association for public service excellence

Public finances: Pre-budget analysis on investment and growth

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1 Introduction

On Wednesday this week, (26 November 2025) the Chancellor of the Exchequer, The Rt Hon Rachel Reeves MP, will present the second Budget of Keir Starmer's Labour government. Like the 2025 Spending Review, the Spring Statement and last year's Autumn Budget, most of the commentary on it in the media and elsewhere has focused on balancing the budget in short-term.

This briefing takes a different perspective. It looks at policies and initiatives affecting the public finances over the longer-term. These include innovations in the public finances, both those introduced by the current Government, and those introduced under previous Governments and maintained (and in many cases, significantly extended) by the current one. They also include changes of focus and culture within Government, such as a shift to preventing societal problems rather than simply responding to them, and a concerted investment in capital infrastructure.

2 Missions and key focus of spend and investment

The government made it clear from the time of its election that its programme would be based on a set of "missions". These were referred to in the Autumn Budget 2024, but they were set out most comprehensively in the Government's Plan for Change, published on 5 December 2024. The six missions are:

- **Strong Foundations** – a stable economy, secure borders and national security.
- **Kickstarting Economic Growth** – Raising living standards in every part of the United Kingdom and rebuilding Britain.
- **An NHS Fit for the Future** – ending hospital backlogs.
- **Safer Streets** – putting police back on the beat.
- **Break Down Barriers to Opportunity** – giving children the best start in life.
- **Make Britain a Clean Energy Superpower** – securing home-grown energy.

These became the focus of the Spending Review (SR), as set out in the press release launching the process.

Budget 2024 and Spending Review 2025 made it clear what the Government's priorities were for public spending and investment:

- Housing – especially energy-efficient homes and including military accommodation
- Transport and economic infrastructure
- Skills and employment support
- Support for children, both inside and outside schools
- The NHS
- Other measures to support growth across the UK's regions.

3 Overview of fiscal planning

When the Labour Government took office, it decided to carry out fiscal planning in two "phases". The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) had a significant role in both of these phases, particularly through the projections of the public finances made in its twice-yearly Economic and Fiscal Outlook (EFO).

Phase 1 was mainly about dealing with urgent issues but also making the changes that were needed immediately to prepare the ground for SR 2025 and the main period of the Parliament. Phase 1 culminated in the Autumn Budget, which included figures on the public finances and the economy from October 2024's EFO. It set out spending totals for 2025-26.

It also set out a new "fiscal mandate" and surrounding "fiscal framework", in a document titled "A strong fiscal framework". This stated the Government's two fiscal rules:

- **Stability Rule**: to ensure that in each fiscal event for the next two years, the current budget is forecast to be "in balance" by 2029-30 at latest – that is, resource spending is met from taxes and other revenues (with a surplus or deficit of no more than 0.5% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP)). Thereafter, the current budget should always be in balance by the third year of the rolling forecast period;

- **Investment Rule**: to ensure that in each fiscal event for the next two years, net financial debt (Public Sector Net Financial Liabilities) is forecast to be falling as a proportion of GDP by 2029-30 at latest. Thereafter, this ratio should always be falling by the third year of the rolling forecast period.

It also committed the Government to improving fiscal management "by monitoring a wide range of metrics". A draft of the updated Charter for Budget Responsibility, which sets the OBR's remit and governs its activities, was also published alongside the Budget.

Phase 2 was about longer-term reforms to implement the missions and tackle more entrenched problems; this incorporated the Spring Statement 2025 and culminated in SR 2025.

The Spring Statement contained some policy measures – both in relation to spending and receipts – and incorporated figures from the March Economic and Fiscal Outlook (EFO). It largely set the total revenue and capital envelopes for the SR. The revenue envelope changed very little before the SR, but there were some significant changes to the capital envelope, as explained in the section 'Public Financial Institutions and Financial Transactions' below.

The SR determined how these envelopes were broken down between departments: it set out departmental spending totals for revenue finance (RDEL) until 2028-29 and for capital finance (CDEL) until 2029-30. It explained the considerations leading to these settlements, including the major programmes and reforms the departments are leading, and how these contribute to the Government's missions.

