

British Chambers of Commerce: Full reaction to Spring Budget 2017

Giving his full reaction to the Budget, Dr Adam Marshall, Director General of the British Chambers of Commerce (BCC), said:

“Businesses had been advised to expect minimal change, rather than a blockbuster Budget, and Philip Hammond did not disappoint.

“Short-term support for firms hardest-hit by business rates rises will be welcomed, along with commitments to technical education, digital connectivity, easier R&D tax credits, and a one-year delay to digital tax reporting for the very smallest firms. Conversely, hikes to dividend taxes and national insurance for the self-employed will be viewed far less positively by entrepreneurs.

“While businesspeople appreciate a steady hand on the tiller, the government is sending mixed signals by holding investment largely steady at precisely the time that it is exhorting British businesses to double down. More needs to be done in the coming months to improve infrastructure, promote international trade, and encourage lagging business investment to ensure the UK is Brexit-ready.”

On Business Rates, the top campaign priority for Chambers of Commerce at the Spring Budget, Marshall said:

“The business communities hardest-hit by this year’s business rates revaluation will breathe a little easier thanks to the Chancellor’s decision to offer a package of transitional reliefs.

“We now challenge councils across England to use every penny of the new funding announced by the Chancellor to offer relief to the hardest-hit businesses in their areas, without excuses and without delay.

“However welcome, measures that mitigate the short-term impact of business rate rises are little more than a sticking plaster. The radical changes needed to improve the broken business rates system will have to wait for another day. The campaign for radical reform – and an end to punishing levels of business property tax to ensure the Treasury raises enough to fund local services – continues.”

“The decision not to bring forward the switch in indexation from RPI to CPI will cost firms billions – bills they can ill-afford when taken together with other policy costs like the Apprenticeship Levy, pensions auto-enrolment and higher tax on insurance premiums.

“The government had an opportunity to re-visit the detail of reform to the appeals system but has not addressed the serious concerns ratepayers have. This will mean that more businesses seeking to correct an erroneous bill could go without redress.

“In the longer-term, fundamental change is needed, including stripping plant and machinery from rates assessments that does so much to discourage business investment.

On investment in technical skills, Adam Marshall, said:

“Business communities across the country tell us that improved technical education and stronger workplace experience are needed to help them fill the skills gaps they face.

“These announcements represent an important step in the right direction over the coming years. Ensuring that businesses of all sizes, and in all regions, have an input into the design of the new system will be crucial to its success.

“Business, educational institutions and government need to work together over the coming years to ensure that parity of esteem between academic and technical education is achieved. The cultural and funding bias towards academic routes that pushes young people toward A-levels and university still needs to be addressed.”

On ‘returnships’, Adam Marshall, said:

“Encouraging people back to work is crucial for providing businesses with the skills and talent that they need. Companies across the UK are facing skills shortages, and will welcome efforts to help those who have taken career breaks get back into business.”

On international trade, Mike Spicer, Director of Research and Economics, said:

“There was a noticeable and disappointing absence of any new support for exporters, or measures to encourage international trade in this Budget. As we begin the Brexit process, it’s more important than ever to get UK businesses trading their goods and services with the world. The government must do more to incentivise and promote companies to be ambitious and trade to new markets.”

On research and development, Mike Spicer, said:

“Reducing the cost of accessing the tax credit will encourage investment in research & development which should boost the UK economy at a time when productivity growth remains weak. However, to ensure that UK firms remain competitive on the global stage it is vital that greater investment in research and development is supported by retention of our intellectual property.”

On digital infrastructure, Fiona Krasniqi, digital spokesperson at the BCC, said:

“We welcome the announcement on full-fibre broadband connection vouchers as businesses need faster and more reliable connections, that also offer impressive upload and download speeds. The governments focus must now be on

rural areas and existing business parks that still do not have superfast connections. The private sector will invest where there is a demonstrable return on investment and we would urge that the scheme is communicated effectively to the business community and providers.”

On 5G strategy, Fiona Krasniqi, said:

“We have long-called for the UK to lead the world in developing 5G technology, so we are pleased to see the groundwork for this finally begin with the new National 5G Innovation Network. It is positive to hear that strategy will explore how to improve coverage on road and rail routes as businesspeople must be able to work successfully and without interruption whilst on the move.”

