

# A brief guide to the UK public finances

Office for  
**Budget  
Responsibility**

**T**HE independent **Office for Budget Responsibility** was established in 2010 to monitor the public sector's finances. Twice a year – alongside each Budget and Autumn Statement – we produce detailed forecasts for the coming five years, assessing the likely impact of policy decisions and expected developments in the economy. We then use these forecasts to assess the Government's performance against the fiscal targets that it has set itself for the management of the public finances.



This guide provides a brief introduction to the UK public finances and to the terms used to describe them in the official statistics. In doing so we are looking at the finances of the public sector as a whole – which encompasses not just central government, but also the devolved administrations, local councils and public corporations. The figures presented in this guide are taken from our March 2016 forecast, which covers the five fiscal years up to 2020-21. Each fiscal year runs from April to March.

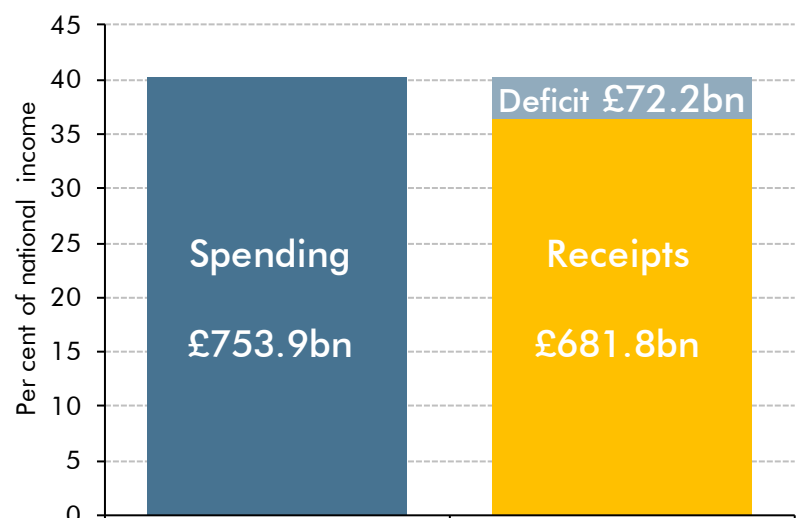
# Overview

**I**n each forecast we assess how the public finances are likely to evolve on the basis of existing Government tax and spending policies and our best guess at the likely evolution of the economy. In particular we try to estimate:

- **how much money the public sector will raise** from taxes and other sources of revenue. In 2015-16, we expect it to raise £681.8 billion, equivalent to around £25,000 per household or 36.3 per cent of national income.
- **how much it will spend** on things like public services, state pensions and debt interest. In 2015-16, we expect it to spend £753.9 billion, equivalent to around £28,000 per household or 40.2 per cent of national income.

- whether it will spend more or less than it raises – in other words **whether it will run a budget deficit or surplus**. In 2015-16, we expect a deficit of £72.2 billion. Because receipts are forecast to rise faster than spending in future years, we expect the deficit to get smaller each year and there to be surpluses in 2019-20 and 2020-21.

