



House of Commons

Committee of Public Accounts

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# **Sustainability and financial performance of acute hospital trusts**

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**Thirtieth Report of Session 2015–16**





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*Report, together with formal minutes relating  
to the report*

*Ordered by the House of Commons  
to be printed 7 March 2016*

## The Committee of Public Accounts

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Powers of the Committee of Public Accounts are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No. 148. These are available on the Internet via [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk).

### Publication

Committee reports are published on the Committee’s website at [www.parliament.uk/pac](http://www.parliament.uk/pac) and in print by Order of the House.

Evidence relating to this report is published on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee’s website.

### Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Stephen McGinness (Clerk), Dr Mark Ewbank (Second Clerk), George James (Senior Committee Assistant), Sue Alexander and Ruby Radley (Committee Assistants) and Tim Bowden (Media Officer).

### Contacts

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## Summary

The financial health of NHS trusts and NHS foundation trusts has significantly worsened in the last three financial years. Trusts had a net deficit of £843 million in 2014–15, which is a severe decline from trusts' £91 million deficit in 2013–14, and £592 million surplus in 2012–13. Trusts' finances look set to deteriorate further—halfway through 2015–16 three quarters of trusts had a deficit, and their total overspend could rise to around £2.5 billion. The Department of Health, NHS England and NHS Improvement have not taken action soon enough to keep trusts in financial balance. The target for trusts to make 4% efficiency savings across the board is unrealistic and better data is needed for more informed savings and efficiency targets. Failings in the system for paying providers need to be addressed as a matter of urgency, with NHS Improvement and NHS England acknowledging that the current system is not fit-for-purpose as it does not incentivise the right behaviours needed for joined-up healthcare services. Spending on agency staff has contributed to trusts' financial distress, and action to tackle this problem is welcome, albeit late. The NHS will not solve the problem of reliance on agency staff until it solves its wider workforce planning issues. We recognise the immense challenge of achieving financial and service sustainability when demand is rising and budgets are tight, and acknowledge the ongoing efforts of NHS England and NHS Improvement to find solutions. But there is much to do to produce the convincing plan necessary for the NHS to get itself back into financial balance.

## Introduction

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In 2014–15, the Department of Health (the Department) allocated £98 billion of its £111 billion budget to pay for NHS services. Finances across the NHS have become increasingly tight with health funding rising at a historically low rate of 1.8% in real terms between 2010–11 and 2014–15. At 31 March 2015 there were 90 NHS trusts and 155 NHS foundation trusts, of which 55 NHS trusts and 100 NHS foundation trusts were acute hospital trusts providing healthcare services such as accident and emergency, inpatient and outpatient and in some cases specialist or community care. NHS Improvement, a new health sector regulator, brings together Monitor, the regulator for NHS foundation trusts, and the NHS Trust Development Authority, the oversight body for NHS trusts. A significant number of acute hospital trusts are in serious and persistent financial distress and many are struggling to make efficiencies to improve their financial position. The Department and NHS England provided £1.8 billion of additional financial support to NHS trusts and NHS foundation trusts in financial difficulty in 2014–15. The NHS Five Year Forward View, published in October 2014, set out changes to the provision of healthcare services that aims to enable the NHS to adapt to pressures of increasing patient demand for healthcare and funding constraints. The new models of care outlined in the Five Year Forward View aim to break down the boundaries between primary care, hospitals and community care, and integrate services around the needs of the patient.

## Conclusions and recommendations

1. **The financial performance of NHS trusts and NHS foundation trusts has deteriorated sharply and this trend is not sustainable.** NHS trusts' and foundation trusts' finances have deteriorated at a severe and rapid pace, with trusts' £843 million deficit in 2014–15 representing a sharp decline from the £91 million deficit reported in 2013–14. This situation looks set to worsen with three quarters of trusts in deficit six months into 2015–16. NHS Improvement told us that by the end of 2015–16 the deficit could be more than £2.5 billion, although with the capital transfers and accounting adjustments made by the Department and NHS Improvement, it hoped to reduce this years' deficit to £1.8 billion. Not enough has been done soon enough to tackle this spiralling trend. Now many trusts are only getting by on the extra cash given to them by the Department and NHS England, which together provided £1.8 billion of financial support to trusts in financial distress in 2014–15. The Department, NHS England and NHS Improvement told us about the £1.8 billion sustainability support that will be available to trusts in 2016–17 to provide “breathing space” to help trusts' finances get back on track, although we heard that this fund would not itself clear the deficit. The Department is also looking to generate £2 billion this parliament from disposing of surplus estate but there is little detail on how this will be realised.

