

UK growth accelerated in the fourth quarter of last year

The fourth quarter saw UK growth speed up to 0.7% for the three months. The quarterly pattern last year according to the ONS was 0.2% in Q1, 0.6% in each of Quarters 2 and 3, and 0.7% in Q4. The ONS says this amounts to 1.8% growth for the year as a whole, though the four quarters as reported gives you a figure of 2.1%. What is clear from these figures is the economy grew faster after the Brexit vote than before by a decent margin, the opposite of the official and expert forecasts at the time.

As the ONS rightly said “In the fourth quarter the UK experienced the strongest arte of growth among European groupings and G7 countries”. Let’s hope the Treasury adjust their forecasts for our economy in the Budget statement, as their recent forecasts have been far too low.

Lords pass Brexit Bill unanimously

Parliament has now spoken. A large majority for Brexit in the Commons is now matched by a unanimous vote in the Lords.

The Supreme Court has succeeded in delaying the letter but not in stopping it. As I thought at the time of the discussions on the Supreme Court decision it is the view of Parliament we should send the letter. If it had not been Parliament would have said so and voted accordingly prior to the Court decision.

I expect the Lords to approve the Bill at third reading in a similar way. It would be odd indeed if they changed their minds after yesterdays important vote.

Design and use of UK airspace consultation

The Government is currently consulting on proposals to:

- Support the reform of airspace, thereby maximising the economic and social benefits of aviation

- Minimise the negative local impacts of aviation

Ministers are seeking comment on proposals to update policy on the management of UK airspace including:

- The role of an Independent Commission on Civil Aviation Noise to ensure noise impacts are openly considered
- Providing industry with the ability to assess noise impacts and guidance to help them manage change more effectively
- Bringing compensation policy for airspace changes in line with policy on changes to aviation infrastructure
- Greater flexibility for London's major airports, so they can adapt noise management to the needs of their local communities

The consultation can be found here: <http://bit.ly/2m3y2Hj>. It closes on 25 May 2017.

UK public finances are OK

The latest figures for public spending, tax revenue and borrowing published yesterday showed more progress in reducing the running deficit. Total state borrowing adjusted for the bonds the Bank of England has bought in remains at a moderate level, around 65% of GDP.

The main reason new borrowing is reducing is the continued good growth in tax receipts. In the period April 2016 to January 2017 tax revenues were 5% higher than in the same period of the previous financial year. This reflects the continued growth of the UK economy. Self assessment income tax receipts and corporation tax receipts showed especially strong growth based on improved business activity and investment prospects.

This increase in tax allowed an increase of 2% in public spending and a reduction in the rate of new borrowing. In the financial year to date central government current spending is up by 1.4% and local government current spending up by 10.2%. Central government net investment rose by 6%. (ONS official figures). There are some areas where it may be necessary to spend more.

It is still a good idea to spend money wisely. Ending our EU contributions is an obvious improvement to make. There are issues with poor value for money in parts of the overseas aid budget. There are more opportunities to help people into work, to cut the benefit bill by substituting earnings from work. There are many efficiency improvements to be made in areas like railway spending, which is running at high levels.

The government also needs to be careful over tax rates. Taxing income may be a necessity, but it is not wise to tax working and investing too heavily as it can do considerable economic damage and prove self defeating. The budget is an ideal time to review current rates and ask which taxes should be lower in order to raise more revenue as and when economic growth delivers more cash.

The Forest School

I was sad to receive a copy of the resignation letter of the Head teacher of the Forest this week. I wish her well in retirement and understand her wish to pass the leadership of the school on to someone else.

In the letter she draws attention to the current level of the Forest budget. I agree with those in Wokingham who would like our schools to have bigger budgets, as they are at the bottom of the league tables for receiving public money. I campaigned on the Conservative party Manifesto in 2015 that proposed a move to fairer funding in this Parliament. I worked with MPs from other parts of the country in the previous Parliament who shared the problem of relatively low levels of financial support for their schools. This Parliament I have urged successive Secretaries of State to press on with putting in a suitable scheme that rebalances the cash going to each school so that those getting least are better treated.

The present Secretary of State has promised to introduce such a scheme and is consulting on the details. I have urged her to give more to the poorly financed schools. I have also asked for further transitional relief. Some was awarded in recent years as the Coalition government agreed with me and the MP Group making the case for fairer funding.

I did have a meeting at the Forest to discuss budgets and to suggest ways to attract more money. The immediate pressures have been created by a shortfall of pupils applying to the school, which the Forest attributed to the opening of Bohunt. The main sums of money are given to schools on a per capita basis to cover the costs of each pupil. This will remain true under the new funding scheme, so it will be important for a school that wants a decent budget to recruit pupils up to its capacity. With more pupils and more income it is possible to offer a wider range of subjects and to have more equipment and staff. If fewer pupils attend then it does mean fewer staff and may also entail a narrower range of subjects.