Spending and receipts in 2015-16

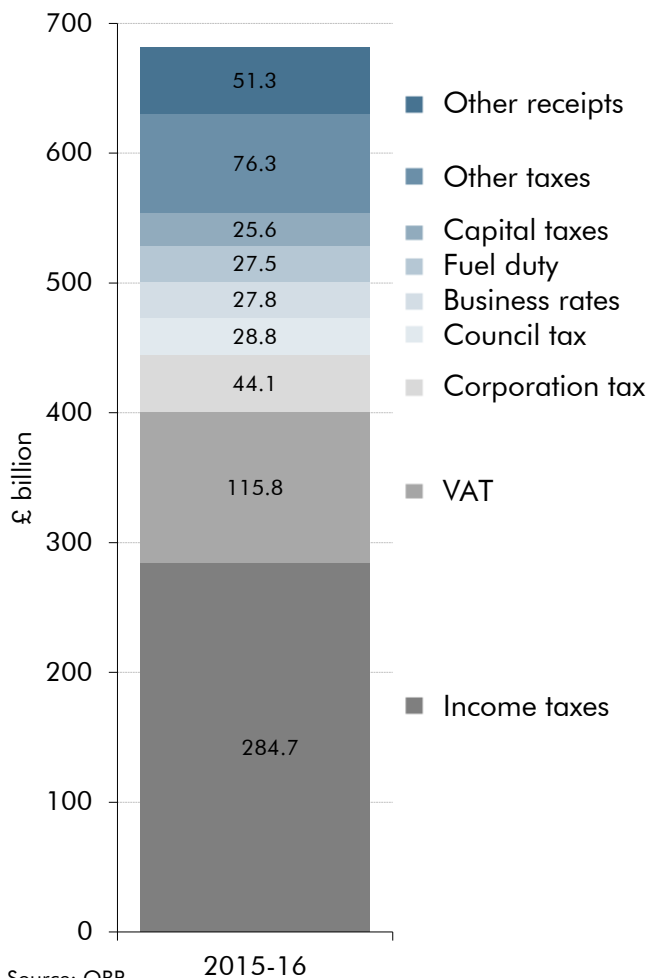


- **how much will be added to – or paid off – the national debt** in each year. We expect public sector net debt to have peaked relative to the size of the economy in 2015-16 at 83.7 per cent of national income – the highest ratio since the late 1960s. (Net debt was less than 40 per cent of national income prior to the financial crisis.) This is equivalent to £1,591 billion or £58,000 per household. In 2016-17, we expect debt to fall to 82.6 per cent, the first year-on-year fall as a share of national income since 2001-02. As the deficit shrinks, we expect the ratio of net debt to national income to continue falling and to reach 74.7 per cent by 2020-21. But in cash terms we expect it to rise to £1,740 billion by then.

# Income

**I**N 2015-16, we expect the public sector's income to amount to £681.8 billion, equivalent to £25,000 per household or 36.3 per cent of national income. These are called 'public sector current receipts' in the official statistics and come from many sources. Taxes are the most important, providing 92 per cent of the total in 2015-16.

## Sources of public sector receipts



The taxes that bring in the most money are income tax and national insurance contributions, which together are expected to raise £284.7 billion. Value added tax (VAT) is the next most important, expected to raise £115.8 billion. Other big taxes include corporation tax, council tax, business rates and fuel duty. No other tax is expected to raise more than £20 billion.

Taxes on North Sea oil and gas production, which raised just under £11 billion in 2011-12, are not expected to bring in any revenue at all in 2015-16.

The public sector also receives other revenues, including interest payments on its assets (such as foreign exchange reserves and student loans), while public corporations generate some income.

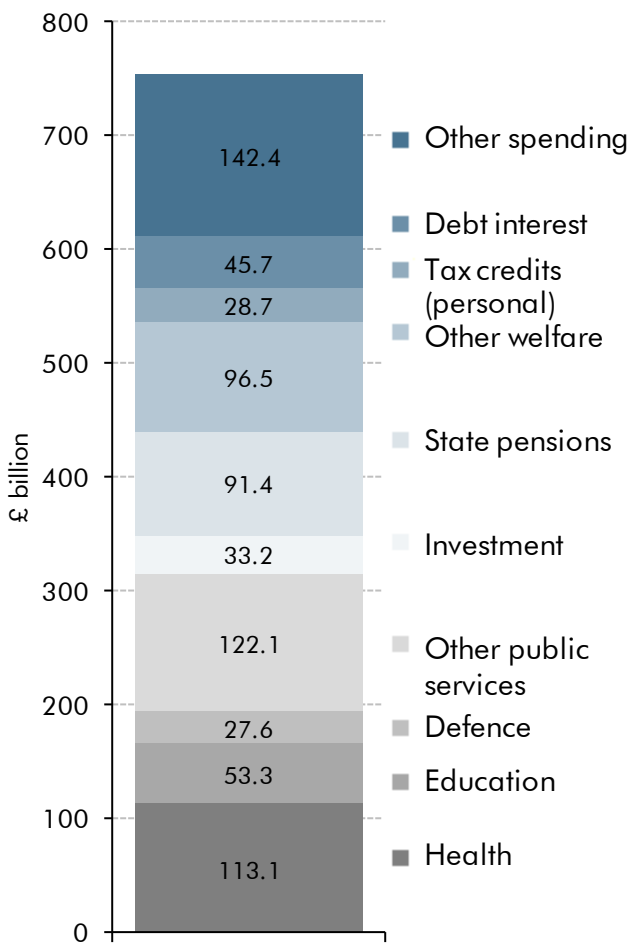
Over the next five years, we expect total receipts to grow by 25 per cent, a little

