

UK: prolonged Brexit uncertainties cloud outlook

- No relief yet:** The news that the UK has failed to resolve Brexit and has to stay in Brexit limbo, potentially until 31 October 2019, is not good for its near-term economic outlook. The hard Brexit risk continues to hang over the UK economy like a sword. Unless and until the UK passes the Withdrawal Agreement, thereby guaranteeing no hard Brexit, we expect economic activity to remain sluggish. We thus reduce our forecast for real GDP growth to 1.2% in 2019 from 1.4% previously, while keeping 2020 unchanged at 2.1%.
- Politics first:** Our economic base case is based on a political judgement. We see an odds-on chance that UK parliament will pass the Withdrawal Agreement before 22 May. This implies that Brexit happens by the end of Q2 2019 and that the hard Brexit risk is off the table thereafter. Continued gains in real household spending power, and some pent-up investment demand point to a modest growth uptick once Brexit is settled. From annualised growth rates of 0.6% in H1 2019, we see growth temporarily accelerating towards 2.4% in H1 2020 – Table 1 – before returning toward trend thereafter.
- Clouded outlook:** The risks to the economic outlook are higher than usual: clearly to the downside and a little to the upside. The end state – hard Brexit, semi-soft or soft Brexit, or no Brexit – and exactly how long it takes to reach it, will have a major bearing on the UK economic outlook. In case UK parliament cannot resolve Brexit in Q2, any delay would depress growth momentum thereafter. The near-term risk is that we may need to downgrade our UK forecast for 2019 H2 if Brexit uncertainties persist beyond the second quarter.
- The Bank of England (BoE) is in a bind:** Since the Brexit vote in June 2016, the BoE has raised rates twice. However, the UK looks ready for modestly higher rates still. Labour markets are tight and wage growth is accelerating. Survey-based measures show inflation expectations rising. In our view, the BoE, cautious about the risks, would prefer to stay on hold until Brexit is resolved. If our base case prevails, we would look for the next rate hike in August. However, the BoE cannot wait too long as inflation risks could build further. Even if Brexit remains unsolved heading into H2 2019, it could still hike once in H2 2019.

Table 1: UK economic forecasts

		2017	2018	2019	2020	1Q18	2Q18	3Q18	4Q18	1Q19	2Q19	3Q19	4Q19	1Q20	2Q20	3Q20	4Q20
GDP	% y/y	1.8	1.4	1.2	2.1	1.2	1.4	1.6	1.4	1.5	1.2	1.0	1.2	1.7	2.1	2.2	2.2
	% q/q					0.1	0.4	0.7	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.4	0.5	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.5
Private Consumption	%q/q ann.					0.2	1.6	2.8	0.9	0.6	0.6	1.7	1.9	2.4	2.4	2.1	1.9
	% y/y	2.1	1.7	1.5	2.4	1.6	1.8	1.6	1.6	1.3	1.2	1.5	2.1	2.5	2.6	2.4	2.1
Government Consumption	% q/q					0.5	0.5	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.4	0.7	0.8	0.6	0.5	0.5	0.5
	% y/y	-0.2	0.4	1.5	0.7	0.8	-0.1	-0.3	1.0	0.8	1.7	2.2	1.1	1.2	0.8	0.5	0.4
Investment	% q/q					0.2	-0.4	-0.1	1.3	0.0	0.5	0.4	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
	% y/y	3.5	0.2	-1.8	3.7	2.1	-0.4	0.2	-1.1	-2.3	-2.8	-2.0	-0.3	2.7	4.8	3.9	3.6
Final Domestic Demand ¹	% q/q					-0.8	-0.6	0.9	-0.6	-2.0	-1.0	1.7	1.0	1.0	1.0	0.8	0.8
	% y/y	1.9	1.2	0.9	2.3	1.5	1.1	1.0	1.0	0.6	0.6	1.1	1.5	2.3	2.6	2.3	2.1
Net Exports ¹	% q/q					0.2	0.2	0.4	0.3	-0.2	0.2	0.8	0.7	0.6	0.5	0.5	0.5
	% y/y	0.5	-0.2	-0.4	-0.1	0.5	0.0	-0.4	-0.7	-0.7	-0.3	-0.3	-0.2	0.0	-0.1	-0.2	-0.2
Stockbuilding ¹	% q/q					-0.2	-0.4	0.0	-0.2	-0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	-0.1	-0.1	-0.1
	% y/y	-0.6	0.4	0.9	0.3	-0.8	0.3	0.8	1.3	1.8	1.3	0.5	-0.1	-0.6	-0.4	0.1	0.4
Current Account Balance	GBP bn	-68.4	-81.6	-90.2	-77.6	-17.7	-17.3	-23.0	-23.7	-24.0	-23.0	-22.0	-21.2	-20.7	-19.8	-18.9	-18.0
	% of GDP	-3.3	-3.9	-4.1	-3.5	-3.4	-3.3	-4.3	-4.4	-4.4	-4.2	-4.0	-3.8	-3.7	-3.6	-3.4	-3.2
Industrial Production ²	% y/y	1.8	0.8	1.4	1.9	2.0	1.1	0.7	-0.7	0.2	1.5	1.3	2.6	2.1	1.8	1.8	1.8
	% q/q					0.1	-0.6	0.7	-0.8	0.9	0.7	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
Unemployment Rate ²	%	4.3	4.1	3.8	3.7	4.2	4.0	4.1	3.9	3.9	3.8	3.8	3.8	3.8	3.7	3.7	3.7
CPI ²	% y/y	2.7	2.5	1.8	2.0	2.7	2.4	2.5	2.3	1.8	1.8	1.8	1.9	1.9	2.0	2.1	2.1
General Govt. Balance ³	% of GDP	-2.7	-1.6	-1.6	-1.2												
General Govt. Debt ³	% of GDP	87.9	86.7	85.7	84.8												
BoE Bank Rate ⁴		0.50	0.75	1.00	1.50	0.50	0.50	0.75	0.75	0.75	0.75	1.00	1.00	1.25	1.25	1.50	1.50

