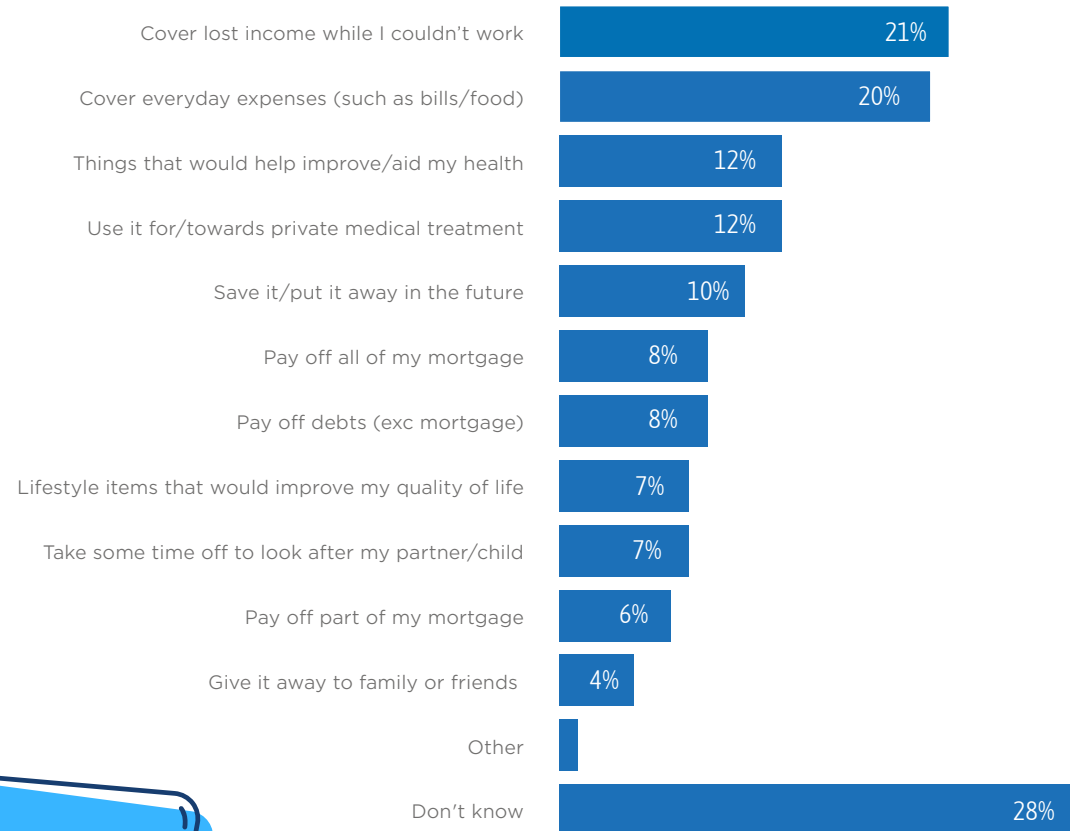
Consumer responses highlight a clear disconnect between how Critical Illness Cover is framed and how it would actually be used. While mortgage-led thinking continues to influence perceptions of relevance, it does not reflect how consumers say they would respond in the event of a claim.

Only 8% say they would use a payout to pay off their mortgage in full. Most expect to use the money more flexibly, to cover living costs, support recovery or provide financial breathing space. Notably, 12% say they would use it to fund private medical treatment.

This contrasts with an industry emphasis on mortgage-aligned solutions such as decreasing term cover, despite the fact that the financial and lifestyle impacts of serious illness often increase with age. The risk of illness does not reduce as mortgages are paid down, yet product framing frequently implies that it does.

**Only 8% would use a CIC payout to pay off their mortgage**

### ***If you had a CIC policy and needed to claim in the future, what would you expect to use the payout for / spend the money on?***



**Nearly six in ten advisers highlight repaying a mortgage**

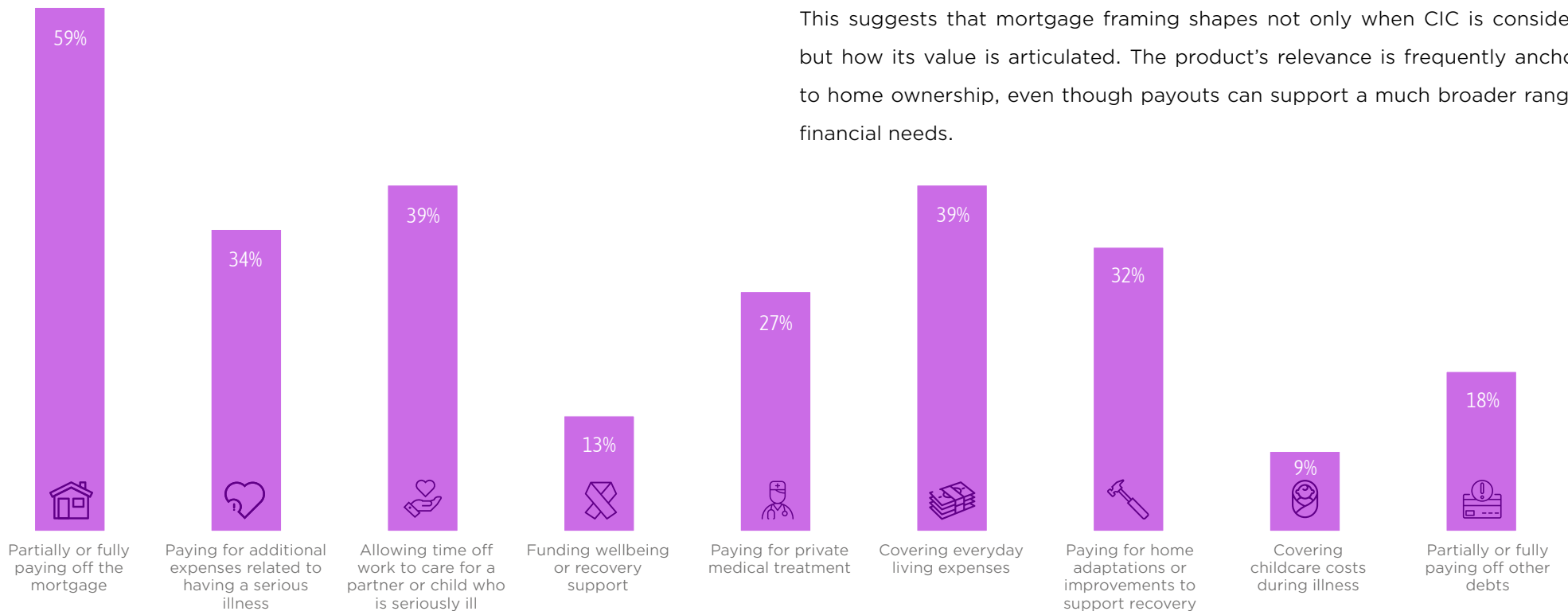
## Mortgage framing – an adviser view

From an adviser perspective, how Critical Illness Cover (CIC) is positioned in client conversations remains closely linked to housing. When describing how a payout might be used, nearly six in ten advisers (59%) most often reference partially or fully repaying a mortgage.

While advisers also highlight allowing time off work to care for a partner or child (39%) and paying for private medical treatment (27%), these messages are less dominant in advice discussions.

This suggests that mortgage framing shapes not only when CIC is considered, but how its value is articulated. The product's relevance is frequently anchored to home ownership, even though payouts can support a much broader range of financial needs.

### When explaining CIC benefits to clients, which aspects do you highlight most often?



## Are we adapting to a growing rental market?

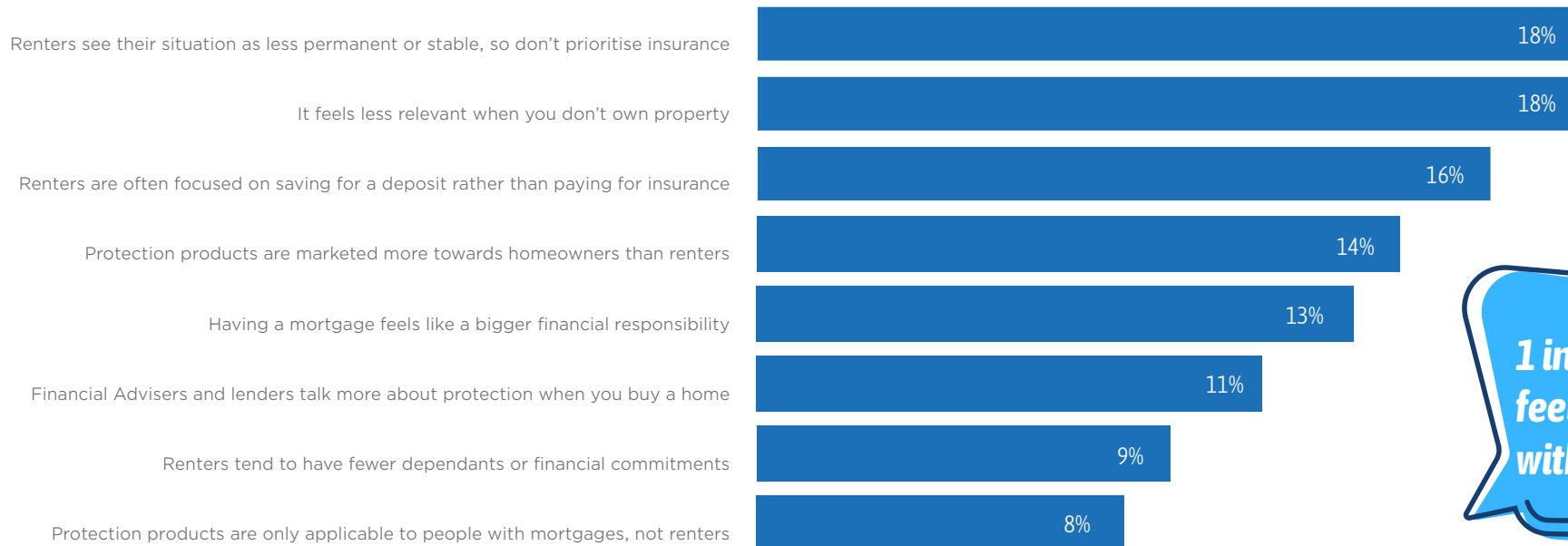
When renters are asked why they are less likely than homeowners to take out Critical Illness Cover (CIC), the reasons point to a lack of adaptation in how CIC is positioned.

Among renters, engagement with CIC is often put off until a later date. Many describe renting as a temporary life stage (18%) or say they are focused on saving for a deposit (16%) - priorities that can suppress consideration of risk even though exposure to the financial impact of serious illness remains just as high. Around one in five explicitly say CIC feels less relevant because they do not own a property, reinforcing how housing status continues to shape perceptions

of need. This perception is reinforced by mortgage-centric marketing: 14% of renters say protection products are targeted at homeowners, while 11% report that CIC is primarily discussed during mortgage conversations.

Despite widespread recognition that home ownership is being delayed, industry messaging has not adapted. Closing the CIC engagement gap among renters will require reframing the product around health risk and income replacement rather than housing tenure.