faster than the cash size of the economy. We expect some taxes to rise more quickly, including self-assessment income tax (driven by policy changes the Government has made) and capital gains tax, inheritance tax and stamp duty on property (driven by asset markets, like housing and the stock market). But some tax receipts are expected to rise more slowly than the economy as a whole, including corporation tax (where the tax rate is being reduced over time), fuel duty (because cars are becoming more fuel efficient) and tobacco duty (because people are smoking less).

# Spending

**T**HE public sector raises money in order to spend it, mostly on the day-to-day costs of providing public services, on capital investment and on cash transfer payments that support the incomes of different types of individuals and families.

## Public sector spending



Source: HMT, OBR 2015-16

In 2015-16, we expect public spending to amount to £753.9 billion, which is equivalent to around £28,000 per household or 40.2 per cent of national income. This is called 'Total Managed Expenditure' and covers many different types of spending.

In 2015-16, we expect central government departments to spend £316.1 billion on the day-to-day ('current') running costs of public services, grants and administration. This is 42 per cent of public spending. The biggest items are health (£113.1 billion), education (£53.3 billion) and defence (£27.6 billion). This spending is subject to multi-year limits set by the Treasury – 'Resource Departmental Expenditure Limits' or 'RDEL'.

We also expect the public sector to spend £72.7 billion – around 10 per cent of the total – on capital investment (roads and buildings, for example). Just under half of

this capital spending will be carried out by government departments, again subject to multi-year Treasury limits – 'Capital Departmental Expenditure Limits' or 'CDEL'. Most of the remainder will be carried out by local authorities (mostly roads, schools and housing) and by public corporations (like Transport for London).

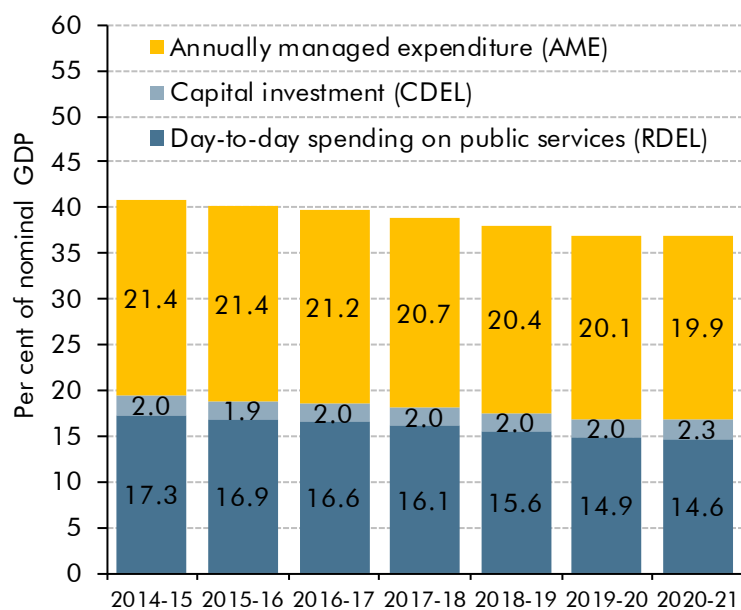
The Government set out detailed department-by-department plans for RDEL and CDEL in its November 2015 Spending Review. These cover the years to 2019-20 for all departments and to 2020-21 for some. For the remaining half of public spending, the amount spent each year is outside the immediate control of the Government. Because this spending is not subject to multi-year limits, it is known as 'Annually Managed Expenditure' or 'AME'.



The biggest component of AME is cash transfers through the welfare system, which we expect to cost £216.6 billion in 2015-16. Around 46 per cent of these transfers are paid to pensioners, with state pensions the largest item at an expected £91.4 billion. Other big items include personal tax credits (£28.7 billion, mostly paid to people of working age) and housing benefit (£24.3 billion, around three-quarters paid to people of working age). Jobseekers' allowance – paid to the unemployed – is expected to cost just £2.5 billion.