¹Contribution to GDP growth ²Period averages ³Maastricht basis ⁴End period

Source: Berenberg, ONS

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A path through the UK's Brexit quagmire

- **The UK and the EU have agreed to delay Brexit until 31 October.** In case the UK passes the Withdrawal Agreement before that date, it will exit the EU early. In one respect, the delay is a big positive. It shows that both the UK and the EU want to avoid a hard Brexit. However, the prospect of a potential 6.5-month delay that could still end in a hard Brexit keeps the serious tail risk hanging over the UK and broader European economy and financial markets.
- To forecast the economic outlook under such circumstances, we need to make a political bet about: a) the likely Brexit outcome; and b) how long it will take to reach it. In our view, despite the major gap between the leading Conservative Party and main opposition Labour on almost all economic and social issues, **there are enough MPs across both parties that want the UK to retain close ties with the EU to provide a majority for one of the soft Brexit options.** This provides scope for the UK parliament to settle the Brexit question ahead of the European elections set for 23-26 May.
- UK Prime Minister Theresa May [has set out a process for achieving a consensus in UK parliament](#). Currently, talks between her cabinet and key figures in the Labour Party are ongoing. In case of a breakthrough from these talks, **the most likely outcome would be that Mrs May and Jeremy Corbyn propose that parliament should hold a binding vote on a customs union as the basis for future relations with the EU.** This option is backed by Labour and came close to a majority in the last set of indicative votes held in the House of Commons on 1 March 2019.
- However, the May/Corbyn talks are not easy. May is under pressure from the hardline Eurosceptics in her party to veer towards a hard Brexit. Corbyn is under pressure from Europhiles in the Labour Party to strike a deal with May only if such an agreement included a confirmatory public referendum. **If May and Corbyn cannot reach an agreement, May has said she will directly go to parliament with a series of indicative votes on the various options.** These could include: hard Brexit, customs union with the EU, Norway plus, second referendum, or cancelling Brexit.
- So far, UK MPs have been spoilt for choice. Despite over two years of wrangling over what model the UK should choose for future relations with the EU, all potential options still seem open. As long as MPs believe that their own preferred option is still possible, they are less inclined to compromise and go for their second or third preferred choice. **To raise the chance that parliament will back something with a majority, May should reduce the number of options significantly.** That she may not have fully abandoned her own deal yet casts some doubt over whether this will be possible.
- **Despite the clear challenges, the logic points to a resolution soon** - possibly before 22 May. This is a critical date. It is the very last date the UK could pass the Withdrawal Agreement without having to hold the European elections on 23-26 May. We therefore see an odds-on chance that Brexit happens in Q2 2019. Still, the risks are significant. **The longer UK parliament deliberates without finding a solution, the risk that it never does rises.** In such a scenario, we would watch the risk that parliament eventually turns to voters to help break the deadlock, either via a snap election or a second referendum. A snap election could bring far-left Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn to power (20%). His socialist economic policies would add to the supply-side risks to the UK economy coming from Brexit already. A second referendum could end in either a hard Brexit (20% risk) or no Brexit (20% chance).