### Why renters are less likely to take out CIC



**1 in 5 renters say CIC feels less relevant without property**

## Core vs Enhanced: what do consumers want?

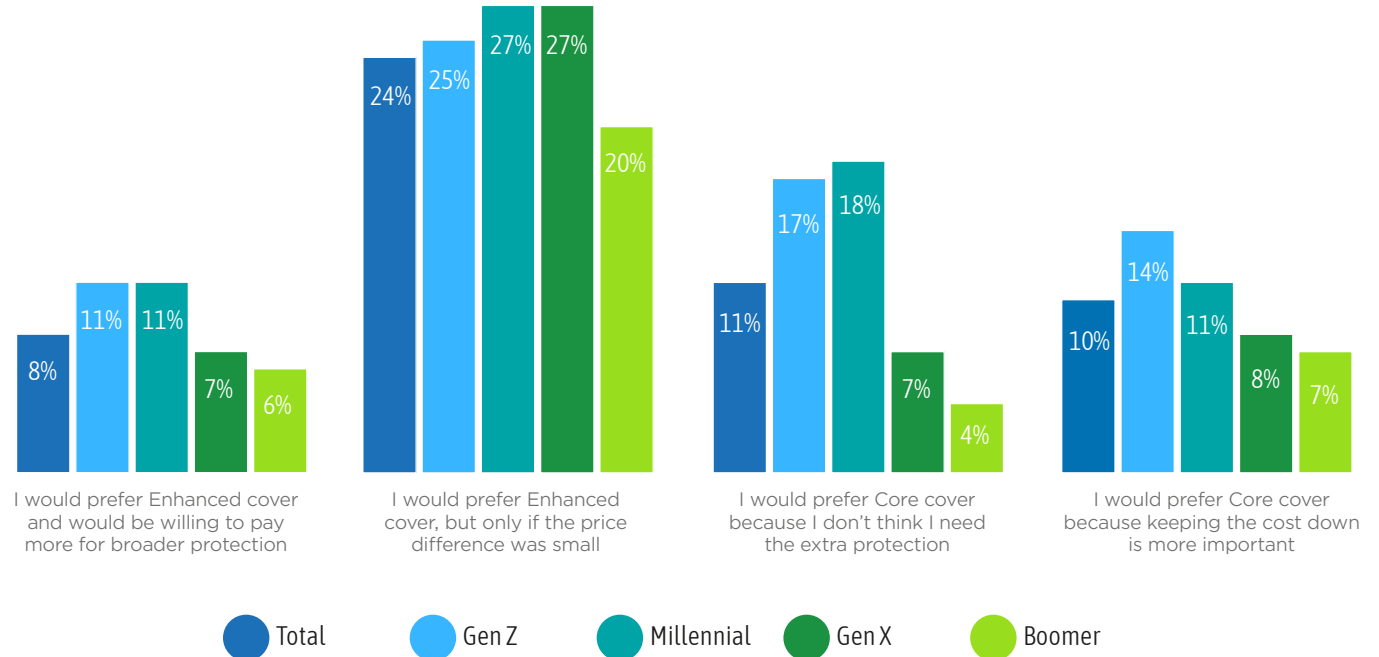
When consumers are shown a choice between a basic Critical Illness plan and a more comprehensive option, preferences differ notably by age. Younger consumers are more likely to favour enhanced protection when the differences are explained.

Preference for enhanced plans is materially higher among Gen Z and Millennials. Among Millennials in particular, 38% say they would prefer an enhanced plan, of which 11% say they would be prepared to pay more for the additional protection. This contrasts with much lower preference levels among older age groups.

This runs counter to the common assumption that younger consumers adopt an “it won’t happen to me” mindset, suggesting instead that when differences are clearly explained, younger groups can be highly receptive to broader protection.

**38% of Millennials prefer an enhanced CIC plan**

### If both Core and Enhanced Critical Illness cover were available, which statement best reflects your view?



## Enhanced cover: what drives appeal?

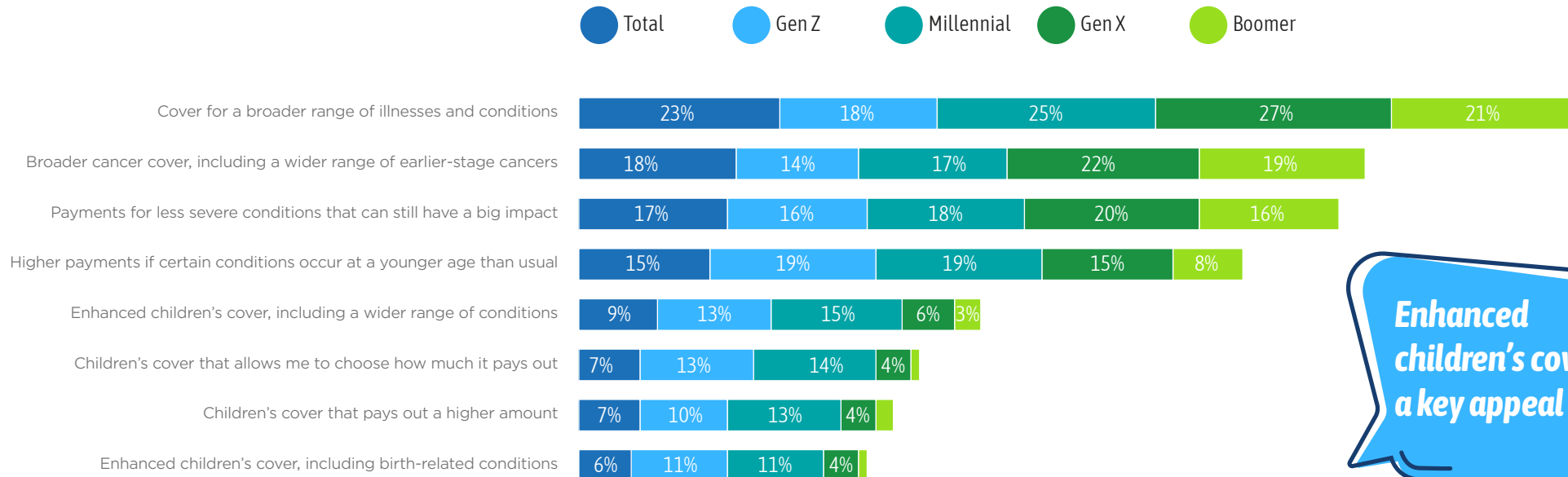
When consumers are asked what makes enhanced Critical Illness plans more appealing, family-focused benefits stand out, particularly among younger age groups.

While broader illness definitions are the most commonly cited feature overall (23%), child-related benefits rise sharply in importance among Gen Z and Millennials. Enhanced children's cover, including wider definitions, is cited by 15% of Millennials as a key driver of preference, compared with just 3% among

those aged 55 and over.

This gap suggests that enhanced plans resonate most where protection decisions are shaped by responsibility for dependants and future family needs, rather than personal risk alone. For younger consumers, enhanced Critical Illness Cover appears to extend relevance beyond individual diagnosis to wider household protection.

### Which of the following features would make you more likely to choose an Enhanced Critical Illness Cover policy instead of a Core policy?



**Enhanced children's cover is a key appeal driver**

## Core vs Enhanced — an adviser view

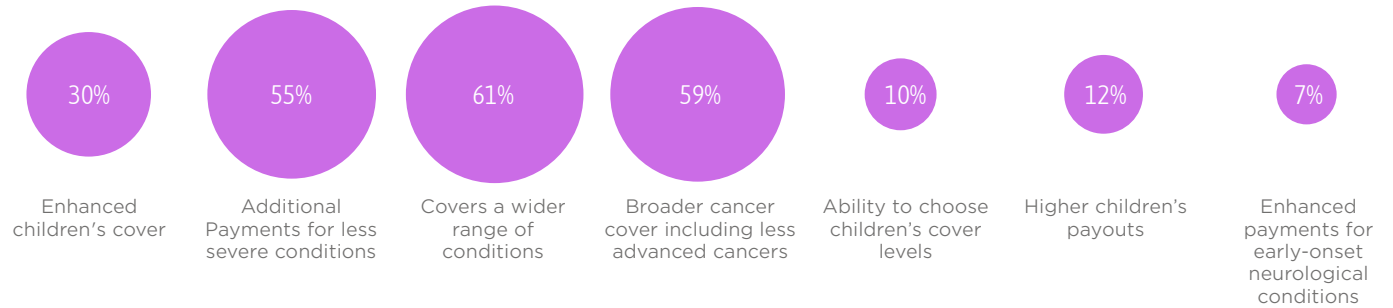
From an adviser perspective, Enhanced Critical Illness Cover (CIC) is typically recommended for the depth and breadth of protection it provides. The most commonly cited drivers are broader cancer cover (59%) and cover for a wider range of conditions (61%), followed by additional payments for less severe conditions (53%).

Children's cover also plays a role, with 31% of advisers saying enhanced children's benefits influence the choice of Enhanced CIC, closely aligning with the priorities expressed by our consumer study.

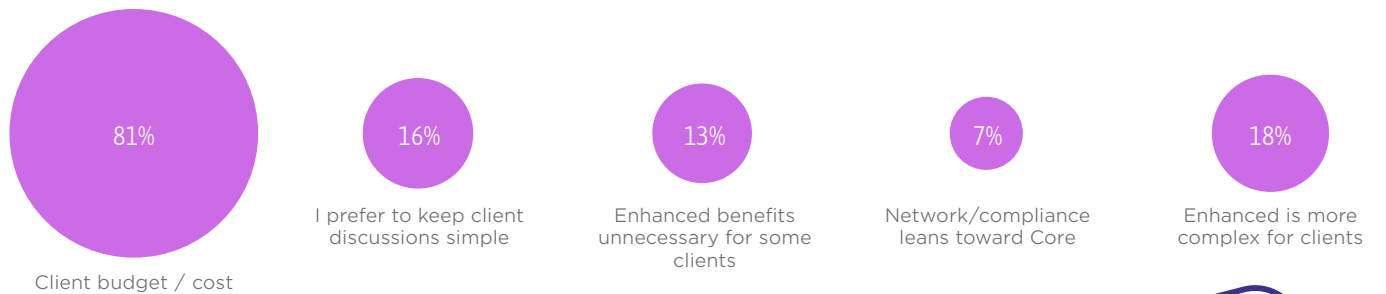
By contrast, recommendations for Core plans are overwhelmingly driven by affordability. 81% of advisers cite client budget as the primary reason.

Despite these positive signals, close to half of CIC sold in the market remain Core plans, suggesting there may be further opportunity to improve how the additional value of Enhanced cover is communicated to consumers.

### Which CIC features, in your experience, most influence clients to choose Enhanced?



### If you recommend Core rather than Enhanced CIC, what are the main reasons for this choice?



**59% driven by broader cancer cover**

## Hilary Banks

Chief Commercial Officer,  
Guardian Financial Services



*“Better explanation can unlock protection growth”*

This report should prompt a renewed commitment across the protection industry to up our stakes on how we engage with consumers. With Consumer Duty bringing increased focus to customer understanding and outcomes, the findings highlight confusion and a persistent gap between how much we expect consumers to understand about protection and what they actually know and value. Awareness of both critical illness cover (CIC) and income protection (IP) remains low. The majority say they haven't seen or heard anything about either product in the last year. Where there is awareness, understanding is often incorrect. Consumers confuse CIC and IP, assume they're unaffordable, or believe they're already covered.

What the report shows is that explanation changes minds and is central to delivering good customer outcomes. The findings about joint life CIC is a good example. For many couples, joint policies remain the instinctive choice, just 17% assume 2 single policies would provide better protection. This

assumption is rarely based on an understanding of how joint policies behave after a claim or life changes. That view shifts when the differences are explained. Once consumers understand that 2 single policies typically cost only slightly more but provide independent cover that continues after a first claim, 51% say that single policies offer better overall protection and value. That insight supports Guardian's dual life approach and CIEExpert's Single is Best campaign.

Confusion around IP tells a similar story. Low take-up is often mistaken for low relevance, but the research suggests otherwise. Only 22% of consumers know how long their sick pay lasts, and many assume it removes the need for IP. When the limitations of sick pay and the role of IP are clearly explained, perceived relevance shifts materially. These audiences are under-informed, not disengaged. We also see limited consumer understanding of job definitions in IP, despite advisers recognising their importance. The majority

(79%) of advisers say clear work definitions are important and significantly increase client trust. More than half would recommend an own job definition even at a higher cost. When consumers understand what they're protecting and when a claim would be paid, protection becomes tangible rather than theoretical, providing valuable peace of mind.

While the research highlights areas for improvement, the message is ultimately positive. This is not a market lacking appetite, but one that responds to better explanation. The growth opportunity lies in continually improving how we explain, design and recommend protection, so it keeps pace with the changing lives it's designed to support.

Finally, we would like to thank CIEExpert for producing such valuable insight. Following the impact of the first report, we're proud to sponsor the research again and support its role in improving understanding across our industry.