Interest payments on the national debt are expected to cost the Government £34.1 billion in 2015-16. This includes the interest government pays to private sector holders of the bonds it issues – known as 'gilts' – and also the interest paid by the Bank of England on the money created during the 'quantitative easing' of monetary policy after the late 2000s financial crisis and recession.

#### Public spending to 2020-21



Source: OBR, HMT

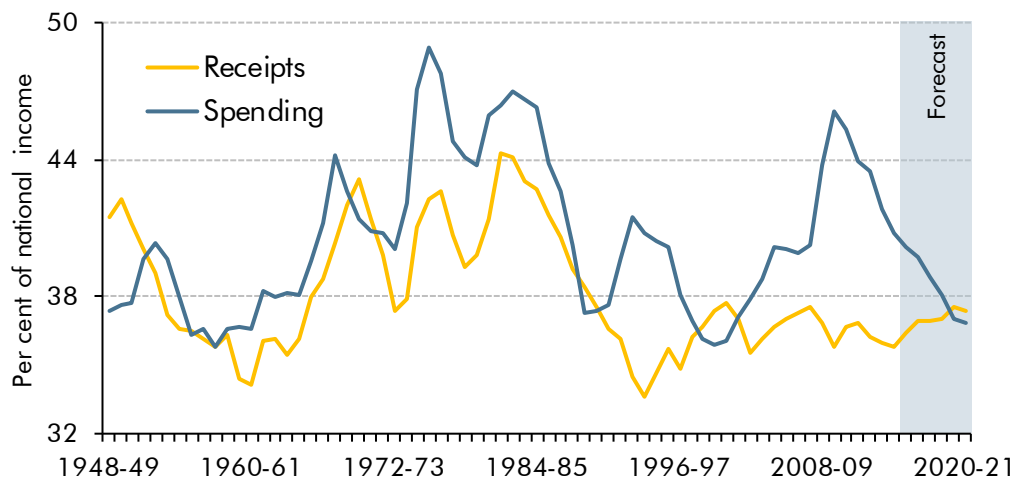
Over the next five years, we expect public spending to rise by 12 per cent in cash terms – much slower than the cash economy. This is based on the detailed plans for departmental spending set out in the Spending Review and our forecast for AME.

We expect AME to rise by 13 per cent, with debt interest increasing by 27 per cent as interest rates are assumed to rise. The Government's multi-year spending plans mean that RDEL will rise by 6 per cent in cash terms by 2020-21, but will fall by more than 2 per cent of national income.

# Deficits or surpluses

**WHEN total spending in a year is higher than total receipts**, the Government needs to borrow to cover the difference. This gap is known as the budget deficit or 'public sector net borrowing'. When receipts are higher than spending, the government runs a surplus. Deficits and surpluses are similar to losses or profits for a company.