**Recommendation:** *The Department, NHS England and NHS Improvement should make sure all trusts in deficit have realistic recovery plans by the start of the 2016–17 financial year that will lead to timely and sustainable improvements.*

2. **The targets set by NHS England and Monitor for providers to make efficiencies were unrealistic and have caused long-term damage to trusts' finances.** The 4% efficiency target for trusts set by Monitor and NHS England was driven by the shortage of resources available across the NHS overall. Historically the NHS has achieved efficiency savings of 1–2% and a target of more than double this has proved to be overly ambitious. While the Department told us some trusts should have even tougher targets placed on them, NHS Improvement recognised that efficiency savings of this magnitude were unachievable for many trusts. NHS England agreed that aggressive efficiency targets had caused long-term damage to trusts' financial positions. It said the new efficiency savings target of 2% from 2016–17 was a “more reasonable” requirement for trusts to deliver.

**Recommendation:** *The Department, NHS England and NHS Improvement should set informed and realistic targets for providers to make efficiencies.*

3. **The data used to estimate trusts' potential cost savings targets is seriously flawed.** The previous Committee recommended in 2015 that NHS England and Monitor should collect consistent and detailed cost data across the NHS and use this to set efficiency savings targets for NHS bodies. Both accepted this recommendation at the time and so it is concerning that Lord Carter's team used trusts' cost data from 2014–15 to set savings targets for trusts, when half of trusts' cost data from the previous year was described as “materially inaccurate” by Monitor. NHS Improvement agreed that the quality of the data needs to improve and said that organisations must work together to get better cost data. More widely, the proper collection of data is an issue

we see time and again across government. The effectiveness of targets is dependent on the quality of the underpinning data and inaccurate cost data will lead to ill-informed savings targets for trusts.

**Recommendation: NHS Improvement should set out how it will work with trusts in the 2016–17 financial year to improve the quality of the data on which its savings targets are based.**

4. **The current system of paying providers through a national tariff does not support financial sustainability nor incentivise joined-up services.** Monitor and NHS England set the prices and rules that determine how healthcare providers are paid through the national tariff payment system. The NAO's report showed that trusts which rely mainly on tariff income are more likely to run a deficit than trusts that receive extra income for carrying out activities such as teaching and research. Penalty fines imposed by clinical commissioning groups for non-compliance with performance targets create added financial pressure for trusts. NHS Improvement told us that its payment system should support providers to work in a sustainable way but it acknowledged that the current system was “not fit-for-purpose” in this regard. NHS England said the payment system was not driving improvement nor incentivising the joined-up services which would reduce demand for acute services and help trusts to better cover their costs.

**Recommendation: NHS England and NHS Improvement should set out proposals for changing the payment and contracting system for providers to one that supports financial and service sustainability, incentivises integration and service collaboration and reduces the need for reactive financial support to providers in difficulty.**

5. **Acute hospital trusts' spending on agency staff has contributed to their financial distress.** Acute trusts' spending on temporary staff increased by 24% between 2012–13 and 2014–15, as a result of difficulties recruiting permanent staff and new requirements for safe staffing levels. NHS England said that spending on temporary staff was the largest driver behind trusts' increasing deficits. It described how some agencies providing temporary staff had taken advantage of the situation to charge “rip-off” fees, and the Department argued that no one had foreseen the scale of “exploitation” by agencies. NHS England and NHS Improvement plan to use the collective bargaining power of the NHS, as a large employer, to drive down prices paid for temporary staff. NHS Improvement estimates that the predicted £4 billion expenditure by trusts on agency staff in 2015–16 could be £880 million lower if there were no excessive agency charges. We accept that the cost of agency staff may be excessive, but we also note that the use of agency staff in the NHS is nothing new and that the opportunity for agencies to take advantage of staff supply shortages was predictable. Yet the Department, NHS England and NHS Improvement are only recently making serious attempts to control agency spending. We also note that, while our witnesses attributed close to £1 billion of deficit ‘pressure’ in 2015–16 to additional spending on temporary staff, the root cause is the volume of temporary staff required, as opposed to the element of the associated costs which is the agencies' commission. Ultimately, until the NHS solves its workforce planning issues, including the lack of affordable homes for NHS staff, it will not solve the problem of reliance on agency staff.