4 Public finance innovations

4.1 Public Financial Institutions and Financial Transactions

In *UK infrastructure: A 10 Year Strategy* the Government lists five "growth-focused public financial institutions". Three of these existed in some form before the current Government was elected:

- **National Wealth Fund**. This was launched as the UK Infrastructure Bank in 2021. It could then invest across five sectors. Following a commitment by the new Government, it has now been reshaped as the National Wealth Fund and is able to invest more broadly, with a purpose of driving growth across the UK and the transition to net zero.

- **British Business Bank**. This is a development bank wholly owned by HM Government. Probably its most prominent role was delivering the Coronavirus support schemes during the pandemic. It supports smaller businesses to get needed capital to start up, to scale up and to stay in the UK. It has supported over 100,000 entrepreneurs with Start Up Loans.

- **UK Export Finance**. Its mandate, as expressed in the infrastructure strategy, is "to ensure no viable UK export fails for lack of finance, doing so sustainably and at no net cost to the taxpayer".

The other two are new ones:

- **National Housing Bank**. This is being established as part of Homes England. It will support developers with a broader range of finance products than Homes England has previously been able to offer.

- **Great British Energy (including Great British Energy – Nuclear)**. This will develop, build, operate and own clean energy projects across the UK, as well as investing in existing projects and supporting clean energy supply chains.

These institutions provide loans, equity and guarantees (mainly to the private sector, although, for example, National Wealth Fund loans are available to local authorities at low rates), in ways which "crowd in" private capital. Taken together, the available funding these five institutions have for this is increasing very significantly. The new Government has announced an increase of £56.1bn, taking the total available funding, or "capacity", to £153.4bn.

Slightly over half of the new capacity is being provided as Financial Transactions. When the Government or wider public sector provides a loan to the private sector, it receives in return an obligation to provide it with future payments. More broadly, the public sector can acquire or sell loans, equities or other "financial assets" to the private sector; any such transaction is termed a financial transaction (FT).

FTs took place before the current Government was elected, but the new Government has completely reformed the financial and regulatory regime governing them. When an FT took place under the existing regime, the payment to the private sector was added to the primary measure of debt, the Public Sector Net Debt (PSND). However, the corresponding asset was not accounted for in PSND. The new primary measure of debt, Public Sector Net Financial Liabilities, on the other hand, nets off the value of the asset.

Alongside the Autumn Budget 2024, which introduced the change of debt measure, the Government published a new Financial Transaction Control Framework which governs their use. The Control Framework was summarised in the document *A Strong Fiscal Framework* which accompanied the Budget, and the Control Framework was updated in the Spring Statement 2025. At this point, a “checklist” was also published, giving Government departments an understanding of how the Treasury would assess bids for new FTs.

During Phase 2, the Government decided to use FTs in some new ways, such as support for private sector homebuilders – a novel, high-value way for the Government to invest in house building. This particular support totals £4.8bn, of a total of £9.6bn of new FTs identified in the Spending Review (beyond what was in the Spring Statement).

The SR also announced an increase of £1bn in the FT capacities of devolved governments through the Barnett Formula.

Between the Autumn Budget and the Spring Statement, the forecast for total capital departmental budgets fell for the first half of the Parliament and rose for the second half. The new uses of FTs in the SR are forecast to increase these budgets even more towards the end of the Parliament. This has allowed the government to reprofile some of the rest of the spend, bringing it forward to 2026-27.

Consequently, capital departmental spend will be 3.1% higher in 2026-27 than set out in the Budget, 2.8% higher in 2027-28, 4.7% higher in 2028-29 and 5.4% higher in 2029-30.

4.2 Social impact investing and the Better Futures Fund

In both the Autumn Budget 2024 and the SR, the Government announced plans to develop a social impact investment vehicle “to support mission delivery and tackle complex social problems”. The government wants to capitalise on the willingness of philanthropists, social enterprises, institutional investors, local authorities and the wider “impact economy” to invest for social return. A Social Impact Investment Advisory Group was created in January to consider how such investment could best be unlocked.

The result was the Better Futures Fund, launched in July 2025. This will provide £500m Government funding to support “struggling and vulnerable families and children” to access “better education, a safe home, and the caring supportive environment they need to flourish”. But crucially, it plans to raise an equal amount from local government, social investors and philanthropists, providing a total investment of £1bn over ten years.

