

Communicating complex analysis: a challenge for fiscal councils and PBOs

Robert Chote

Chairman

African Network of Parliamentary Budget Offices

Cape Town, South Africa

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Introduction

- Effective communication is essential for policy impact
- Sharing experience is always helpful
- But one size does not fit all
- Sensible approaches will depend on
 - Audiences you need to reach
 - Nature of analysis to be communicated
 - What can and cannot be published e.g. confidentiality
 - Resources - time, skills, technology, money
- Transparency (process and analysis) builds trust

Background to the UK OBR

- Created in 2010 to improve trust in official fiscal analysis
 - Check on Treasury rather than resource for Parliament
 - Council of three and 27 civil servant staff
- Main roles
 - Publishing economic and fiscal forecasts
 - Monitoring progress against government targets
 - Scrutinising cost or saving estimates for policy measures
 - Assessing sustainability and risks to public finances
- But we do not
 - Make policy recommendations or look at options

Know your audiences

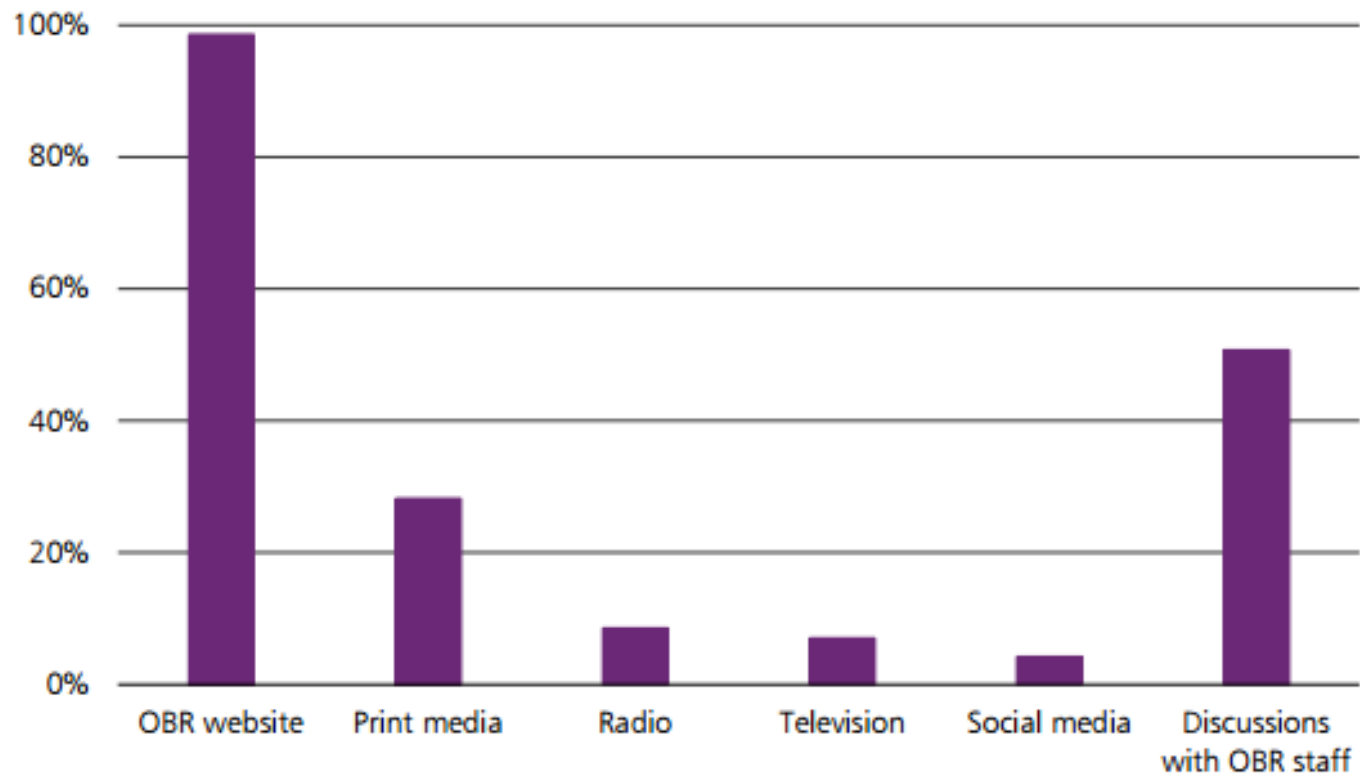
- Who are you talking to, what are they interested in and how knowledgeable are they?
- Most IFIs have to address multiple audiences. For OBR: media (economic and political), parliamentary (specialist committees and ordinary members), civil society (think tanks and pressure groups), academics, international institutions and the public
- They differ widely in their level of interest, institutional knowledge, frequency of engagement, numeracy, trust
- Do you offer different types of analysis to different audiences or one type that appeals to as many people as possible?