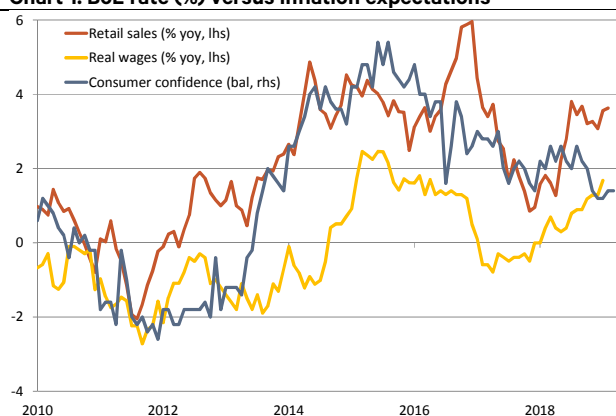
Economic outlook

- If parliament backs one of the options for a soft Brexit in Q2, this would remove the hard Brexit risk and lift the uncertainty hanging over households and businesses by the end of the second quarter. That would enable growth to rebound in Q3 as the UK enters a transitional period – of probably 18 months – in which it would remain in the EU single market. **From annualised growth rates of 0.6% in H1 2019, we see growth temporarily accelerating towards 2.4% in H1 2020 – Table 1 – before returning toward trend thereafter.**
- The sharp 15% drop in trade-weighted sterling following the Brexit vote, reflecting declining confidence in financial markets about the UK economic outlook, pushed up import prices and headline inflation towards 3% during 2017. The squeeze to real household disposable incomes from the rise in inflation has slowed real household

spending growth since the Brexit vote – Chart 1. But the squeeze is now over and real wages are rebounding nicely at rates of close to 1.5% yoy. Spurred on by an income tax cut in April, spending growth is set to improve, especially on big ticket items that often go hand in hand with credit to finance such payments. Households should feel more confident to take on such risks once Brexit is sorted. **In our base case, we look for household private consumption growth to accelerate from c1.2% yoy currently to c2.7% in H1 2020.**

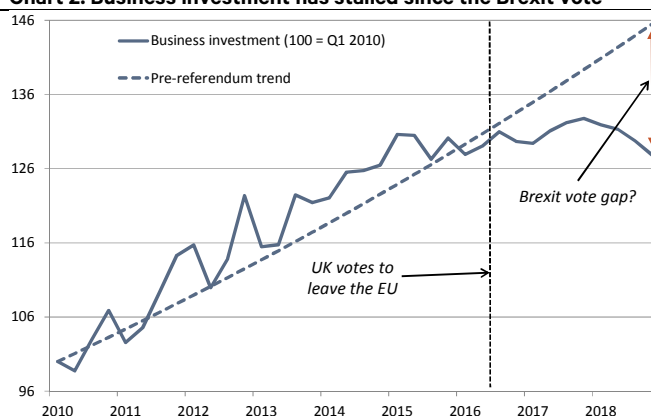
- Brexit uncertainty has severely dampened businesses' appetite to invest since the Brexit vote in June 2016. After rising moderately in 2017, business investment declined in each quarter of 2018. By Q4 2018, it was **c14% lower than it would have been had the pre-referendum trend** (from 2010 onwards) continued – see Chart 2. Private business investment is the main component of gross fixed capital formation (GFCF), the broadest category of investment spending. We see GFCF declining by 1.8% in 2019, largely due to the carry-over effect of sharp declines in the second half of 2018 and a likely further contraction in H1 2019. In any outcome barring a hard Brexit we would expect business confidence to improve materially over the medium term. With improved sentiment, firms are more likely to step up long-lived capital investment. **We thus look for GFCF to rebound by 3.7% in 2020 as firms partly unleash pent-up investment that they had withheld over the past three years.**