4.3 The Green Financing Programme

The Green Financing Framework was published in June 2021. This sets out the parameters for the Green Financing Programme, in which funding is mainly raised from "green gilts", but also from NS&I's retail Green Savings Bonds. This funds expenditure to "tackle climate change, rebuild natural ecosystems and support jobs in green sectors". The SR says that the Government plans to raise £10bn through green gilts in 2025-26. This is almost exactly the amount raised through green gilts in 2023-24 (£9.9bn, with a further £0.9bn from NS&I bonds).

4.4 Green Book reforms and place-based business cases

The Green Book is an internal HM Treasury document. It has been around for decades and has been revised many times. It sets out the process for assessing different options for achieving a particular policy objective. This involves considering the options from five different viewpoints ("dimensions"):

- Strategic dimension
- Economic dimension
- Commercial dimension
- Financial dimension
- Management dimension

and drawing up a long list, then a short list, before selecting the preferred option. There are supplementary and related guidance documents, on subjects such as valuing infrastructure spend, assessing the impacts of crime, risk management and ensuring high quality analysis.

A review in 2020 of whether the process favoured London and the South-East found no evidence of bias, but that it could undermine "levelling up" policies. Despite subsequent revision of the Green Book and improvements to appraisal practice, concerns have continued, resulting in a new review being launched in January 2025.

The actions that are consequently being taken include:

- **Introducing "place-based business cases"**, which business cases for individual interventions can then refer to. This is to seek the maximum benefit from a number of interacting interventions in a particular geographical location.

- **Reviewing the "Social Time Preference Rate"** or "discount rate" and improving Green Book guidance on transformational change. The discount rate implements the principle that a short-term return on investment is more useful than the same return at a later date. These actions are to tackle a concern that the process consequently gives preference to short-term, marginal change over long-term, transformational change.

- **Clarifying the use of Benefit-Cost Ratios BCRs**. The review found that these were over-emphasised in appraisals, with reports of 'BCR thresholds' being used, which are not endorsed by the Treasury.

- **Shortening the Green Book and its supplementary guidance**.
- **Clarifying the level of detail that is proportionate to different business cases**.
- **Providing more support to regional and local government for preparing business cases**, including training and accreditation and more secondments from central to local government.
- **Publishing all business cases for major projects and programmes** on the Business case publications: collection, to make it easier to assess potential bias and allow business case writers to see existing examples. (Guidance on what should be published was issued alongside the SR, but since the page was launched, no business cases have yet been published.)
- **Inviting Mayoral Strategic Authorities to join the Treasury's Green Book Network Steering Group**.

4.5 Transformation Fund

The Spring Statement announced the creation of a £3.25bn fund to "drive efficiencies across government and save money later in the Parliament". The SR set out what this was to be spent on. The measures listed included a few announced in the Spring Statement, on fostering, probation and "Frontier AI exemplars", as well as allocations for devolved governments through the Barnett Formula. The rest were grouped under three headings:

- Digital
- Prevention
- Productivity and efficiency.

These themes are covered in the next section. The spending of the £3.25bn is to be split between three years: £250m in 2025-26, £2bn in 2026-27 and £1bn in 2027-28.

Similarly, Autumn Budget 2024 announced a Reform and Innovation Fund, worth £165m in 2025-26, to "support the development of a new approach to improving public services". The projects this was to be spent on in 2025-26 include foster carer recruitment and planning reform. SR 2025 stated that this "new approach" is being taken forward by the Cabinet Office in its Test, Learn and Grow initiative – see overleaf.

5 Changes to working practices in Whitehall and beyond – driving growth and recycling savings

The Government's focus on its missions has led it to set up various bodies within Whitehall and teams of advisors, including a Growth Delivery Unit, a 'mission control' team for clean power and a Mission Delivery Unit. (See Institute for Government's Whitehall Monitor 2025 for more.)

5.1 Value for money, efficiency and digital technologies

Autumn Budget 2024 also announced the creation of an Office for Value for Money, a time-limited body, to lead work on improving efficiency and creating a cost-conscious culture within Whitehall.