On the Making Tax Digital scheme, Suren Thiru, Head of Economics, said:

“The temporary deferral of making tax digital for firms below the VAT threshold is a welcome step. However, while this will help to ease some of the administrative burden for our smallest businesses, there continues to be serious reservations about HMRC’s ability to deliver such a major undertaking. HMRC must ensure that the move to digital tax accounts does not create new burdens for businesses, and must work closely with the business community, accountants and other stakeholders on their plans for implementation.”

On changes to the tax system for the self-employed, Suren Thiru, said:

“Many entrepreneurs and sole traders will be disappointed to see significant rises to their National Insurance bills over the coming years. Ministers need to ensure that these business people, who make a significant contribution to the economy, also get the recognition and benefits that correspond to their contribution.”

On the reduction of the dividend allowance, Suren Thiru said:

“Whilst the reduction is relatively small, this will come as a blow to many small business owners. Alongside changes to the tax system for the self-employed, the government risks undermining the UK’s entrepreneurial spirit.”

Ends

Notes to editors:

Spokespeople are available for interview, please call the press office.

The British Chambers of Commerce (BCC) sits at the heart of a powerful network of 52 Accredited Chambers of Commerce across the UK, representing thousands of businesses of all sizes and within all sectors. Our Global Business Network connects exporters with nearly 40 markets around the world. For more information, visit:

Media contacts:

Orla Hennessy – Press and Communications Officer

020 7654 5813 / 07825746812

Press release: M5 travel advice in Gloucestershire as Cheltenham Festival gets under starter's orders

Highways England has advised drivers using the M5 in Gloucestershire to plan ahead and allow extra travelling time during next week's world famous Cheltenham Festival.

The popular event runs from Tuesday, 14 March until Friday, 17 March with more than 200,000 people expected to attend throughout the week.

The Festival concludes with Friday's Gold Cup which can see more than 65,000 people attend on a single day. The busiest times on the roads are expected to be between 9.30am until 12.30pm each day. Queues are likely on the approach to M5 junction 10 southbound, and on all approaches to M5 junction 11.

Gareth Price, Highways England emergency planning officer for the South West, said:

Junctions 10 and 11 of the M5 are like to be busy on these days, particularly Friday, 17 March.

Our aim is to keep the Highways England network running whilst keeping road users safe and informed. We advise all drivers to check our traffic and travel information channels, set off early and allow plenty of time for their journeys.

Highways England provides up-to-date traffic information [via its website](#), via Twitter @highwaysSWEST, local and national radio travel bulletins, electronic road signs and mobile platforms.

Press release: Public exhibitions for A500 Etruria widening

Drivers, business owners and residents are invited to find out more about plans to widen a section of the road that connects the M6 with the city of Stoke-on-Trent.

Highways England is developing a scheme to widen the A500 from two to three lanes between Porthill (A5271) and Wolstanton (A527), helping to reduce congestion and improve journey times.

Highways England will be working in collaboration with Stoke-on-Trent City Council to ensure the scheme will tie in with the local authority's proposed improvements at the A500 Wolstanton junction and the associated access into the Etruria Valley site.

Highways England project manager, Malcolm Mitson, said:

This scheme will improve journeys for people using the A500 by easing the flow of traffic and reducing congestion, making journey times more reliable. And increasing capacity with a third lane will support the growth of the local economy as well as improve safety.

It is proposed the speed limit will be lowered from 70mph to 50mph, for safety and consistency with other parts of the route in urban areas.

It's also proposed to close the public footpaths that run alongside the A500, instead providing an alternative footpath/cycle way at a safer distance from the main carriageway, as well as safe pedestrian access to cross the road at Porthill junction.

The scheme, part of the government's £15.2bn road investment strategy, will take approximately 18 months to complete, with construction starting by spring 2020 and opening to traffic autumn 2021.

People attending the exhibitions will be able to see plans of the proposals, find out more about the scheme and ask questions of the project team.

Highways England will be attending events being run in conjunction with Stoke-on-Trent City Council on:

- Wednesday 15 March, 9am to 3pm, at Middleport Medical Centre, Newport Lane, Stoke-on-Trent, ST6 3NP
- Thursday 16 March, 2pm to 8pm, at Bradwell Lodge Community Centre, Bradwell Lane, Porthill, Newcastle-under-Lyme, ST5 8PS

General enquiries

Members of the public should contact the Highways England customer contact centre on 0300 123 5000.