## The gap between receipts and spending



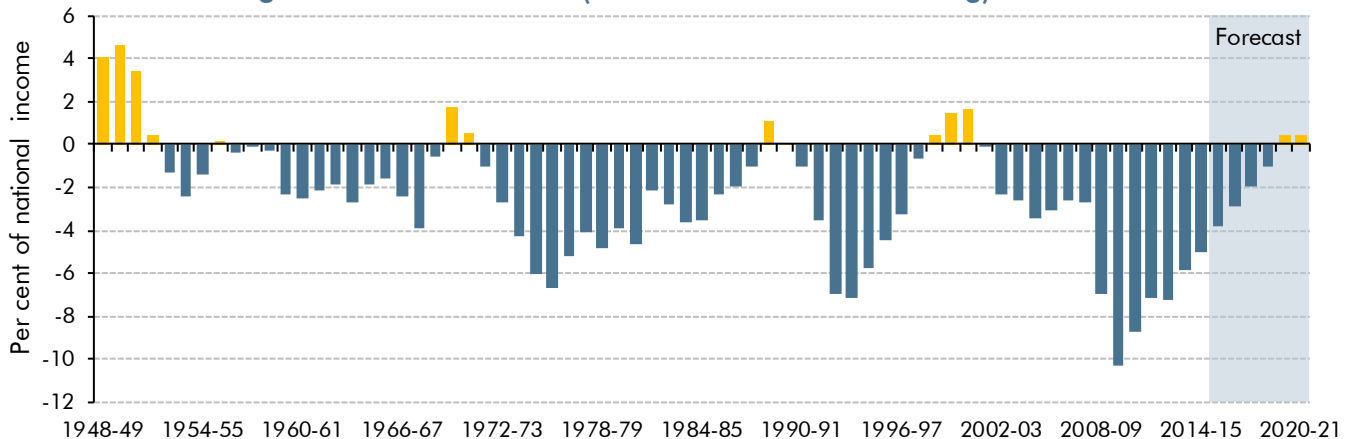
Source: ONS, OBR

In 2015-16, we expect a deficit of £72.2 billion or 3.8 per cent of national income – down from its post-war peak of £154.7 billion or 10.3 per cent of national income in 2009-10. We expect receipts to rise faster than spending over

the next five years, so we forecast that the deficit will get smaller each year. Indeed, by 2019-20 we expect the Government to be running a surplus of £10.4 billion on current policy, at which point receipts would be 37.5 per cent of national income and spending would be 37.0 per cent of national income.

Swings into deficit have become steadily more pronounced over the post-war period. And budget surpluses have been achieved in only 12 years since 1948.

## Public sector budget deficit since 1948 (Public sector net borrowing)



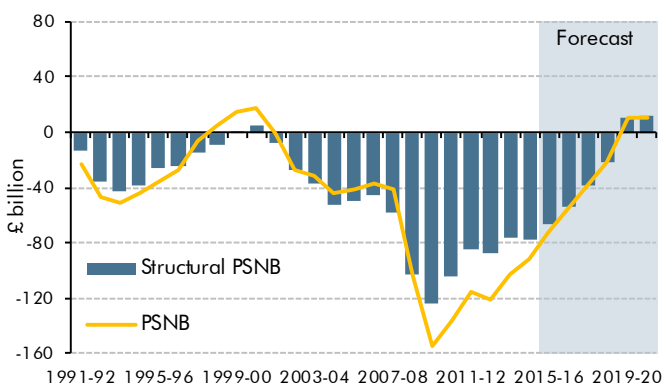
Source: ONS, OBR

Movements in the budget deficit are in part the result of the ups and downs of the economy. When the economy is strong, the deficit will be lower as taxes flow in and welfare costs are reduced. The opposite is true when the economy is weak.

The 'structural' budget deficit is an estimate of how large the deficit would be if the economy was operating at a normal, sustainable level of employment and activity. We never know precisely what this 'normal' level would be, so these estimates are always uncertain. We currently estimate that the economy will be running 0.3 per cent below normal capacity in 2015-16. So we judge that the structural deficit is a little smaller than the overall deficit. The remaining 'cyclical' part of the deficit would disappear automatically as the economy returns to a normal level of activity.

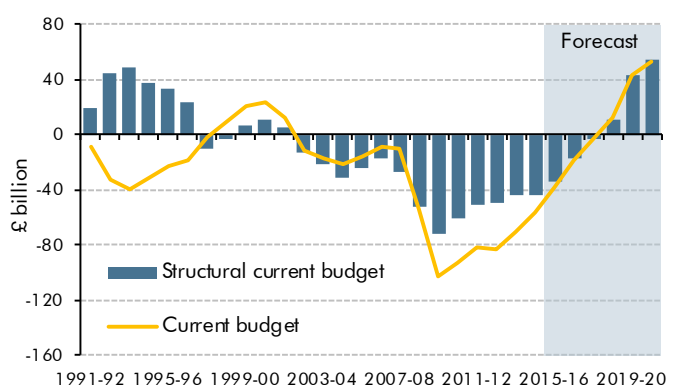
The headline deficit is the difference between total receipts and total spending, but people are also interested in the 'current deficit' (or surplus). This counts all receipts and all current spending, but excludes spending on net investment. As long as net investment is positive, the current deficit will be smaller than the overall deficit. We expect the current deficit to be £39.0 billion in 2015-16 and there to be a current surplus of £53.4 billion in 2020-21.