This is a key theme of the opening chapter of SR 2025. Related themes in this chapter are:

- Improved use of digital systems and technologies, including more data-driven decision-making and use of Artificial Intelligence (AI);

- Improving skills and making Government leaner and more community-oriented.

The effort to improve efficiency is demonstrated in the Departmental Efficiency Delivery Plans, a document published alongside the SR. This sets out the plans each department has to reduce its costs. Much of the projected saving is based on improving digital systems/AI and reducing contracting costs. However, there are some other notable sources of savings:

- The NHS has the 'NHS Productivity Plan', which is backed by an increase in technology and transformation spend of nearly 50%. NHS productivity has already grown by 0.6% per year in the period 1995/96-2018-19; the aim is to increase this to 2% per year over the SR period. This would create net efficiencies of £2.8bn in 2026-27, £5.8bn in 2027-28 and £8.95bn in 2028-29 – which would be reinvested in the NHS, as part of the 10 Year Health Plan. A reduction in agency spend alone could result in significantly savings, given that this has saved nearly £1bn in 2024-25.

- The OBR forecasts that £9.6bn can be saved by 2030 by tackling fraud and error in the welfare system.

- SR 2025 sets out reforms to the asylum system which it forecasts will save at least £1bn per year by 2028-29 (compared with 2024-25).

- Efficiencies from contracting and improved digital systems extend beyond Whitehall to bodies such as Network Rail and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA).

The digital transformation of public services is being led by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) and strategic oversight will be provided by the Digital Inter-Ministerial Group. A blueprint for modern digital government was published in January 2025, with SR 2025 promising a Government Digital and AI Roadmap this autumn.

5.2 Trialling new ways of working and risks to the public finances

Many of the changes to how services are to be delivered are being led by the Cabinet Office. The department wants to see services designed around people – taking a "no wrong door" approach of letting people access services in the ways that suit them. Ministers recognise both that there is a need to prove new approaches will save money and that there is some inherent risk in trying new ways of working. Consequently, the Cabinet Office has compared and contrasted the experience of introducing Universal Credit with how disruptive technology companies operate, and has come up with the idea of "Test, learn and grow". It is essentially to do a "patch test" for a new policy in a small area, make any tweaks necessary and then expand it to a wider area, while continually monitoring and making adjustments throughout the rollout.

This approach is consciously in contrast with mistakes made in the past, in which either:

- A "big bang" approach to has been taken to reform, where everything is risked on everything going right first time; or
- Pilots have launched with a big fanfare, then not followed through on.

The greatest risks to the public finances are subject to an assurance mechanism which involves both the Government and the OBR. In its *Fiscal Risks and Sustainability Report* (FRS), the OBR examines these greatest risks. The Government has one year to respond to each report. The September 2024 FRS looked at climate change damage, long-term health trends and long-term fiscal projections. The Government gave its response in June 2025, alongside SR 2025. FRS 2025 was published the following month, and looked at climate change, the public sector balance sheet, and pensions.

5.3 Investment in infrastructure

The Government published UK infrastructure: A 10 Year Strategy on 19 June, to provide a single consistent, coherent, overarching strategy for investment over ten years. The amount to be spent is fixed over the SR period, after this it will rise with inflation – with a commitment that the Government will invest at least £725bn over the full decade. The strategy mentions some individual projects, but does not provide a list; its role is strategic, to provide confidence that the Government is planning adequately for the long term and clarity about its direction of travel.

The National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority (NISTA) will oversee individual projects and programmes, mapping them out in its Infrastructure Pipeline micro-website. This is "a dynamic online tool, developed with input from industry stakeholders". The "first iteration" contains 775 projects/programmes, with £150bn investment in these planned by the end of 2026/27, £379bn over the next 5 years and £531bn over the next ten years, all of these figures being in 2024/25 prices. These include (in descending order of scale of investment): energy, health and social care, transport, waste and wastewater, education and defence.

The 10-year Infrastructure Strategy explains how the Government will work with devolved governments, the importance of a spatial approach to infrastructure planning and how it envisages infrastructure unlocking regional growth.

5.4 Industrial Strategy and sector plans

The Industrial Strategy was published on 23 June. It sets out measures the Government is taking to improve the environment businesses operate in and to support UK industry. Three of its four chapters relate to policies which will affect businesses across all sectors, while the fourth relates to specific support for eight key industrial sectors. The Government has also published Sector Plans for these eight sectors.