# CIC: New market influences

13% have concerns about NHS waiting times

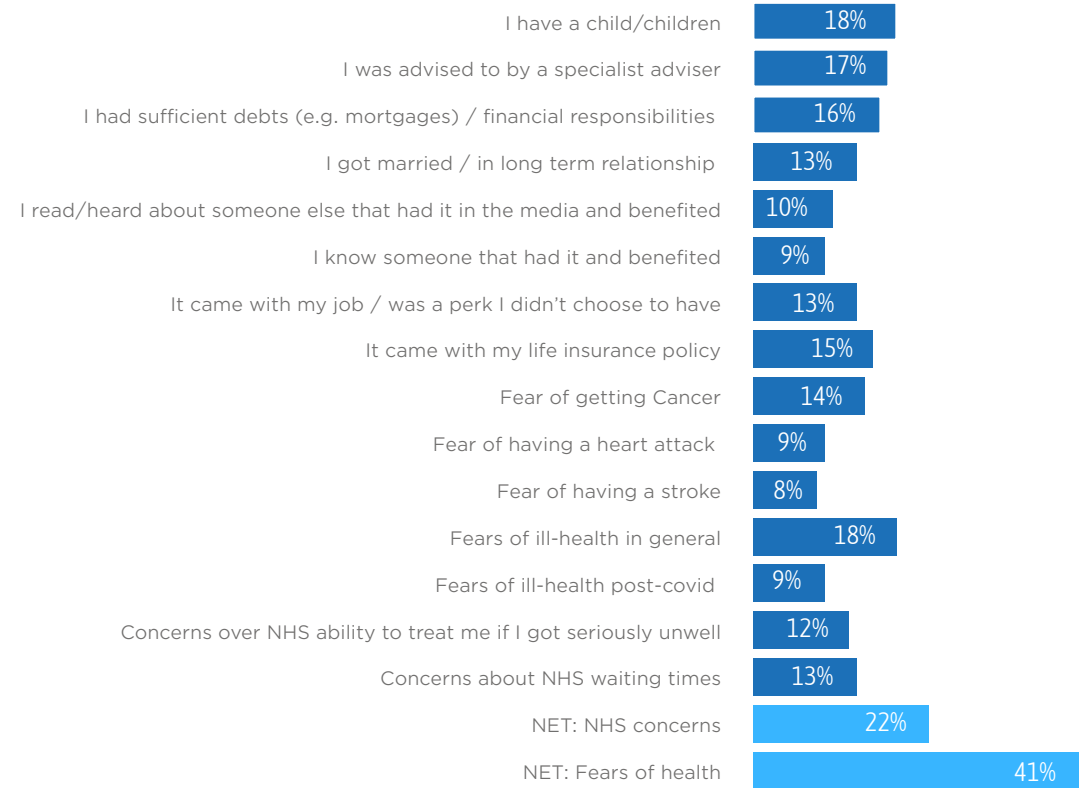
## What health concerns make CIC feel relevant?

Health concerns remain a central driver of engagement with Critical Illness Cover (CIC). Fear of serious illness continues to feature prominently, particularly among younger consumers.

In addition, 13% point directly to concerns about NHS waiting times as a reason for holding or considering CIC. When broader health anxiety and system pressure are combined, the impact is significant. Among Gen Z and Millennials, 60% say either personal health vulnerability or NHS-related concerns influence how relevant the product feels.

This suggests that CIC is increasingly evaluated within a wider health context rather than purely through mortgage or life-stage triggers. For younger generations in particular, concerns about illness and access to timely treatment are already shaping protection decisions.

## Which, if any, are reasons you have/or have had a CIC policy?



### NET: Fears of health and concerns over NHS



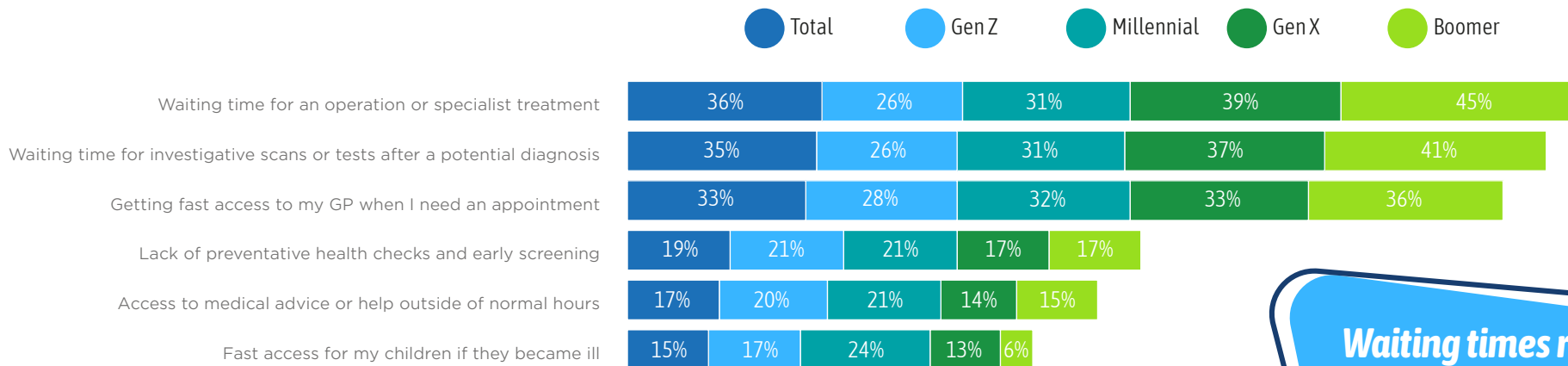
## What concerns people most about healthcare?

When consumers are asked what concerns them most about healthcare for themselves or their family, access and timeliness emerge as prominent themes.

Concerns about long NHS waiting times and delays in diagnosis or treatment sit alongside fears of serious illness itself. Anxiety is therefore not limited to the risk of disease, but extends to confidence in how quickly the system can respond.

This context is important. Protection decisions are shaped not only by health fears, but by perceived system strain. Where delays and capacity pressures are seen as real risks, financial protection may increasingly be viewed as a way to preserve choice and reassurance during uncertainty.

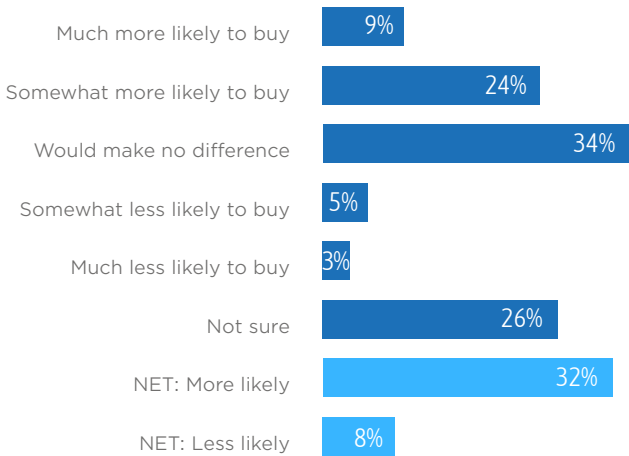
### Which of the following issues concern you most about healthcare for yourself or your family?



**Waiting times rank as the leading healthcare concern (36%)**

**NHS framing lifts purchase intent to 42% of Millennials**

**Some insurers now pay out once a person has been on an NHS waiting list for surgery, rather than waiting until after the operation. If an insurer offered this option, how would it affect your likelihood of buying Critical Illness Cover (CIC)?**



**Do NHS waiting times impact consumer appeal?**

Concerns about serious illness and access to timely treatment are increasingly shaping how consumers think about Critical Illness Cover (CIC). Worries about NHS capacity now sit alongside health fears as part of the context in which protection decisions are made.

When CIC is framed around these anxieties, particularly through features that respond to delays in diagnosis or treatment, consumer intent shifts materially. When asked whether they would be more likely to buy CIC if a policy paid out once placed on an NHS waiting list, the NET “more likely to buy” reaches 42% among Millennials and 37% among Gen Z.

This suggests CIC is being viewed not only as a payout following a serious illness, but increasingly as a way to preserve choice and reassurance when confidence in the healthcare system is strained.



## Consumer experience of added-value services

When consumers are asked what additional services would make them more likely to buy or review a Critical Illness policy, practical health support ranks highly. Around a quarter highlight annual health checks (25%), 24/7 access to a GP and second medical opinions as features that would increase their likelihood of engagement.

Among those who have actually used these services, perceived value is even stronger. Amongst Gen Z, 46% rate annual health checks as very valuable and a further 32% as fairly valuable, with similar net positive responses across other health and wellbeing features. This distinction is important. What may initially act as a purchase differentiator can, in practice, become a meaningful part of the product experience.

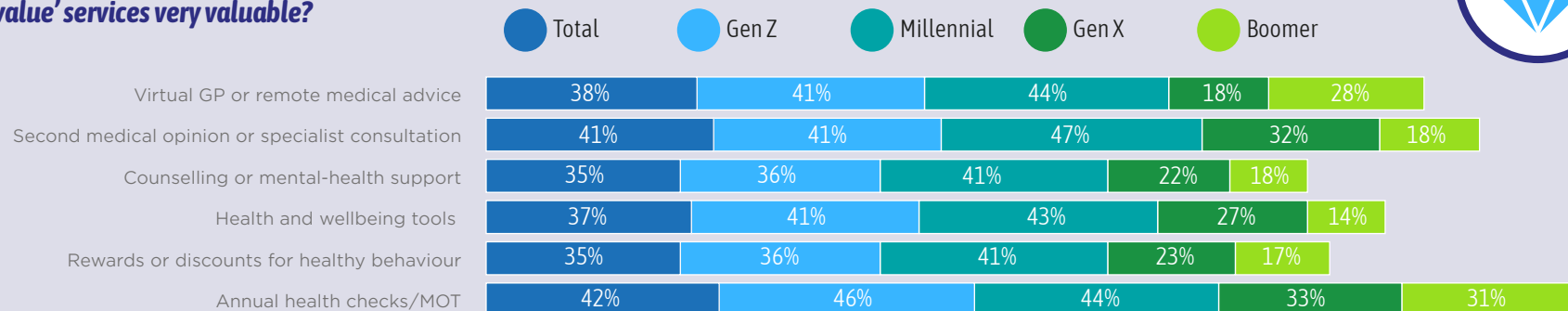
The findings suggest that added value services are not merely marketing embellishments. They have the capacity to influence both consideration and satisfaction, reinforcing CIC as support throughout illness rather than solely at the point of claim.

### Which, if any, of the following would (or has) make you more likely to buy or review a CIC policy?



**46% Gen Z rate annual health checks as very valuable**

### Did you find 'added value' services very valuable?



## Is there demand for “advanced” added value services?

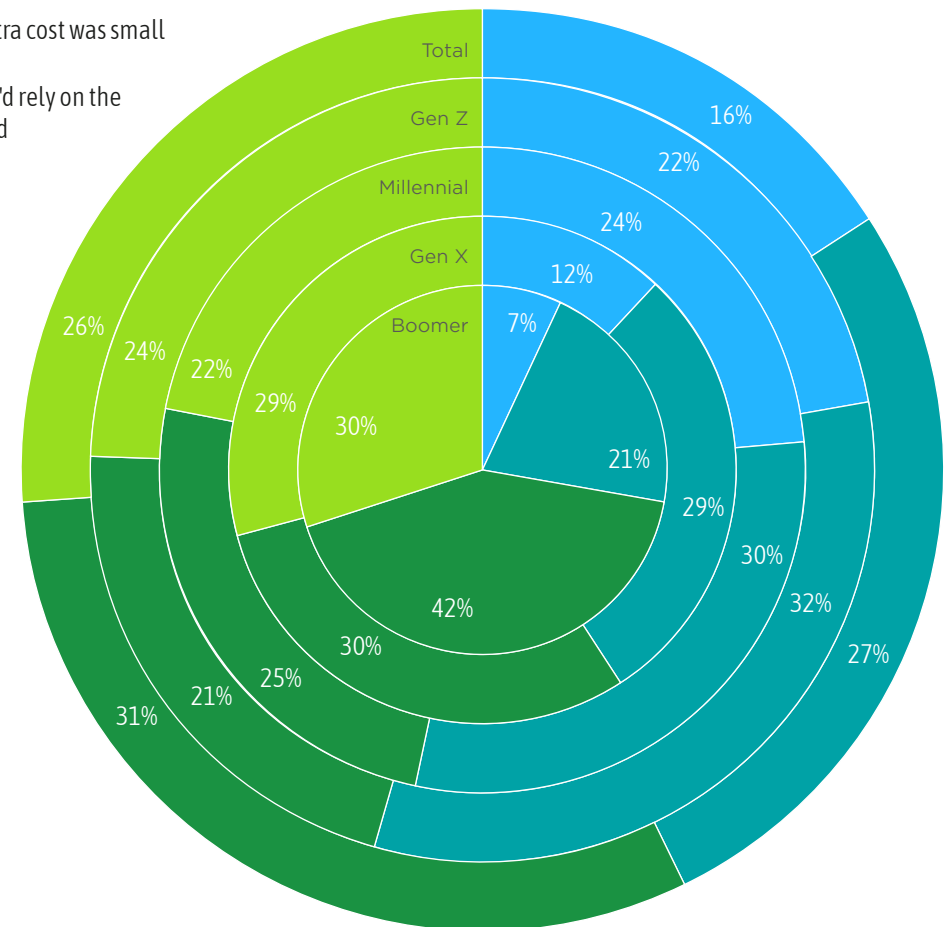
When consumers are asked whether they would pay more for Critical Illness Cover (CIC) that includes enhanced specialist services, responses show clear interest.

