

[Save our banks](#)

Communities across Scotland, particular in our rural areas, are rightly concerned about the impact the decision by RBS to close branches, including in some cases the last branch in the community, will have on local businesses, employees, the elderly and vulnerable and all those who need access to banking services.

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Author:

[Good Christmas news for animals](#)

I was delighted to see the government wants to improve the lot of young pets by tightening controls on breeding and selling kittens and puppies.

The government wishes to ensure that all dog breeders are licensed and only sell animals they have bred themselves. They need to keep young dogs and cats with their mothers for at least eight weeks before sale. They plan a better clampdown on smuggling animals, and on breeding pets with genetic problems. The law will be strengthened to offer more protection to the animals.

Like many of my constituents I want to see pets treated well, and to ensure they are bred and sold by decent local businesses that care about them. I have lobbied for higher standards and voted to end the use of tamed wild animals in the circus.

[UK growth rate revised up](#)

Once again this week we have seen the UK growth rate revised up, both for 2016 and for 2017. I drew attention to the strange downgrade of 2016 from 2% to 1.8% in the official figures at the time and queried it. Now I see they have put it back up to 1.9% so far. There never was a shred of evidence that the referendum vote led to any loss of output growth in the second half of 2016.

The latest figures for the five years to end 2016 make interesting comparisons. Top of the pack was the USA at 13.1%, followed closely by the UK at 12.7%. Germany was the best of the larger continentals, at 10.8%, followed

by France at 6.1% with Italy actually down by 1.8%. In 2016 with half the year after the vote the UK was the top performer of these countries.

The UK this year is likely to finish the year at a higher rate than many forecasts. There have been various reports of how our growth rate is now the slowest of the G7 but this looks likely to be untrue and has definitely been based on unduly gloomy figures. It is the case as I have pointed out that the tax increases on property and cars have had an adverse impact on sales and activity of these items, the official concerns about diesel cars in particular have depressed sales substantially and the Bank is seeking to reduce consumer and car loans. None of this has anything to do with Brexit.

[A budget for equality](#)

Derek Mackay has announced the Scottish Government's budget plans for the year ahead. [You can read a quick summary of the budget here.](#)

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Author:

[More money for local hospitals to deal with winter pressures](#)

The government has announced up to £1.71 m extra cash for the Royal Berks, and up to £2.56m for Frimley to deal with pressures of demand this winter.

I am pleased they have made this announcement before Christmas, as I wish to see our local hospitals properly staffed and financed.