5.5 Investment in services

There are various ways in which immediate spend on services can result in either a greater reduction in future spend or increases in future tax yields (or both). The Government has implemented at least two such policies, which have the potential to result in significant improvements in future public finances.

In recent decades, there has been a fundamental shift in the balance between taxes in and payments out, as higher proportions of the population are either out of work or working less. This is partly due to tax take from/relating to the over-65s not keeping pace with the growth in their numbers, and partly due to growing numbers of economically inactive people of working age – a long-term trend which was boosted by covid.

There is therefore a pressing need to increase the number of people in work – and ideally, in well-paid work. This is a major programme of work taking in several Government departments. It has been widely discussed throughout the media and elsewhere and this briefing is not an appropriate place to describe it in any detail. However, this briefing paper would be incomplete without mentioning it. Policies coming out of this programme include:

- Connect to Work, which helps connect local work, health and skills support. It is designed to help disabled people, people with health conditions, and those with more complex barriers find and/or retain suitable work. This includes coaching from employment specialists and job matching services, as well as embedding advisers directly within healthcare teams (such as GP surgeries and mental health services).

- Eight Youth Guarantee Trailblazers "testing innovative ways to identify young people most at risk of falling out of education, employment or training and matching them up to local training or job opportunities"

- Nine Economic Activity Trailblazers to "empower local areas to design tailored solutions that tackle the root causes of economic inactivity – such as poor mental health, low skills, and barriers like social isolation – rather than just treating the symptoms".

- Redeployment of 1,000 existing Jobcentre staff to work as Pathways to Work advisers, providing skills and employment support to people with Limited Capability for Work and Work Related Activity (LCWRA) on Universal Credit. There is no requirement on those made this offer to engage with it or to look for work.

- Targeting part of the Getting It Right First Time programme in the NHS on 20 NHS Trusts in areas with high levels of economic inactivity. This programme uses evidence-based reviews to improve patient treatment and care. The 'Further Faster 20 cohort' of Trusts focuses on enabling people to return to work, as well as reducing waiting times.

- Expanding access to NHS Talking Therapies.

- A partnership with 'Vanguard' employers to "to reshape how health issues and disabilities are managed in the workplace".

- An investigation led by former Health Secretary Alan Milburn into what's behind rising youth inactivity, with a particular focus on the impact of mental health conditions and disability.

The story of how this programme has evolved and developed can be found in the Autumn Budget 2024, the Get Britain Working White Paper, the Pathways to Work Green Paper and its outcome/Government response, the Keep Britain Working Review and the Department of Work and Pension's (DWP's) news and communications page.

Similarly, there is a pressing need to ensure that taxes owed are collected and that incorrect welfare payments are not made. This is being dealt with by hiring additional staff in DWP and HMRC.

5.6 Devolution

Finally, it is worth acknowledging that the Government's devolution agenda is changing the balance of where public finance decisions are taken, with more taken at sub-national levels, particularly by strategic authorities.

6 APSE Comment

In general, the innovations and trends in policy/financial management described above have the potential to improve the public finances markedly, if lack of public confidence does not hamper them too significantly. However, the Government seems to have yet to realise how these could be broadened out and made more systematic and consistent, and the extent to which this could unleash the country's potential. By failing to use all the tools available to it, and finding a holistic narrative, it has arguably missed chances.

For example, SR 2025, like the Spring Statement and Autumn Budget before it, had neither the figures nor the headlines that the Government would have wanted. It introduced many measures relating to investing to transform public services and the wider economy, with an eventual net benefit to the public finances. However, while the costs of these were recognised within the Spending Review figures, few of the benefits to the public purse were included.

This is due to a number of flaws in the way such benefits are assessed and make their way into fiscal projections.

While the Green Book makes clear that benefits should be accounted for (and indeed, provides a categorisation of such benefits), such an assessment is not always made and accepted by the OBR. Despite the advances in recent years in measuring such benefits of policies, this analysis does not appear to have been performed systematically or rigorously within Government. Ideally, the Treasury and the relevant department would work together to provide a relatively robust analysis of the benefits of each policy and share this analysis with the OBR. The OBR would then critique this, pointing out where significant uncertainties and/or risks remain.