### Public sector net borrowing



Source: ONS, OBR

### Current budget balance



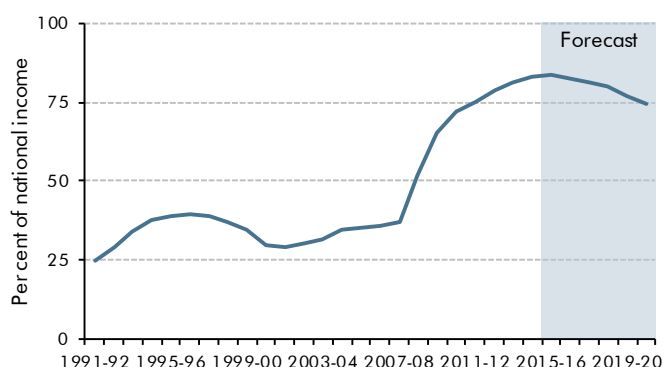
**S**o far we have been looking at the flows of spending and receipts that take place each year and the deficits and surpluses they result in. But because governments run deficits much more often than they run surpluses, they have accumulated a significant stock of outstanding debt over time.

Generally speaking, if the public sector runs a deficit in a particular year, debt will rise in cash terms. But it can still fall as a share of national income if the cash size of the economy is growing sufficiently strongly. (That said, it is also important to be aware that some government activity adds to its debt without adding to the deficit in any given year, most significantly providing loans to students.)

The most widely watched measure of debt in the UK is 'public sector net debt', which subtracts the relatively small amount of assets that the Government could readily turn into cash if required (for example, foreign exchange reserves) from the gross total. We expect public sector net debt to peak relative to national income in 2015-16 at 83.7 per cent, which is equivalent to £1,591 billion or £58,000 per household.

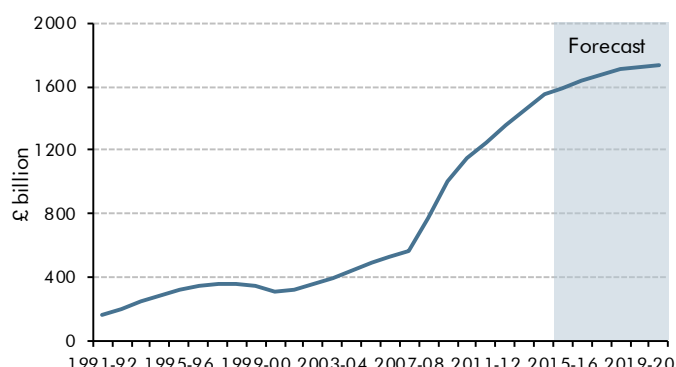
One of the Government's current fiscal targets is to make sure that debt is falling relative to national income every year, thereby beginning to reverse the big increase associated with the recession and financial crisis. We expect that target to be missed, with debt rising by 0.4 per cent to 83.7 per cent in 2015-16, but then falling steadily to reach 74.7 per cent by 2020-21. In cash terms, we expect debt to continue rising each year to reach £1,740 billion by 2020-21.

Debt as % of national income



Source: ONS, OBR

Debt in cash terms





# International comparisons

**H**OW do the public finances in the UK compare to those in other countries? To answer this question we can look at the forecasts for 32 industrial countries produced by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in November 2015. Unfortunately, the OECD forecasts are not directly comparable with the ones that we have presented so far: for example, the OECD does not cover public corporations, while it defines spending and revenue somewhat differently.

That caveat aside:

- the UK government raises somewhat less revenue relative to national income than the majority of other industrial countries – more than the US, Japan and Korea, but less than Scandinavian countries like Finland and Norway;
- public spending as a share of national income in the UK is close to the average of other industrial countries – the UK spends much more than the US and Korea, but much less than Finland or France;
- spending close to the international average, but at the same time raising less in revenue, leaves the UK running one of the largest budget deficits in the industrial world – five countries have bigger ones. Norway has the largest surplus, thanks to oil and gas revenues that it saves rather than spends; and
- net debt in the UK is also higher than the average of other industrial countries.