Overall, 16% say they would be happy to pay extra, with a further 27% willing to consider it if the additional cost is small. In total, 43% show openness to higher premiums for enhanced added value services, while 31% would not want to pay more, highlighting ongoing price sensitivity.

Willingness is far stronger among younger consumers, with a total of 54% of Gen Z and Millennials open to paying more. This suggests that while added value services do not remove cost concerns for everyone, when clearly explained and understood they can justify higher premiums for a substantial proportion.

### Which of the following best describes how you feel about paying extra for this kind of enhanced support?

- I'd be happy to pay extra for access to the most advanced medical or recovery support
- I'd only be interested if the extra cost was small
- I wouldn't want to pay extra - I'd rely on the NHS or standard cover instead
- Not sure



**Over half of Gen Z and Millennials are open to paying more for enhanced CIC support**

## Importance of added value services — an adviser view

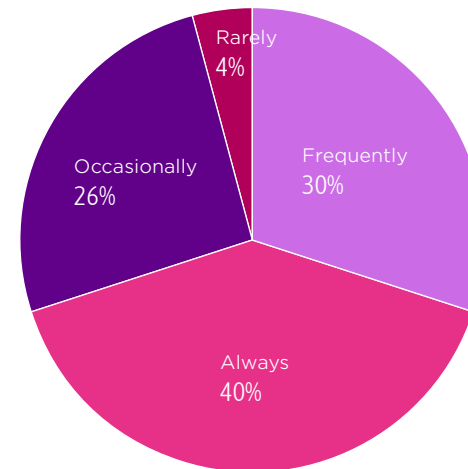
Added value services are now a routine part of Critical Illness Cover (CIC) discussions from an adviser perspective, even if they are not always the primary driver of recommendations.

When discussing CIC with clients, 40% of advisers say they always explain the added value services included, with a further 30% doing so frequently. Only 4% say they rarely or never mention these services, indicating that health and wellbeing benefits are firmly embedded in advice conversations.

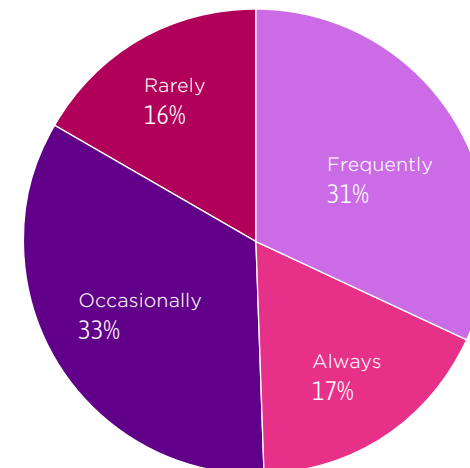
Their influence on final recommendations is more measured. While 17% of advisers see added value services as essential and 31% say they frequently influence recommendations, they most often act as a differentiator. Around a third (33%) say they influence decisions when pricing and cover are similar, supporting engagement rather than driving choice alone.

**Over 70% regularly discuss added value services**

## How often do you explain the Added Value Services included with CIC when discussing Critical Illness policies with clients?



## To what extent do the Added Value Services offered by insurers influence your recommendations for CIC?

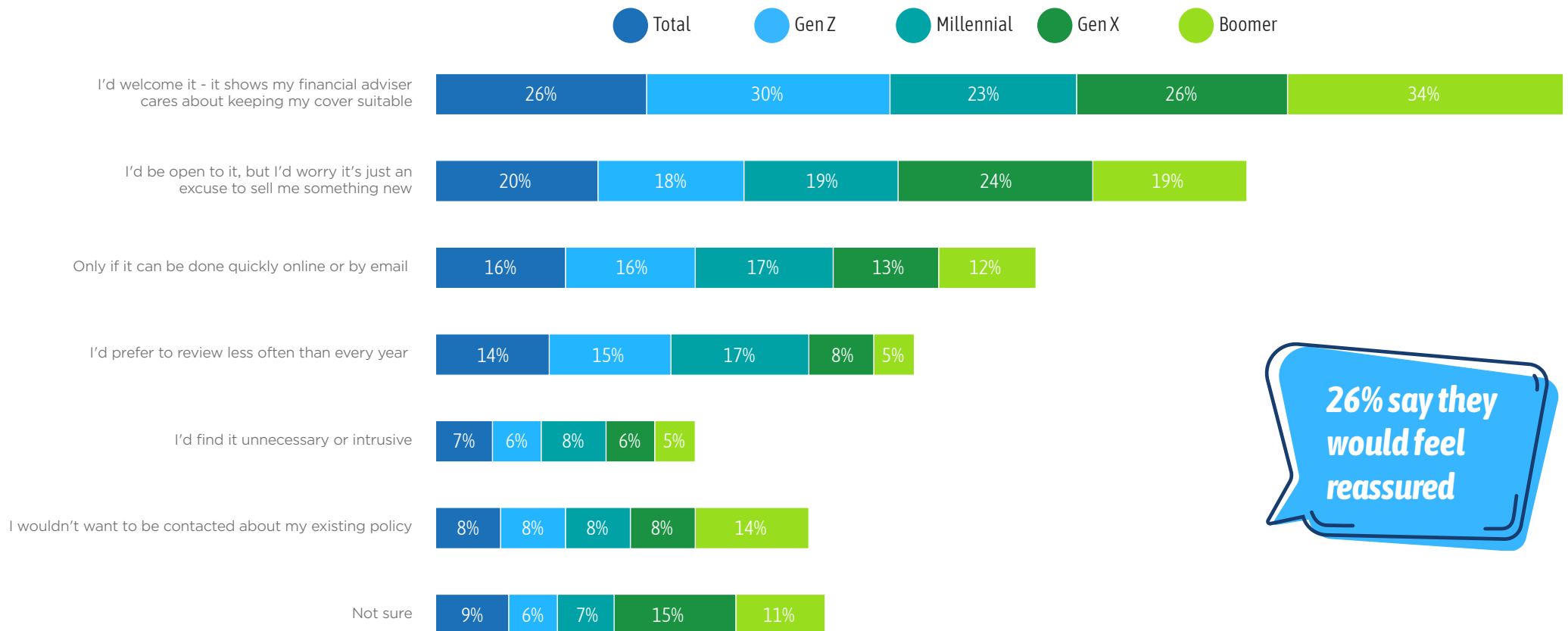


## Annual reviews — consumers' view

When consumers are asked how they would feel about being offered an annual review of their Critical Illness Cover (CIC), responses are broadly positive. The largest single response (26%) say they would feel reassured or supported by the opportunity to review their cover each year. A further 20% say they would be

open to it, albeit with some concern that it could be sales-driven. The findings suggest consumers are receptive to ongoing engagement, provided it feels purposeful rather than promotional. Framed appropriately, annual reviews can reinforce trust and ensure cover keeps pace with changing circumstances.

### How you would feel about an annual review of your CIC policy?



**26% say they would feel reassured**

# IP: Opportunities to reframe

## Consumer perceptions of what conditions IP is primarily for

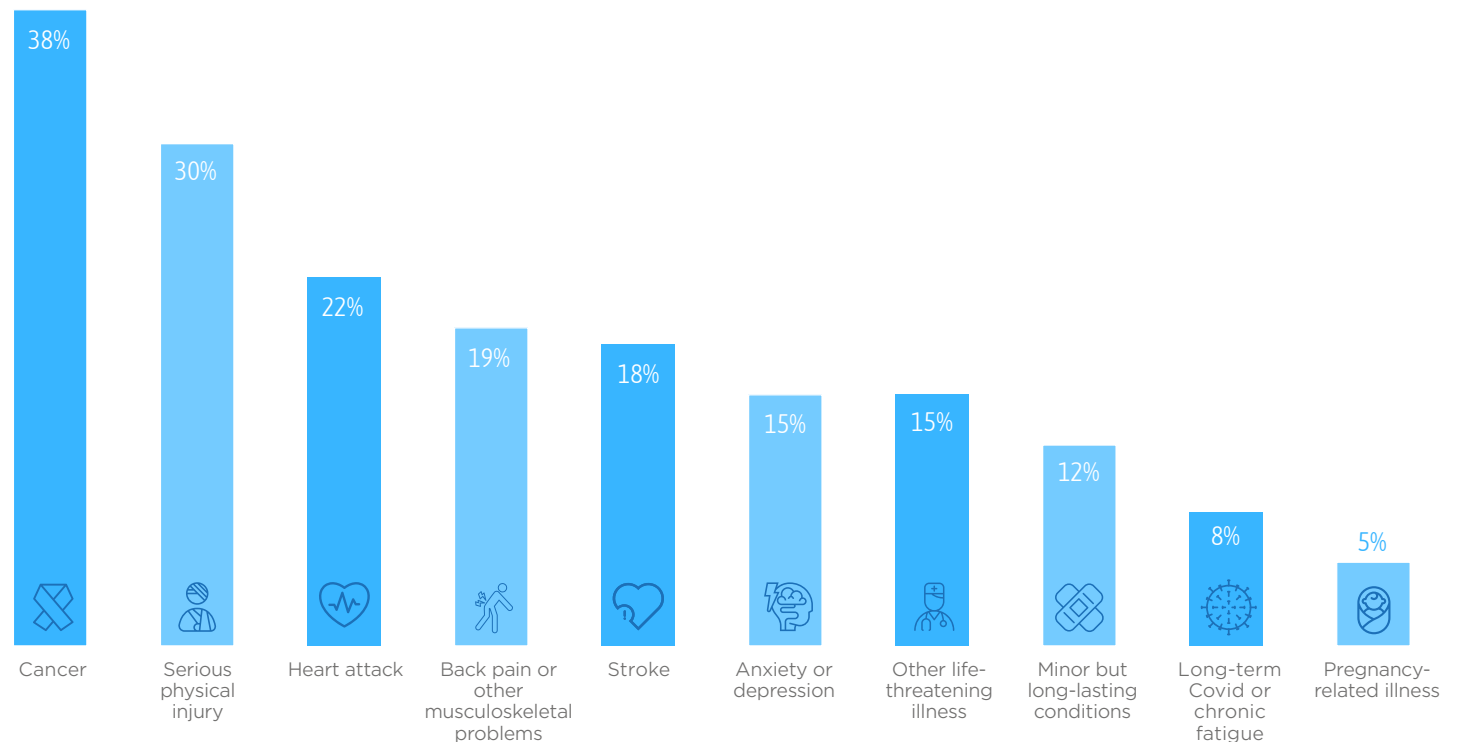
Many consumers have a limited understanding of what Income Protection (IP) typically pays claims for. When asked what they believe are the most common causes of claims, responses skew towards serious but less frequent events such as cancer, heart attack and accidents.

In reality, a large proportion of IP claims arise from musculoskeletal and mental health conditions. These are everyday health issues that affect people's ability to work for extended periods, yet they are not instinctively associated with Income Protection.

This mismatch highlights a gap between perception and practice, reinforcing the need for clearer articulation of what IP is designed to cover.