Channels of communication

- Hard copy publications (sometimes required by Parliament)
- Website
- Press conferences
- On-the-day TV/radio interviews
- Parliamentary committees
- Formal and informal press interviews
- Freedom of information and other information requests
- Blogs and social media

Communication outlets evidence

Chart 7.I: Stakeholder responses to survey question 'How do you access OBR reports? Please select all that apply'



Source: Review stakeholder survey results.

Website: home page

Office for
**Budget
Responsibility**

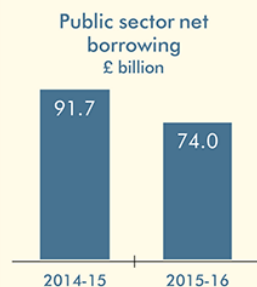
"It is the duty of the Office to examine and report on the sustainability of the public finances"

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APRIL 21, 2016

Budget deficit falls to £74 billion in 2015-16



The public sector borrowed £74.0 billion in 2015-16, according to the first provisional estimate from the Office for National Statistics. This is £17.7 billion down on last year. The deficit was £1.8 billion higher than we forecast at the time of the Budget in March, more than explained by a £2.1 billion overshoot for local authorities. But, as we pointed out then, these initial annual estimates are highly provisional – since 2011-12 they have been revised up or (more often) down by an average of £3.5 billion over the subsequent 12 months.

[Read more](#)

MARCH 16, 2016

The Budget: giveaways followed by takeaways

Despite a weaker outlook for the economy and tax revenues, the Chancellor has announced a net tax cut and new spending commitments. But he remains on course for a £10 billion surplus in 2019-20, by rescheduling capital investment, promising other cuts in public services spending and shifting a one-off boost to corporation tax receipts into that year.

PUBLICATIONS

- [Economic and fiscal outlook](#)
- [Fiscal sustainability report](#)
- [Forecast evaluation report](#)
- [Welfare trends report](#)
- [Monthly public finance release](#)
- [Brief guides and explainers](#)
- [All other publications](#)

UPCOMING EVENTS

- 24**
MAY [Monthly public finances release](#)
- 21**
JUN [Monthly public finances release](#)
- 21**
JUL [Monthly public finances release](#)