Media enquiries

Journalists should contact the Highways England press office on 0844 693 1448 and use the menu to speak to the most appropriate press officer.

Mark Drakeford responds to the UK Government's Spring Budget

The Spring Budget included £149m of additional revenue funding between 2017-18 and 2019-20 and an extra £52m of capital funding for Wales between 2017-18 and 2020-21.

Finance Secretary Mark Drakeford:

"Ahead of the Budget, I wrote to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to outline my concerns about the UK Government's intention to press ahead with £3.5bn cuts to public spending in 2019-20. We still have no clarity about these looming cuts, which could result in our Budget being reduced by £175m.

"The UK Government's efficiency review will not report until the autumn. I am not prepared to wait until then to find out the impact of more cuts to our Budget. I am seeking urgent assurances from the UK Government that we will discuss early findings well before the autumn.

"In these uncertain times, we have been clear about the need to end austerity and invest in our valued public services and the economy.

"Additional revenue funding is always needed against the backdrop of continued cuts to our Budget as a result of the UK Government's pursuit of the damaging policy of austerity.

"Since 2010, our Budget has been cut by 8% in real terms. Today's Spring Budget was yet another missed opportunity to end austerity.

"Despite the ongoing cuts to our funding, we have prioritised funding for social care in Wales and spending health and social care is 6% higher in Wales than in England. I'm pleased the

Chancellor has followed the Welsh Government's lead and recognised the importance of social care to the health service.

"In Wales, we have also acted to support those small businesses which have been disproportionately affected by the independent Valuation Office Agency's revaluation. We have put in place £20m of targeted support for 2017-18, on top of our Small Business Rates Relief scheme.

"The Welsh Government's Cabinet will now decide how we maximise the additional revenue funding and the very modest increase to our capital budget to support our investment priorities."

"We have said for some time that the Swansea Bay Region city deal is ready to be signed – we fully recognise the importance of the deal and the positive long-term economic benefits it will bring across the region. It is disappointing the Chancellor didn't use this Budget to bring the deal to its conclusion immediately."

Press release: Work completed early as part of the A12 becomes the A47

The change sees what was the A12 between Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft now become a part of the A47. This ensures that the A47 is a continuous trunk road from Peterborough to Lowestoft, while the A12 is a continuous trunk road between Ipswich and London.

Work started in mid-January and was expected to be completed tomorrow (Wednesday 8 March), but was actually completed last Wednesday (1 March). Most of the affected signage has had patches stuck on detailing that the road is now the A47 rather than A12, while signage that needed replacing now displays the new road name.

This has delivered on one of the commitments in the Government's Road Investment Strategy, which will see a record £15 billion invested in England's motorways and trunk roads, with £3 billion of that in the East of England.

Highways England project sponsor Steve Cox said:

Highways England is committed to ensuring that our work causes minimal disruption for drivers across the East of England, and we are pleased to have been able to complete this work early to ensure that is the case. This work now ensures that both the A47 and A12

are continuous trunk roads connecting our important towns and cities.

The renumbering follows recent improvement work to the A47 Acle Straight as the road passes through The Broads, which saw improvements to traffic signs and road markings at the A1064 roundabout, Wherryman's Way and the Halvergate junction.

It also comes ahead of consultations into major upgrades elsewhere on the A47 that will be start in 2020, with a series of consultations into these set for the public to share their views at to be launched shortly. These works will include:

- dualling of the A47 between Norwich and Dereham
- improving the A11 and A47 Thickthorn junction
- dualling the A47 between Norwich and the Acle Straight
- improving two junctions at Great Yarmouth, including reconstructing the Vauxhall roundabout

Martin Wilby, chairman of the Norfolk County Council's Environment, Transport and Development Committee, said:

We support the work that Highways England has recently been carrying out in the east of the county and, like many people in Norfolk, are looking forward to their forthcoming consultation on the major improvements they intend to make to the A47. These upgrades to the A47 will make a huge difference to the county and its prosperity, and we'll be working with Highways England to do all we can to ensure they can get underway as soon as possible.

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