**Consumers expect cancer and accidents to dominate claims**

**What do you think are the main reasons people make a claim?**



## Does real claims context change relevance?

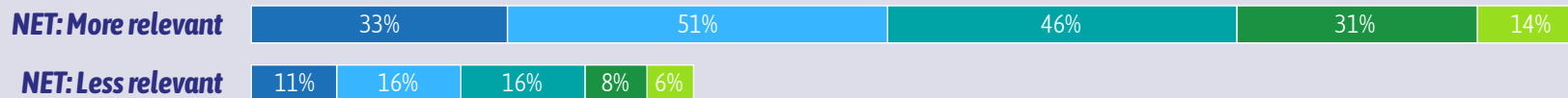
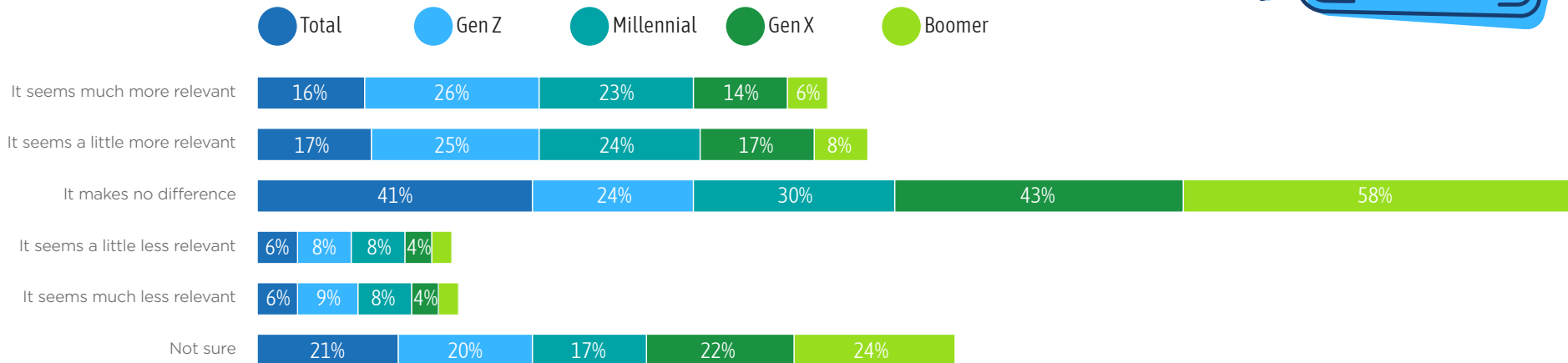
When consumers are told that musculoskeletal issues and mental health conditions are typically the most common causes of Income Protection claims, perceived relevance increases materially.

Overall, 33% say Income Protection (IP) feels more relevant after seeing this information. The effect is stronger among younger groups, rising to 51% of Gen Z

and 46% of Millennials. This suggests many consumers do not instinctively associate IP with everyday health conditions that frequently prevent people from working. Explaining the reality of claims appears to materially increase engagement, particularly among younger generations.

**In reality, the top causes of IP claims are most often:**  
**1. Musculoskeletal issues 2. Mental health conditions 3. Cancer 4. Accidents & injuries**  
**Knowing this, how does it make you view the relevance of IP for someone like you?**

**Claims reality lifts relevance to 51% among Gen Z**



## Do consumers know what sick pay they have?

Very few consumers have a clear understanding of how long their income would be protected if they were unable to work. Only 22% say they know exactly how long employer sick pay would last, with little variation by age.

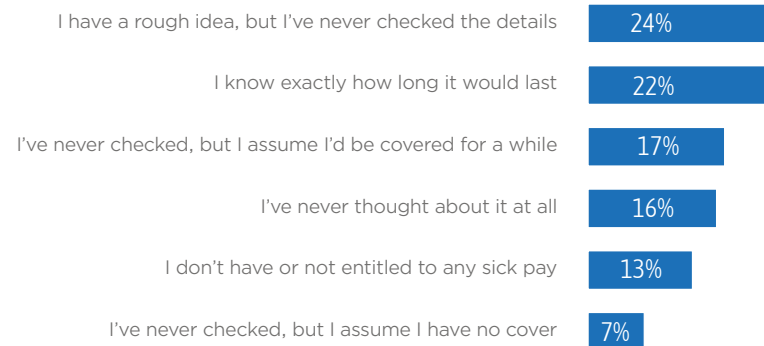
This lack of clarity shapes how people assess their exposure to income loss. Without knowing how long employer support lasts, assumptions fill the gap. One in ten (9%) say they assume they would be covered through work or the state if unable to work.

However, when the limitations of sick pay and the role of Income Protection (IP) are clearly explained, perceived relevance shifts materially. 43% say IP feels more relevant, rising to 61% of Gen Z and 64% of Millennials.

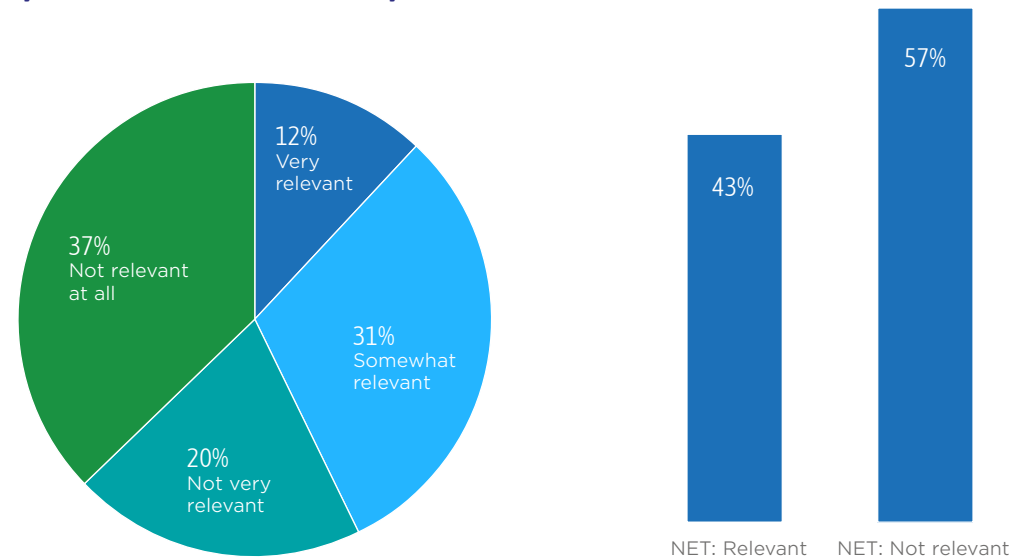
Income risk is therefore not simply ignored; it is frequently misunderstood.

**Just 22% know how long sick pay lasts**

## How long do consumers think employer sick pay lasts?



## Income protection helps replace your income once sick pay stops. How relevant do you think this kind of cover is to your own circumstances?



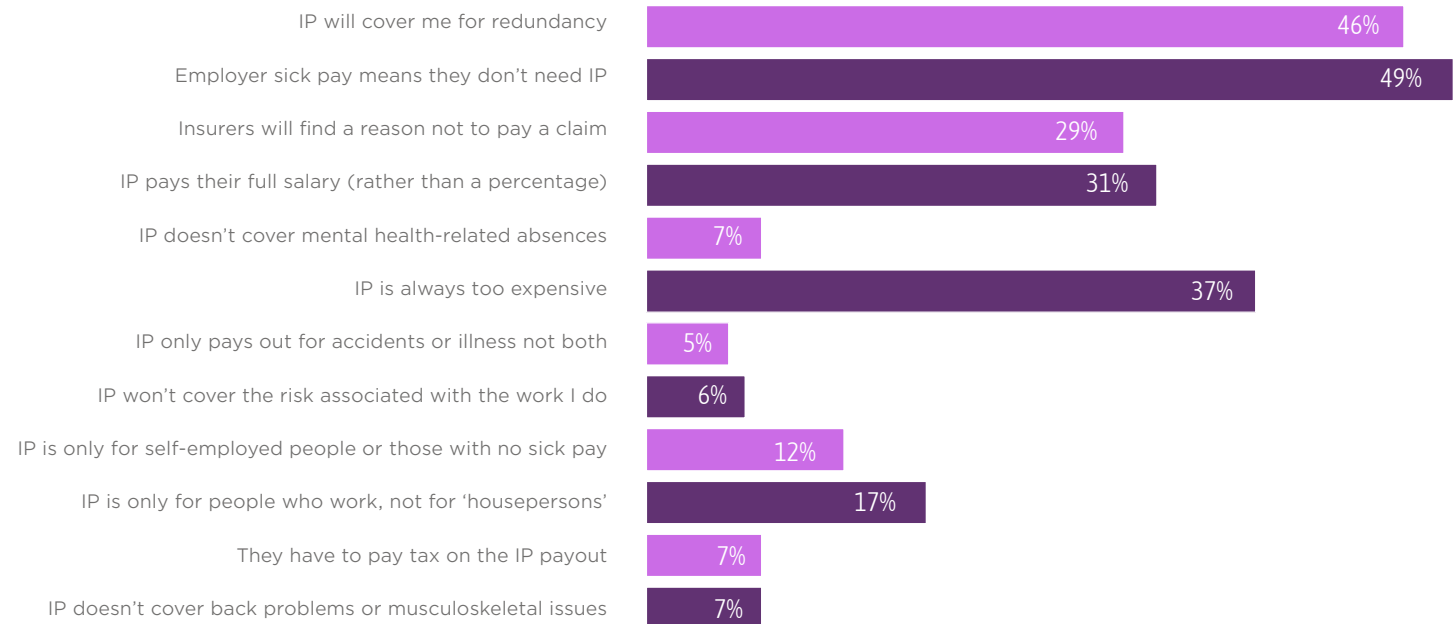
## IP misconceptions – an adviser view

From an adviser perspective, consumer misunderstandings about Income Protection (IP) are widespread and persistent, reinforcing the consumer evidence that income risk is poorly understood.

The most common misconception relates to sick pay. Nearly half of advisers (49%) say clients believe employer sick pay means they do not need IP, reflecting the uncertainty evidenced around how long sick pay actually lasts. Confusion between IP and redundancy cover is also widespread, with 46% saying clients expect IP to pay out if they are made redundant.

Cost concerns are often assumption-led rather than experience-based. Advisers report that 37% of clients assume IP is always too expensive, while 29% believe insurers will find a reason not to pay a claim. Together, adviser insight highlights how false confidence, driven by misunderstanding of risk, claims and product mechanics, continues to suppress consumers' meaningful engagement with IP.

### In your experience, which misconceptions do clients most often have about IP?



**49% of clients believe employer sick pay means they don't need IP**

**Retirement framing lifts relevance for 61% of Millennials**

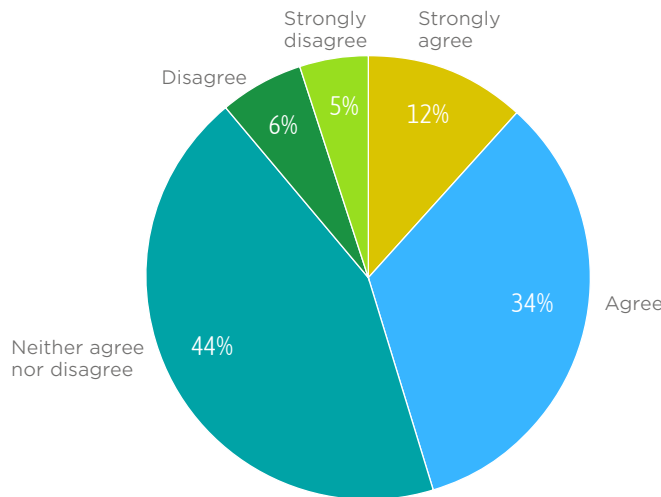
## Is retirement framing an untapped opportunity?

When Income Protection (IP) is framed alongside retirement saving, agreement rises sharply. Overall, 46% agree that protecting income in the same way they save for retirement makes sense, rising to 59% of Gen Z and 61% of Millennials.

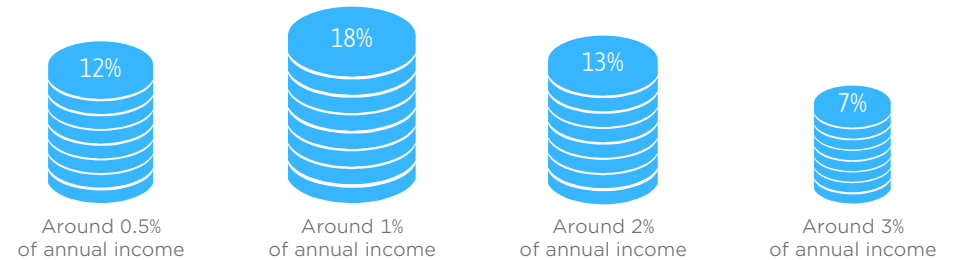
Cost responses reinforce this shift. When asked what percentage of income would seem reasonable, half select a range between 0.5% and 3%, with 18%

choosing around 1% and 13% selecting 2%. Only 15% reject all options outright, while 34% remain unsure. Contrary to the common consumer response that IP “costs too much,” this framing produces a noticeably more measured reaction. When positioned as part of long-term financial planning and expressed as a proportion of income rather than a flat premium, perceived barriers soften, particularly among younger consumers.