An important example of where this has failed is highlighted in Box 3.2 of the March 2025 EFO. This relates to welfare policies in the Pathways to Work Green Paper. It explains that, though the direct fiscal impacts of some of them were incorporated into the forecast, other measures have not been accounted for,

"because policy parameters were not sufficiently specified or because significant aspects of the measures would be the subject of consultation".

In particular, the policy details of the £1bn funding for employment support were not specified with sufficient clarity to allow the OBR to assess the impact on labour supply. The report states,

"Once they have been finalised, we might draw on relevant evidence from previous DWP interventions to estimate the potential labour supply effects".

It must be remembered that this was an assessment carried out for the Spring Statement. No such assessment was done for the SR, arguably the more appropriate time for this to be done. (Spending Reviews – though often not classed as 'fiscal events' – can have a far greater impact on the fiscal balances than an individual Budget, so an independent forecast of the economic effects of policies is far more important. However, the March 2025 EFO remains the latest such report, with another one being produced for this week's Budget.)

Similarly, in data from March of last year, half of the 228 projects in the Government's Major Project Portfolio (then overseen by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority) had a recorded benefit of £0. This situation has improved – in this years' data (now overseen by the National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority), this has reduced to 75 out of 214, but it could probably be further improved.

Robust analysis of project/policy benefits in time for a SR, with an EFO that takes them into account, would provide a more complete, rounded picture of the fiscal prospects. Given the difficult international circumstances and the economic despondency that the Government current faces, this is sorely needed to boost confidence.

It would also allow the Government to set out how receipts and savings could be recycled into further policy measures. In theory, this could allow the Transformation Fund to become a revolving fund for improving the public sector.

It is well documented that there are more ways that the Government could invest in services and tackle pressures on them and societal problems further upstream. In particular, it could invest in reforming the social care system, including respite care, and investing more heavily in public health. This would take pressure off the NHS in a much more effective way than putting the money straight into the NHS

The improvements to the Green Book are also welcome but limited. There is a strong case for an overhaul of Government guidance on calculating the costs and benefits of proposed policies, to encourage more systematic and robust analysis of the benefits. Even within the proposals for place-based business cases, a key point is missed. A suite of interventions focused on one geographic locality may have benefits for other areas. For example, if there are significant migrations flows into London and the Southeast from areas outside those regions, interventions may reduce these flows, which may take pressure off services there.

Investment in infrastructure in the UK has long been below that in many comparator nations. The current Government's emphasis on this could help to correct the imbalance. Through the creation of public financial institutions and the expansion of the use of FTs, the Government has found a mechanism to boost such investment. They have taken steps to ensure that such investment is managed robustly and is focused in specific policy areas with clearly defined goals.

This increased use of FTs has been enabled by the changes to the fiscal framework. However, these changes are relatively modest and technical and the new fiscal framework still does not reflect the principles and philosophy of current public policy. In particular, it does not:

- reflect the notion that investment for a return to the public purse can be in services as well as capital assets;
- reflect the increasing financial and operating autonomy of regional and local government, particularly the new strategic authorities.

In the search for growth, it may turn out to be prudent to focus on eight key high-potential sectors and work up tailored strategies to support them. These will be unevenly distributed across the country, but there are enough of them to give localities food for thought, to consider which of them have the potential for growth in their area.

And the "impact economy" is only likely to keep growing. We are moving away from an age in which people invest time and money with an eye only to monetary return, with investment decisions being made only by institutions and brokers with privileged access to markets. Online platforms and apps give individuals far greater control over investments and increasingly investors are looking for their investments to do good. In this context, the aim to maintain green gilt sales at past levels seems unambitious. It could be worth examining potential symbioses between social impact investing and the green financing programme.

Similarly, the devolution of financial decision-making seems unambitious in the level to which it is being devolved. There are important roles for strategic-level authorities in taking decisions affecting regional economies, spatial planning and key infrastructure used across city and rural regions. However there would appear to be little in the Government's programmes for decision-making at town and neighbourhood level – there is therefore arguably scope for far greater devolution here.

Dr Tom R Lawrence, TRL Insights (APSE Associate)

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