Chart 1: BoE rate (%) versus inflation expectations



Monthly data. Source: Bank of England, GfK

Chart 2: Business investment has stalled since the Brexit vote

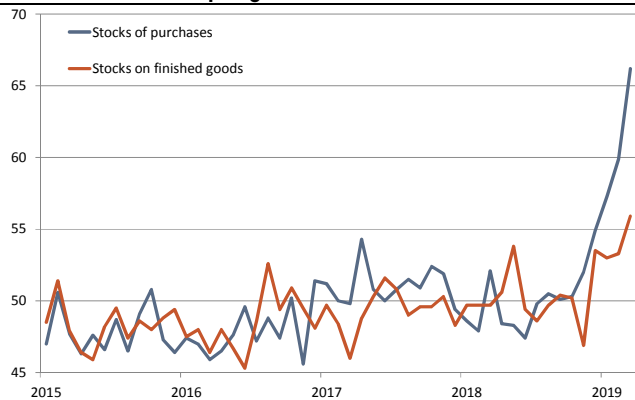


Quarterly data. Source: ONS, Berenberg

- Survey data suggests a sharp increase in stockpiling at the start of 2019 as firms prepared for the potential worst-case scenario of a hard Brexit – Chart 3. While firms have been building stockpiles over the course of 2018 already, surveys have only recently reported on it in a major way. We are thus cautious of reading too much into the sharp jump in reported stockpiling in the latest survey data – Chart 3. GDP data for Q1 - published on 10 May 2019 – will reveal the extent of any such trends. **However, stockpiling that now adds to GDP growth may be partly unwound when, or if, parliament backs a soft Brexit option. This could act as a modest drag on real GDP growth and production over the medium term as stockpiles are run down.** Nevertheless, we would still expect stronger consumption and investment growth to more than compensate for any drag from de-stocking.
- The BoE has proceeded cautiously over the past two years, only hiking rates twice even as the balance of demand and supply and rising cost pressures in the UK domestic economy would have justified a slightly faster pace of tightening. Driven by improving wage growth and rising unit labour costs, inflationary pressures are likely to build over the medium term. Inflation expectations have risen sharply on a sustained basis – Chart 4. **In our view, the BoE would prefer to put off the next hike until Brexit is resolved. We thus look for the next rate hike in August. Even if Brexit remains unsolved into H2 2019, the BoE could still hike once this year if data continue to point to building inflation risks.** By delaying the next rate hike too long, the BoE runs the risks throttling the economy down the road as it plays catch-up.
- In our view, the risks to the economic outlook are higher than usual, both to the upside and to the downside. The end state – hard Brexit, semi-soft or soft Brexit, or no Brexit – and how long it takes to reach will have a major bearing on developments in the UK economy. In case UK parliament cannot resolve Brexit in Q2, any delay thereafter would

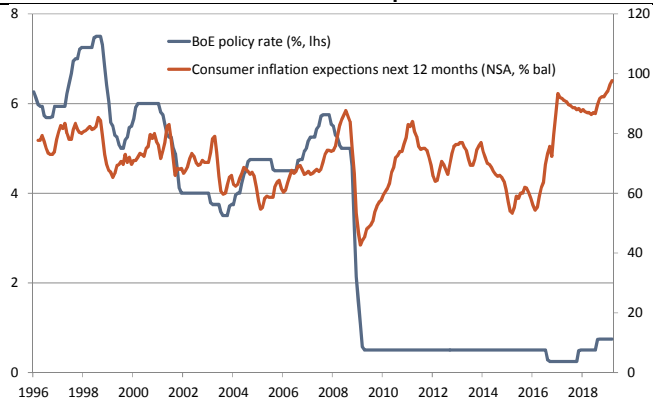
prolong the uncertainty and tail risks and depress growth momentum. We see a risk that we will need to downgrade our UK forecast for H2 if Brexit uncertainties persist beyond Q2.

Chart 3: Firms' stockpiling in case of a hard Brexit



Monthly data. Source: IHS Markit. 50 = no change.

Chart 4: BoE rate (%) versus inflation expectations



Monthly data. Source: Bank of England, GfK

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