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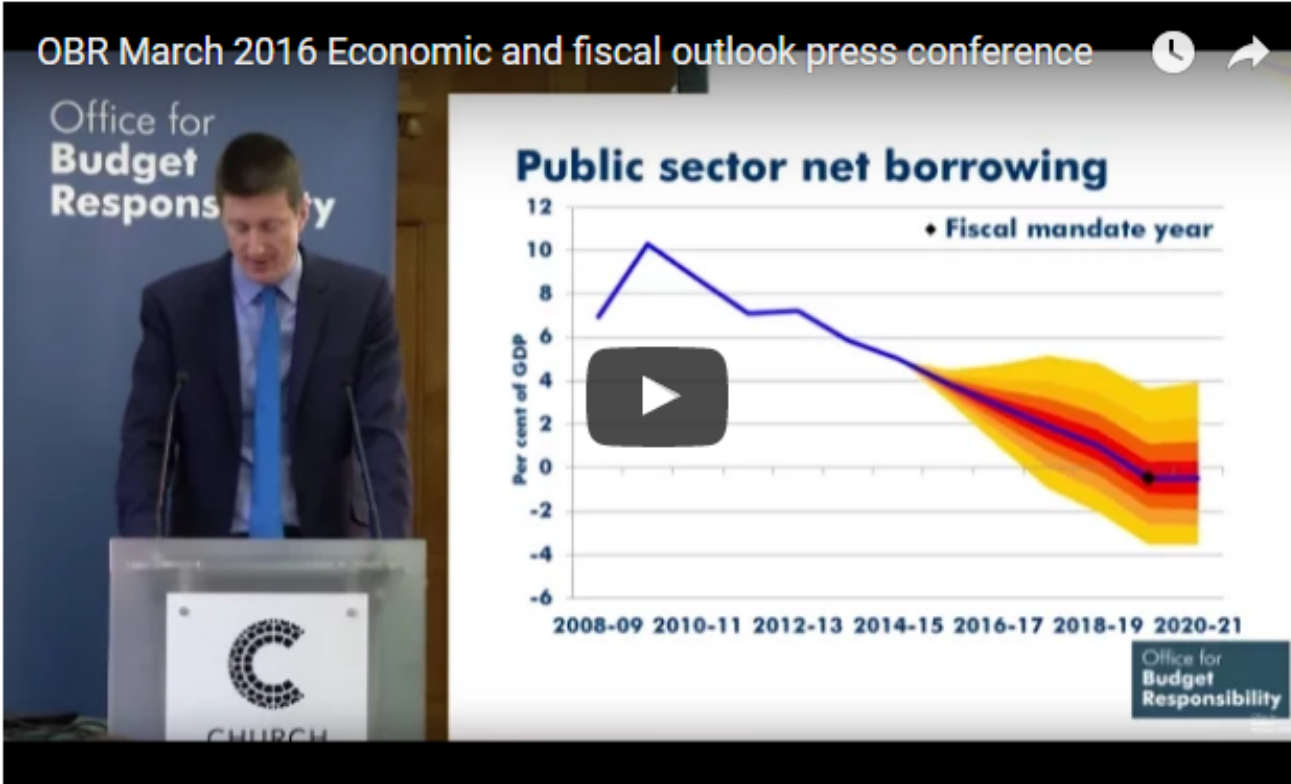
Website: video presentations

MARCH 16, 2016

The Chairman's presentation on our latest economic and fiscal forecast

Robert Chote distils the key messages from our latest Economic and fiscal outlook – in his press conference presentation and accompanying speaking note.

OBR March 2016 Economic and fiscal outlook press conference



Office for Budget Responsibility

Public sector net borrowing

Per cent of GDP

• Fiscal mandate year

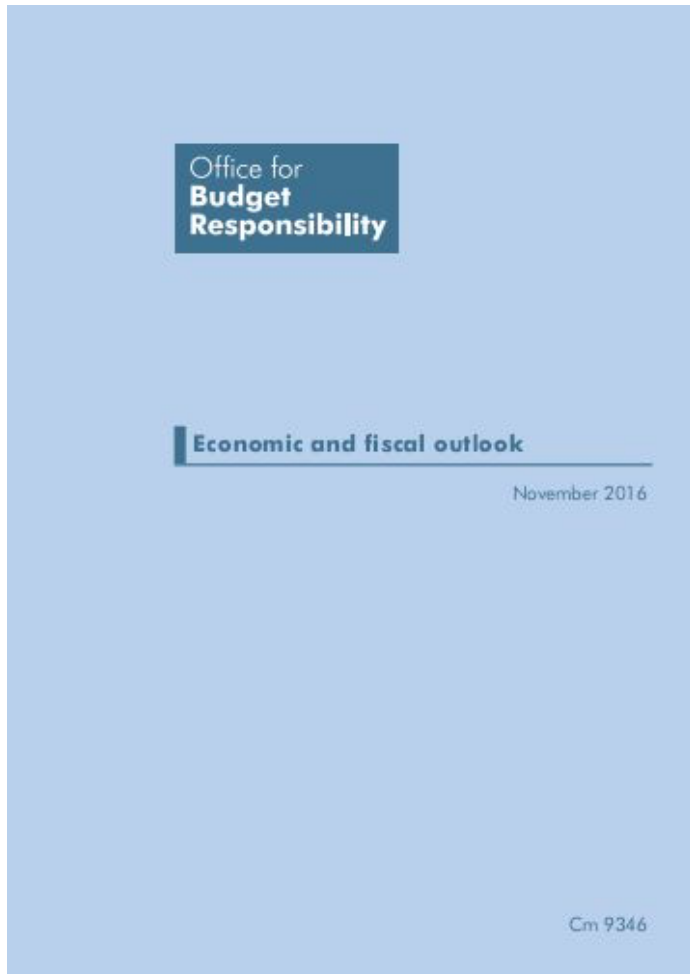
Year	Public sector net borrowing (Per cent of GDP)
2008-09	7.0
2010-11	10.0
2012-13	7.0
2014-15	6.0
2016-17	4.0
2018-19	1.0
2020-21	-1.0