**It makes sense to protect my income in the same way I save for retirement — by setting aside a small percentage each month.**



## What sort of monthly cost would seem reasonable for cover, based on your own income?



● Total ● Gen Z ● Millennial ● Gen X ● Boomer



## Does working at a later age influence views of IP?

People are increasingly working into their 60s and beyond, yet most Income Protection (IP) plans can only be started up to around age 55. This creates a tension between working reality and product design.

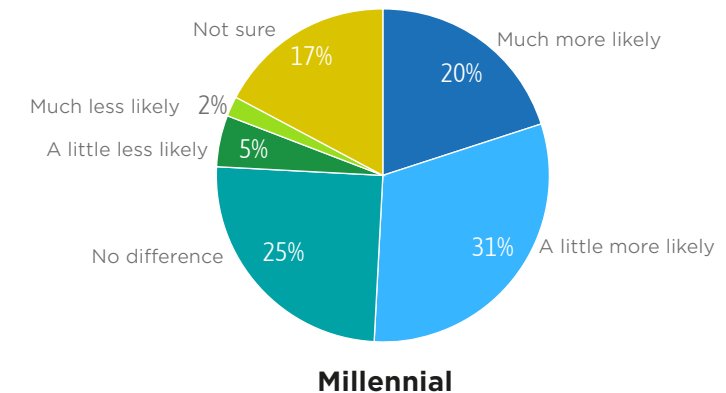
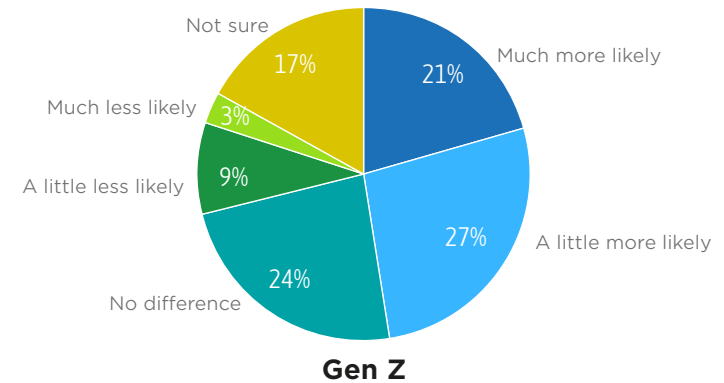
When consumers are asked what would make them more likely to consider IP at age 50 or over, features that protect income continuity towards retirement increase interest.

When IP is positioned as protecting income until retirement, 44% overall say they would be more likely to consider it, rising to 48% of Gen Z and 51% of Millennials.

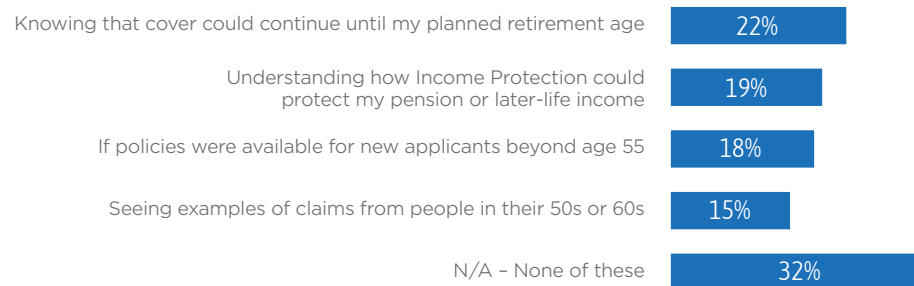
This challenges the assumption that later-life framing only resonates with older audiences. Younger consumers appear receptive to linking income protection with long-term financial security.

**51% of Millennials more likely to consider retirement-linked IP**

## How much more likely would you be to consider Income Protection if it was positioned as a way to protect your income until you can afford to retire?



## Which, if any of the following features would make you more likely to consider taking out Income Protection at this age (e.g. 50 and over)?

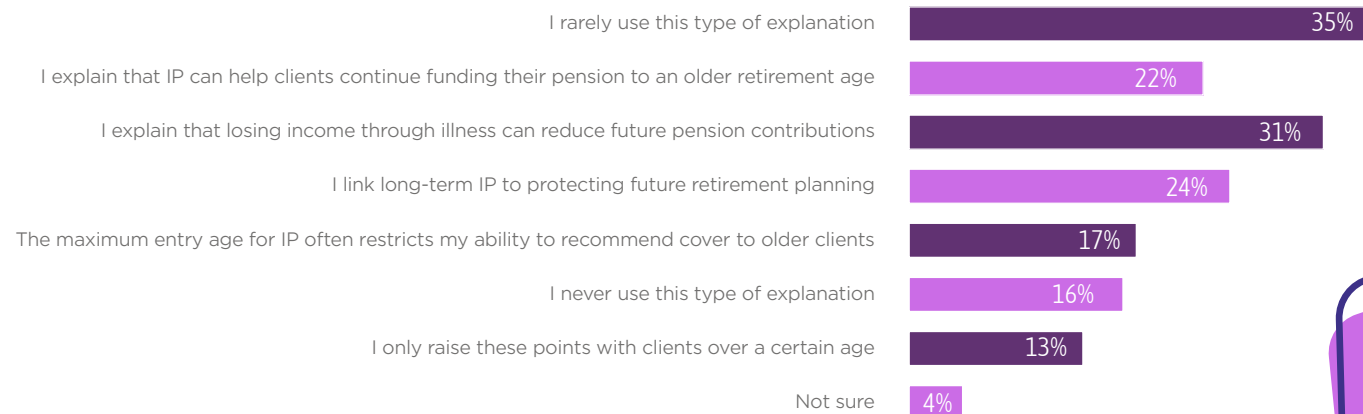


## Retirement framing — an adviser view

Understandably, advisers tend to focus on the immediate consequences of income loss when discussing Income Protection (IP). When retirement framing is used, it usually centres on indirect effects, such as illness reducing future pension contributions (31%), or the role of long-term IP in supporting retirement planning (24%). Fewer highlight IP as a way to help clients continue funding pensions to a later retirement age (22%).

Retirement-based explanations are more commonly directed at older clients, where retirement planning feels more immediate. Yet consumer findings show this framing resonates strongly with younger generations, a group not instinctively associated with long-term financial messaging. The opportunity may therefore be far greater than assumed, with retirement framing linking today's income risk to tomorrow's financial security much earlier in working life.

### When discussing IP with clients, which points, if any, do you raise about working later in life and protecting retirement plans?



## Fi Wynn

Head of Protection Propositions,  
Royal London



*“Modern working lives need income protection that’s flexible and relevant.”*

Today, flexible and hybrid working are firmly embedded, alongside the growth of gig work, freelancing and contracting. These ways of working often come with fewer traditional benefits, such as sick pay, leaving more people exposed to income shocks. Yet income protection remains widely misunderstood and under-prioritised.

CIExpert’s research shows only 22% of people know how long their employer sick pay lasts, with 49% of advisers saying clients assume it removes the need for additional protection. Employer sick pay is often temporary, ending long before someone’s able to return to work. Adviser tools such as Royal London’s Risk Report illustrate why this matters. Younger women are more than twice as likely to be off work for an extended period due to illness or injury than experience a critical illness during their working life, highlighting the importance of income protection. Protection hasn’t always been designed with today’s working lives in mind. Many income protection products were built for a stable, linear

model, despite careers becoming increasingly fluid. The research shows 42% of Gen Z expect mixed or non-linear careers, meaning flexibility is no longer a ‘nice to have’. Consumers consistently say they want protection that adapts as circumstances change, with 48% preferring long-term cover that can flex around variable income and career breaks.

This is particularly evident for the self-employed. 48% of advisers identify self-employment as the most common barrier to securing suitable income protection, driven by uncertainty around how much income can be protected, with 43% saying more flexible cover is needed. Supporting contractors, freelancers and the self-employed requires income protection that accommodates variable income, reduces friction in advice and replaces a sufficient proportion of earnings to provide stability during illness and recovery.

Encouragingly, the research shows when income protection is clearly explained, its relevance

increases for 33% of consumers, rising to over half of younger consumers. This includes understanding everyday claim causes, such as musculoskeletal and mental health conditions, alongside the role of added-value services in recovery. 57% of consumers respond positively to rehabilitation and return-to-work support, while 68% of advisers say these services help them explain and recommend income protection more effectively, making support more tangible and recovery-focused.

At Royal London, financial resilience sits at the heart of our purpose. We believe robust insight, transparency and adaptability are essential in supporting advisers and delivering good consumer outcomes. That means challenging outdated assumptions, improving accessibility and ensuring solutions reflect the realities of modern working life. Insight-led research plays a vital role in supporting better decisions and helping the protection market evolve in a more informed way.

# IP: New market influences

42% of Gen Z expect mixed or non-linear careers

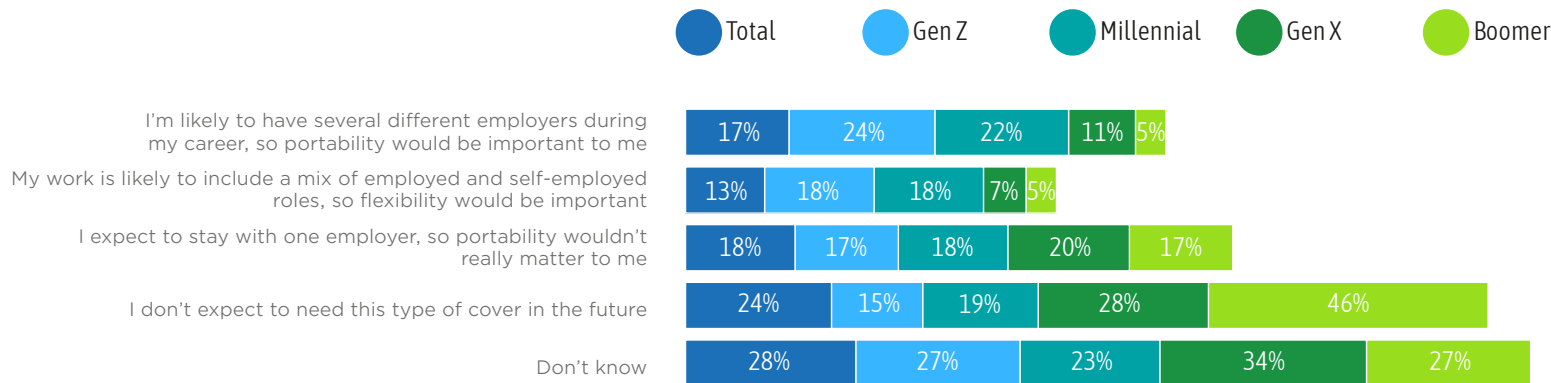
## Do modern careers fit traditional IP models?

Among consumers who are not yet retired, many no longer expect to follow a single, linear career path. Expectations of multiple employers and mixed income models are more pronounced among younger generations.

Among Gen Z, 24% expect to have multiple employers during their working life, with a further 18% anticipating a mixed or non-linear career. Both figures

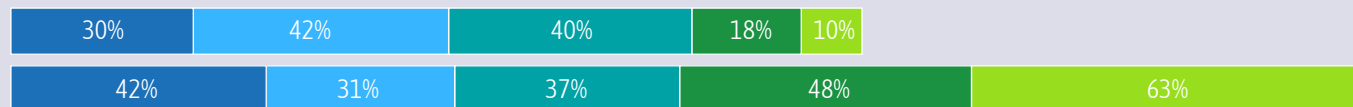
are significantly higher than among older cohorts. This shift away from stable, long-term employment challenges traditional assumptions built into many Income Protection (IP) models. As working lives become less predictable, the question becomes whether protection products are keeping pace with modern employment realities.

