**ADEPT View from Westminster October 2018**

**The Budget**

The best thing about the budget, a fellow Westminster watcher said to me, is that it’s not Brexit. It was an astute observation. For one blissful afternoon, the pending opportunity or gloom (delete as appropriate) presented by our withdrawal from the European Union played second fiddle to the economic affairs of the nation. One may have thought the two were inextricably linked…but you, dear reader, would be wrong. The only reference to Brexit was the warning that a no deal scenario may require a further fiscal event next Spring. Something for us all to look forward too.

No. Forget Brexit. The Chancellor had bigger things on his mind. Namely, the tax status of public toilets. It is perhaps a sign of the political times that the Chancellor of the Exchequer used his flagship annual appearance before the House to literally do toilet humour. Given the serious bashing tech firms took on the stock market following confirmation of the digital services tax, a few cracks about leaks is perhaps safer ground and should be encouraged. Maybe talking about Brexit might not have been such a bad idea after all.

Elsewhere, Spreadsheet Phil did what he usually does on these occasions by enraging, delighting and baffling in equal measure. He had some unexpected wiggle room due to the OBR once again cocking up its fiscal forecasts. My nine-month-old daughter could babble some random numbers and the chances are they’d represent a more accurate prediction than the OBR comes up with. Quite why anyone takes long-term economic forecasting seriously any more I have no idea, but that’s a discussion for another time.

As a result, the Chancellor was throwing cash around like confetti. Forget for one moment that we will be running a budget deficit nearly a decade longer than originally predicted…we’ve got £30bn to spend and, by jove, are we going to spend it. The Health Secretary wore the broadest smile as the NHS nabbed most of the money, although Defence won big with an extra £1bn going to the forces.

For us in local government, it is a joy that our brothers and sisters in Whitehall have finally discovered potholes. Perhaps a ministerial car fell into one. Either way, there’s millions more being allocated to fill them in. Indeed, potholes did better than schools, although headteachers are in line for around £10,000 each to help them afford ‘an extra bit of kit’. One assumes he means books, pencils, pens and other basic provisions one might consider essentials for the teaching of children. Despite my cynicism however, it is a welcome policy and long overdue.

The usual assortment of promises around house building and regional transport investment were present and correct. The mood music here suggests another shunt towards infrastructure investment and that can only be a good thing. Of more interest is the newfound interest all sides have in the high street. All are keen to regenerate these spaces, but the Chancellor runs the table and he gave us a hat-trick of measures. He’s put business rate reform on the agenda and cut them by 33% for smaller outlets. He’s hit global digital firms with a new tax. And he’s found £650m to invest directly in bringing declining high streets up to snuff. It’s an interesting set of proposals that all will be keen to make work.

Finally, and most importantly, he’s increased my personal allowance. So, I get to keep more of the money I earn. Excellent news. I’ll celebrate with a beer (duty froze), cider (duty froze) or whiskey (duty froze)…but wine (duty raised) is off the menu!