Office for Budget Responsibility

Forecasts: the challenge

- Do you offer different types of analysis to different audiences or one type that appeals to as many people as possible?
- Challenge in presenting forecasts
 - Some are interested in the whole forecast, others in broad parts of it (economy or fiscal), some in detailed sections
 - Some are regular consumers, interested in the changes since last time; others are one-time visitors
 - Some are numerate and well-informed; others less so. Political vs economic reporters

Forecasts: our approach



- 2 page overview, 20 page executive summary and 250 page report. Tends to grow over time.
- Press briefing powerpoint, video and speaking notes online
- Plus non-technical “Brief Guide to the Public Finances”
- Time and resource constraints

Forecasts: the publication

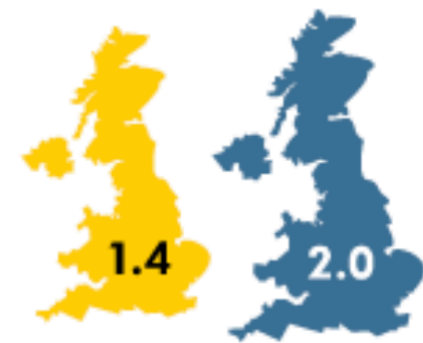
- Write with the expected audiences (not sources) in mind
- Think of the first page as a newspaper story. What are the key messages, what are the key phrases, is there is a single graph or picture that tells the story?
- Avoid jargon and acronyms; explain key concepts - more than once if necessary for people who won't read it all
- Write with humility. Admit to the uncertainty around estimates and forecasts. Build trust and get your defence in early

Images and charts

- Very valuable - both in documents and as something to tweet or post online to attract people to publication
- Think about the message you are
- Make the underlying data available
- Give sources and definitions (perhaps via annex/link)
- Show plenty of history when you can

Images: simple summaries

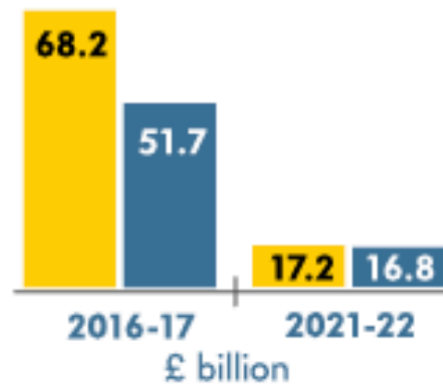
GDP growth in 2017



Percentage change on a year earlier

● Nov 16 ● Latest

Borrowing



● Nov 16 ● Latest

Performance against the Government's fiscal targets:



Fiscal mandate:

structural deficit below 2% of GDP in 2020-21



Supplementary target:

debt falls as % GDP in 2020-21



Welfare cap:

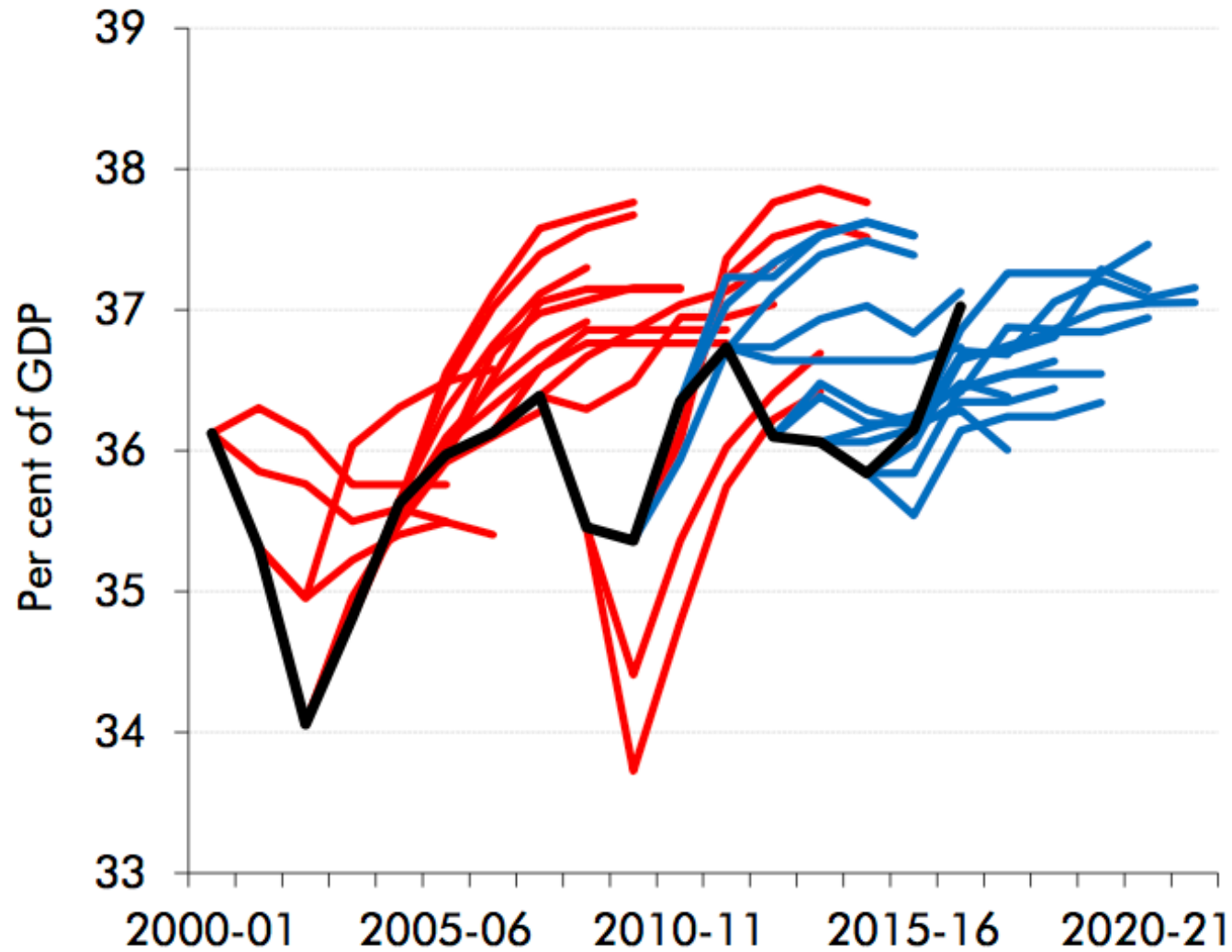
spending below cash limit in 2021-22



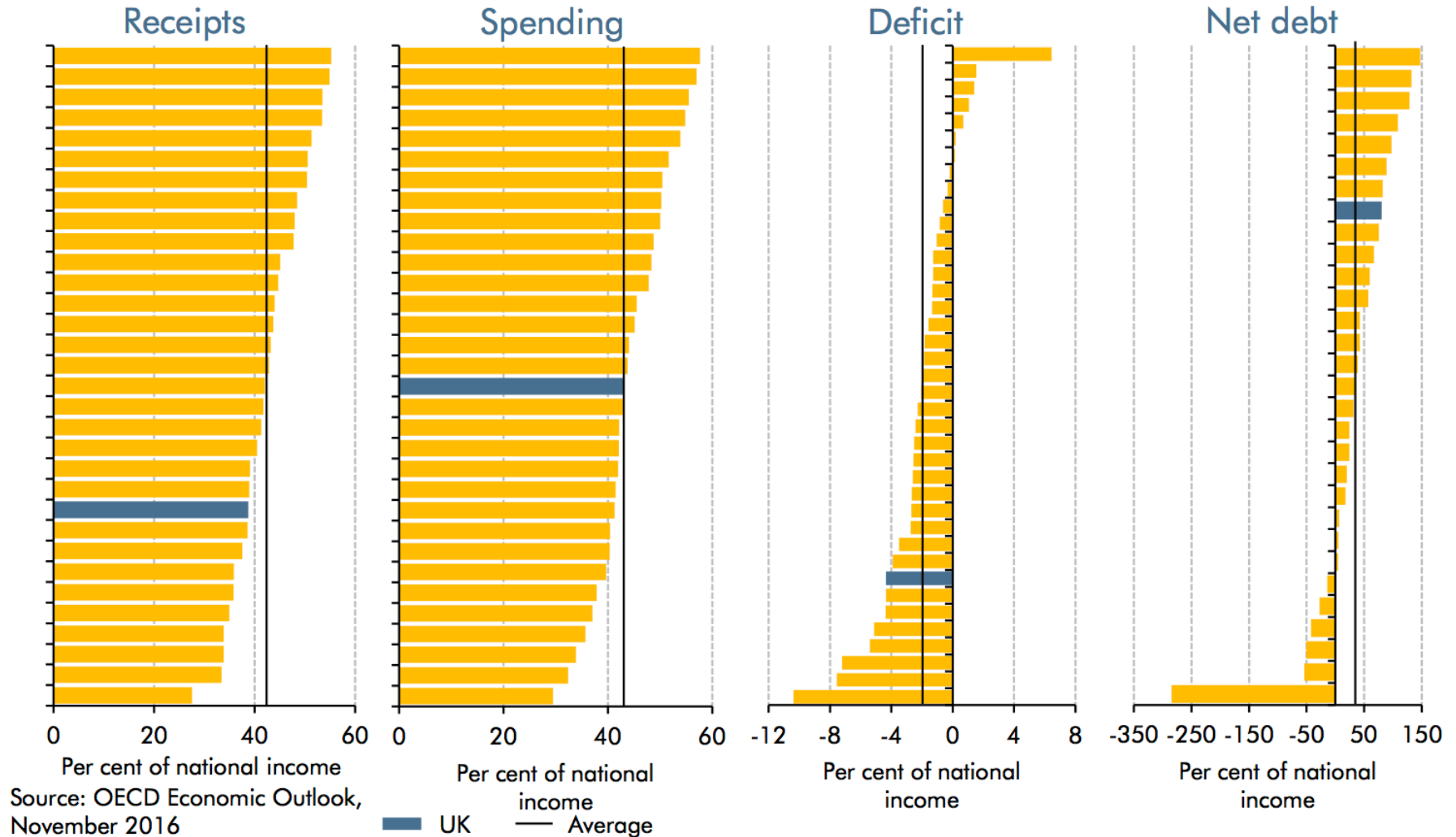
Fiscal objective:

balance asap in next Parliament

Images: revenue uncertainty



Images: international comparisons



Some general thoughts

- Think like an iceberg - your audiences see only what is above the waterline, but they need to believe that there is a huge submerged mass of knowledge beneath
- Recognise the simplicity/completeness trade-off (short publications take longer to write than long ones)
- Strike a balance in responding to deliberate or inadvertent criticism or misrepresentation
- Think about who you want to deal with stakeholders in answering questions about analysis
- Make use of non-experts (internal or external) to review or test the material you present
- Manage relationships well - in the UK politicians cope better with bad news than surprises