## How important would it be to have an income protection plan that can move with you if your work situation changes?



**NET: Important**

**NET: Unimportant**



## Modern careers — what features are key?

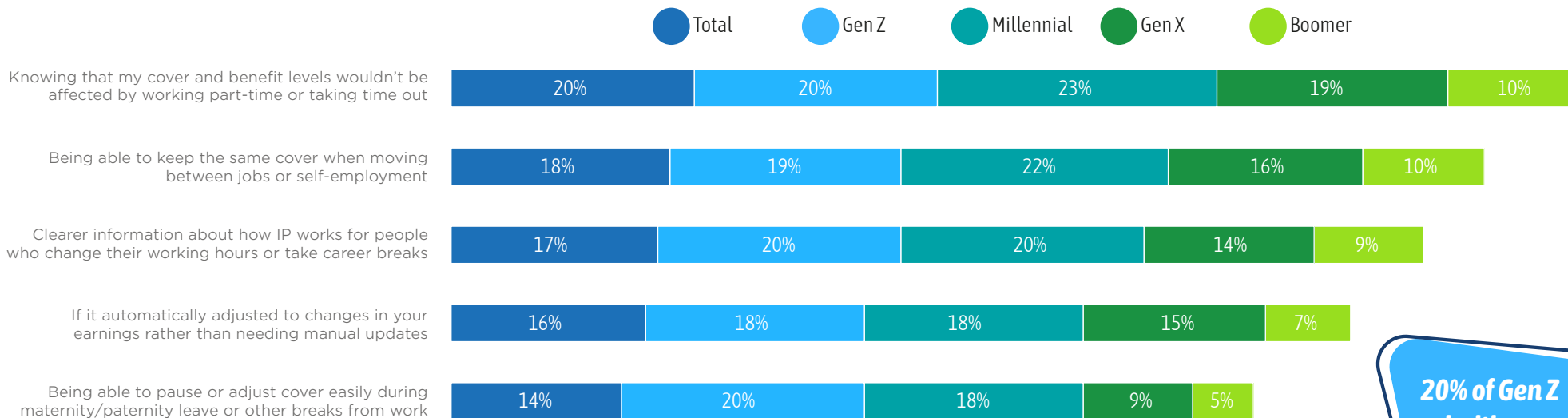
When consumers are asked what would make them more likely to take out Income Protection (IP), adaptability emerges as a clear priority.

The strongest responses centre on reassurance that cover will remain stable as working patterns change. Consumers want confidence that reducing hours or taking time out will not undermine benefit levels, alongside clearer explanations of how IP operates when careers pause or income shifts. Flexibility around

maternity and paternity leave is also a key driver among Gen Z (20%), resonating equally across genders and reinforcing that adaptability is now a mainstream expectation.

As careers become less linear, protection is expected to adjust accordingly. IP must move with modern working lives rather than reflect outdated employment assumptions.

### Many people have periods out of full-time work. Which of the following changes or features would make you more likely to take out an Income Protection policy?



**20% of Gen Z prioritise parental leave flexibility**

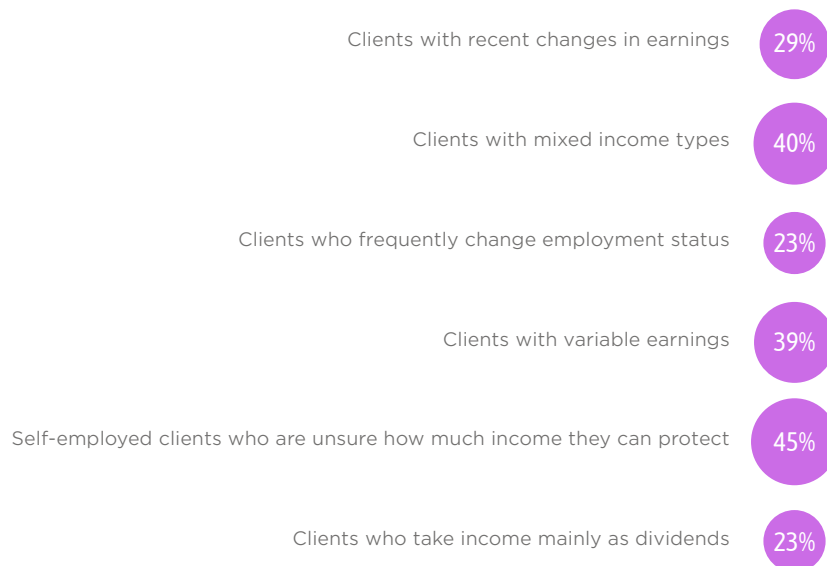
**Self-employed income uncertainty is a major advice barrier**

## Modern careers — an adviser view

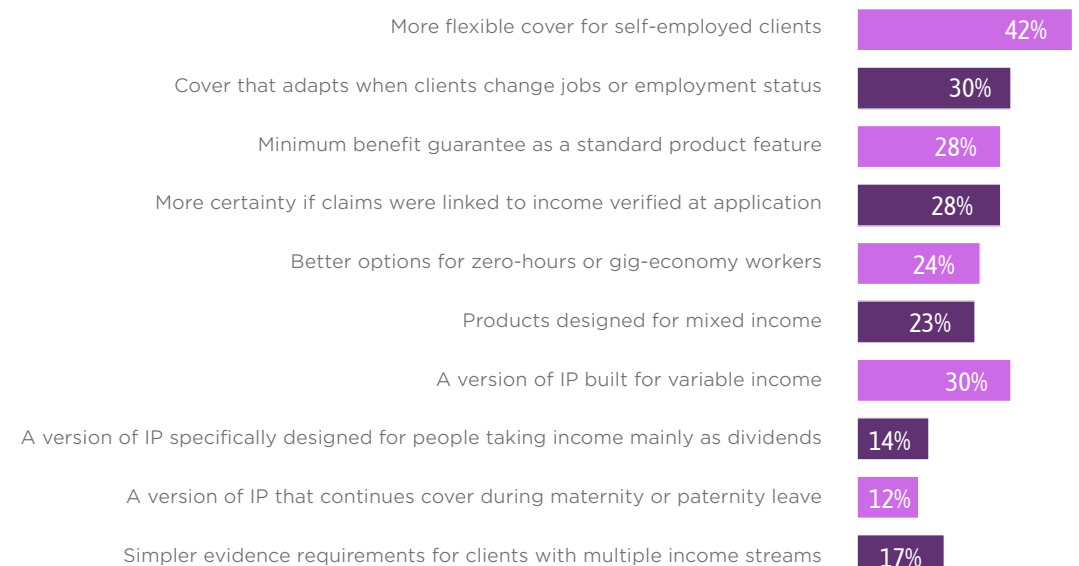
Modern working patterns create practical challenges when recommending Income Protection (IP). The most common barrier relates to self-employment, with 45% of advisers saying self-employed clients are unsure how much income they can protect. Mixed income types (40%) and variable earnings such as bonuses or commission (39%) also complicate advice, alongside frequent job changes (23%) and dividend-based income structures (23%).

When asked what would most improve uptake, advisers point clearly to adaptability. More flexible cover for self-employed clients (43%), IP designed for variable income (31%), and cover that adjusts as employment changes (30%) are seen as the most impactful improvements. The message from advisers is clear: many feel constrained by current product limitations when responding to shifting work patterns, creating friction in advice conversations despite growing client need.

### When arranging IP, which income-related factors most often become barriers to recommending or securing suitable cover?



### If IP adapted more clearly to modern work and income patterns, which changes would make the biggest difference to uptake?



**58% of Gen Z would prefer long-term IP**

## Flexibility and cover length: what appeals most?

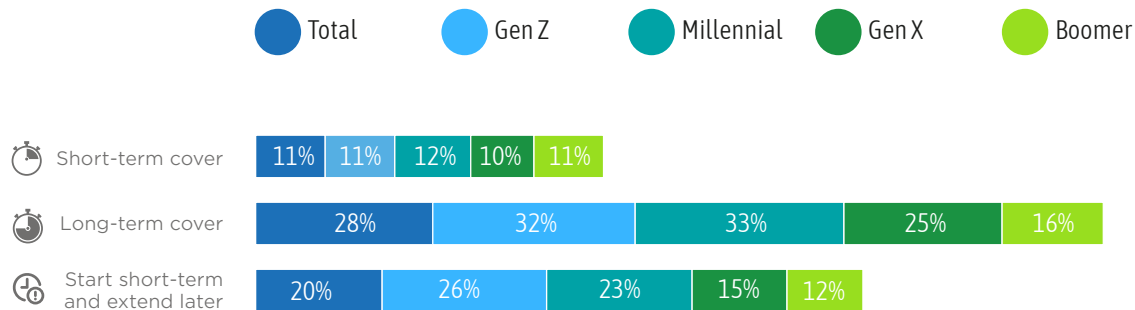
When consumers are asked what type of Income Protection (IP) they would prefer, their instinct is clearly towards cover that lasts. Nearly half (48%) favour long-term protection or cover that can be extended, compared with just 11% who actively prefer short-term cover only.

This preference is not confined to older groups. A majority of Gen Z (58%) and Millennials (56%) favour long-term IP, either through cover that pays out until recovery or retirement, or through short-term cover with a clear route to extend.

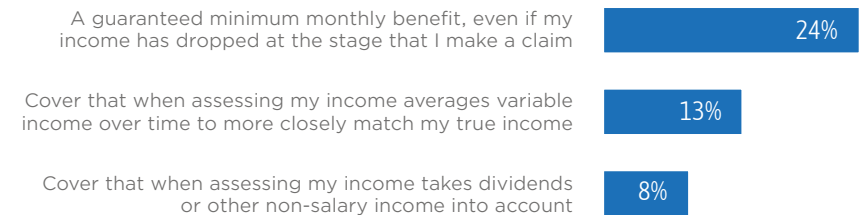
This challenges the assumption that younger consumers only want temporary protection.

When asked what features would make them more likely to buy, predictability stands out. Guaranteed minimum benefits increase likelihood for 27% of Gen Z and 31% of Millennials, alongside interest in cover that adapts as income changes and clearer expectations at claim. This suggests the barrier is not duration, but confidence in how protection would perform.

### Preferred cover duration and features that increase likelihood of purchase



### Which of the following would make you more likely to take out a policy?



## Importance of job definitions – an adviser view

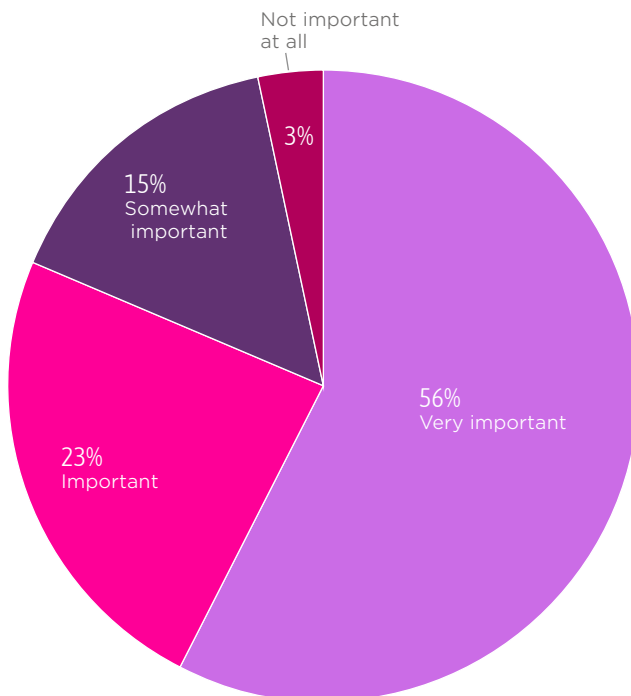
When consumers are asked about Income Protection (IP), it is clear that job definitions such as “Own Occupation” or “Suitable Occupation” are poorly understood.

From the adviser perspective, these definitions are seen as fundamental to trust. 56% of advisers say clear work definitions are very important and significantly increase client trust, with a further 23% saying they are important - meaning nearly eight in ten advisers see them as a key credibility driver.

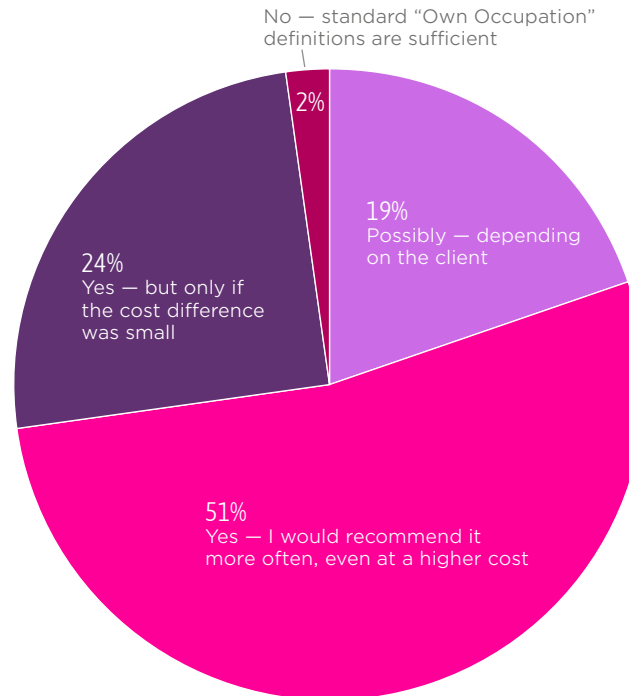
This is reflected in adviser behaviour. 51% say they would recommend an “Own Job” definition more often even at a higher cost, rising to 75% when including those who would recommend it if the cost difference was small.

The contrast highlights a clear opportunity: consumers struggle to understand job definitions, while advisers see them as one of the most effective ways to make IP feel concrete and trustworthy.

### Importance of clear work definitions in building client trust



### Likelihood of recommending an “Own Job” definition



**79% say clear job definitions increase client trust**

Rehabilitation support resonates with 65% of Millennials

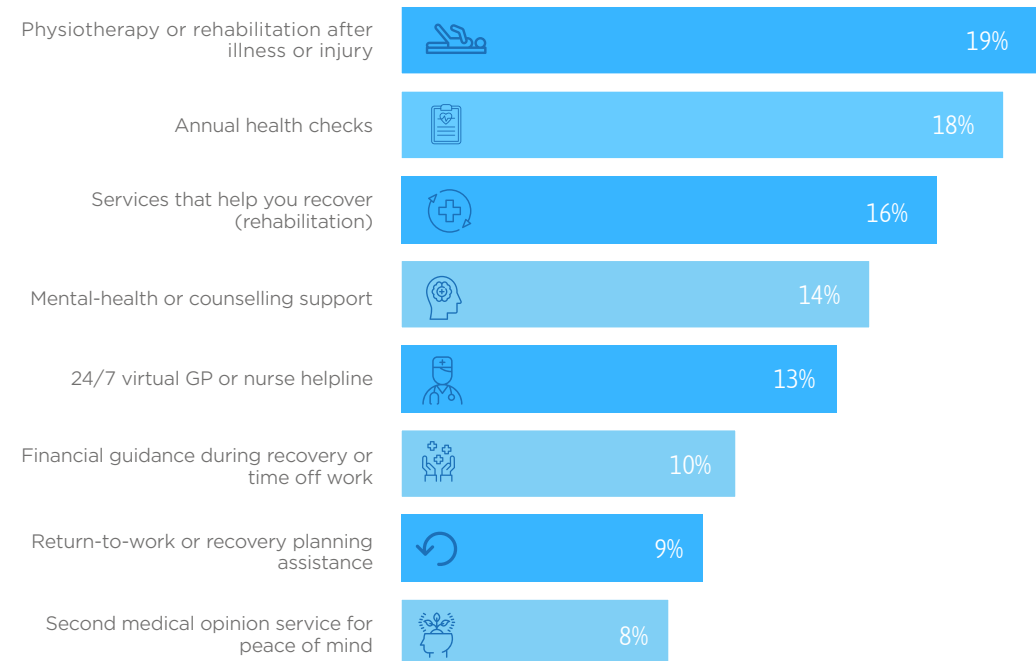
## Which added-value service features are most valued?

When consumers consider the health and wellbeing services that can sit alongside Income Protection (IP), practical and preventative support stands out most strongly.

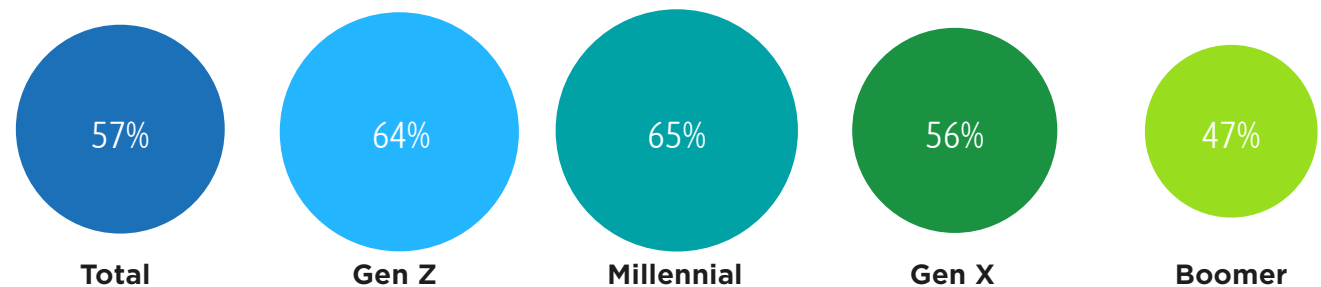
Annual health checks and health MOTs are among the most highly valued features, alongside access to mental health or counselling support. Rehabilitation and return-to-work services, such as physiotherapy or workplace adjustments, also rate highly, highlighting the appeal of support that helps people recover and return to work.

This is reinforced when consumers reflect on overall value. Among Millennials, 65% say they feel fairly or very positive about rehabilitation and return-to-work support, showing that understanding these services materially increases perceived value and engagement.

## Which of the following kinds of services would you find most valuable as part of a policy?



## Which of the following best reflects how you feel about active rehabilitation or return-to-work support?



## Importance of added-value services – an adviser view?

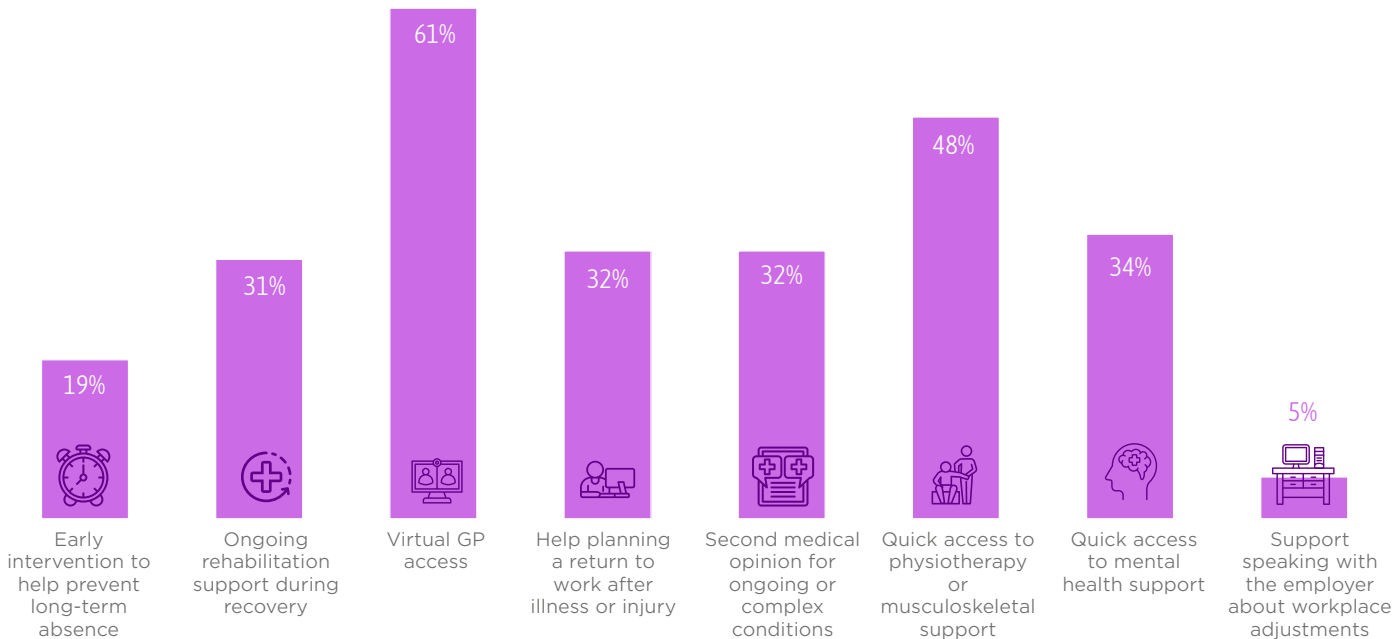
From an adviser perspective, health and wellbeing services play a meaningful role in Income Protection (IP) conversations.

Two-thirds (69%) of advisers say added value services help them explain or recommend IP, including 30% who say they help significantly and 38% who say they help somewhat. Only 8% say these services do not help at all. When advisers are asked which services are most helpful, access-led support stands

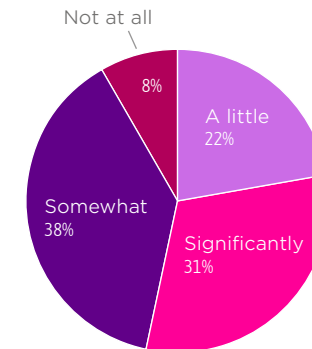
out. Virtual GP access is cited by 60%, followed by rapid access to physiotherapy or musculoskeletal support (50%) and mental health support (35%). Recovery and return-to-work services also feature strongly, indicating that advisers value support that helps clients before and during periods of absence.

Overall, adviser insight closely mirrors consumer responses, reinforcing added value services as a practical and credible way to strengthen engagement with IP.

### Which Added Value Services do you find most helpful when explaining or recommending IP to clients?



### To what extent do IP Added Value Services, such as early intervention, rehabilitation, mental health support & physio, help you explain/recommend IP?



**Added value services help 69% of advisers recommend IP**

# Overcoming assumptions



## Clive Mayne

Director and founder, CIExpert

*“Can we inspire true collaboration to improve understanding and grow protection?”*

If Critical Thinking 24 exposed widespread misunderstanding, Critical Thinking 26 reveals something even more sobering: the scale of confusion across protection products is greater than many of us imagined. Awareness of Income Protection and Critical Illness Cover remains weak, and confusion between the two only deepens misunderstanding.

It would be easy to feel discouraged. Tackling awareness across the entire market is a formidable undertaking. Yet the success of the “Single is Best” campaign reminds us all that meaningful change does not require revolution everywhere at once. It requires focus, persistence and the courage to challenge existing norms. We must also respond to a changing environment. A growing population of renters, modern and less predictable working patterns, later retirement and an NHS under visible strain all demand a shift in dialogue. The

old mortgage-led narrative is no longer sufficient. Protection must speak to income resilience, health uncertainty and long-term financial security, not simply home ownership. Advisers remain the most powerful educational force in our industry. When equipped with clearer insight into consumer drivers, assumptions can be challenged and behaviour can shift. We have seen it happen.

This research shows that younger generations are not disengaged; they are receptive to longer-term thinking, to retirement-linked framing and to broader health support when it is clearly explained. Yet tensions remain. Whilst many consumers assume Income Protection is primarily for the self-employed, advisers tell us that self-employed clients are often the hardest group to place, given variable income and product constraints. Market needs and product realities are misaligned. The opportunity, therefore, is not simply to increase awareness, but

to improve articulation and adaptation. Menu-style solutions allow Critical Illness Cover and Income Protection to complement rather than compete, enlarging the scope of protection rather than forcing a choice between products.

The Critical Thinking Ambassador programme has itself been inspiring. Competitors from across the market have united for a shared purpose: to grow the size of the cake rather than argue over the size of the slice. That spirit of collaboration clearly demonstrates that when evidence is clear, collective progress is achievable.

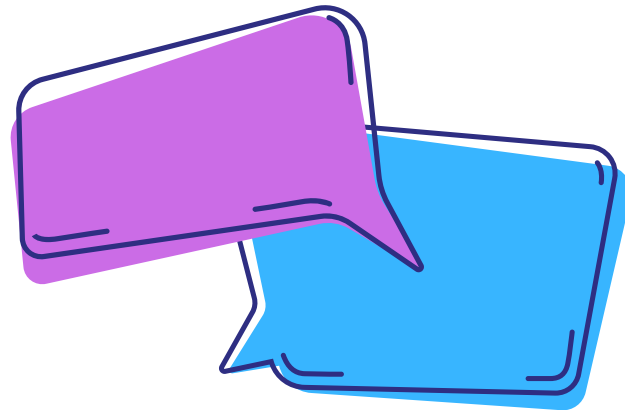
The challenges are significant. But the tools are in our hands: insight, evidence and the confidence to move beyond long-standing defaults. If we are prepared to act, the opportunity is not incremental change, but meaningful evolution in how protection is understood and valued.



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# *Critical Thinking*

from CIEXPERT