**Recommendation:** *NHS England and NHS Improvement should be clear that spending on agency staff is only one contributing factor to the deficit. They should set out how they will support providers to secure the collective action that is needed to get value for money from the use of agency staff as a matter of urgency.*

6. **There is not yet a convincing plan in place for closing the £22 billion efficiency gap and avoiding a ‘black hole’ in NHS finances.** Acute hospital trusts are at a crisis point and NHS Improvement acknowledged the need to “regroup” and “rethink” priorities. We recognise the huge challenge of putting the NHS on a firmer financial footing and maintaining services at a time of increasing demands and when budgets are tight. The Department, NHS England and NHS Improvement understand the scale of the challenge and told us about their ongoing work to try to address the problems. For example, NHS England and NHS Improvement told us it will be supporting and challenging the local sustainability and transformation plans that each part of the country will produce in June 2016. We support their efforts, but have not yet seen the overarching and convincing plan for where and how the £22 billion savings needed by 2020–21 will be made. The NAO has also commented on the lack of a detailed plan and made various recommendations in its report to help work towards achieving long-term sustainability.

**Recommendation:** *The Department of Health, NHS England and NHS Improvement should report to us jointly in September 2016 on their progress with implementing the NAO’s recommendations and the further recommendations we make in this report.*

# 1 Managing financial performance

1. On the basis of a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, we took evidence from the Department of Health (the Department), NHS England and NHS Improvement.<sup>1</sup> We also took evidence from Yeovil District Hospital NHS Foundation Trust and the Healthcare Financial Management Association.

2. In 2014–15, the Department allocated £98 billion of its £111 billion budget to its largest arm’s-length body, NHS England, to plan and pay for NHS services. The 211 clinical commissioning groups spent the greatest share of this, largely buying healthcare from 90 NHS trusts and 150 NHS foundation trusts. The Department is ultimately responsible for securing value for money from this expenditure. In 2014–15, the Department came close to exceeding the £111 billion revenue expenditure budget authorised by Parliament, underspending by just £1.2 million or 0.001%.<sup>2</sup>

3. There has been significant change in the NHS since the introduction of the Health and Social Care Act 2012. These changes have come at a time of increased financial pressures in government arising from austerity. Health is an area of public spending that the government has protected in recent years compared with most other areas of government spending. However, finances have become increasingly tight with health funding rising at a historically low rate of 1.8% in real terms between 2010–11 and 2014–15.<sup>3</sup>

4. The NHS Five Year Forward View, published in October 2014, set out proposed changes to the provision of healthcare services to enable the NHS to respond to increasing patient demand and funding constraints. The Five Year Forward View estimated there will be a £30 billion gap between resources and patient needs by 2020–21. In November 2015, the government committed to increasing funding for the NHS by £8.4 billion by 2020, with £3.8 billion of this given to the NHS in 2016–17. This extra funding leaves an estimated £22 billion gap between resources and patient needs by 2020–21.<sup>4</sup>

5. The NHS must be financially sustainable for it to provide sustainable healthcare services to patients. In recent years, spending by NHS trusts and NHS foundation trusts has outpaced growth in their income and trusts’ are increasingly unable to keep their spending within budget.<sup>5</sup>

## Deteriorating financial performance

6. The latest audited data shows that NHS trusts’ and NHS foundation trusts’ financial positions have significantly worsened since the previous Committee’s report in February 2015.<sup>6</sup> NHS trusts and NHS foundation trusts together reported a £843 million deficit in 2014–15, which is a sharp decline from trusts’ £91 million deficit in 2013–14 and £592 million surplus in 2012–13. The percentage of NHS trusts and NHS foundation trusts in deficit increased from 10% in 2012–13, to 26% in 2013–14, rising to 48% in 2014–15. The Department and NHS England provided NHS trusts and NHS foundation trusts that

1 [C&AG’s Report, \*Sustainability and financial performance of acute hospital trusts\*, Session 2015–16, HC 611, 16 December 2015](#)

2 [C&AG’s Report, paras 1–2](#)

3 [C&AG’s Report, para 2](#)

4 [C&AG’s Report, para 3](#)

5 [C&AG’s Report, para 4 and Figure 1](#)

6 [Committee of Public Accounts, \*Financial sustainability of NHS bodies\*, Session 2014–15, HC 736, 3 February 2015](#)

were in financial difficulty with £1.8 billion of cash support in 2014–15 so that trusts had the money they needed to pay their suppliers and staff and to fund essential building works.<sup>7</sup> We heard that Yeovil District Hospital NHS Foundation Trust received a loan from the Department in 2015–16, and would be requesting a further loan to cover its costs in 2016–17. It said it had not included the repayment of the loan in its five year financial plan that had been signed-off by Monitor.<sup>8</sup>

7. In the first six months of 2015–16, 76% of NHS trusts and NHS foundation trusts reported deficits.<sup>9</sup> In November 2015, Monitor and the NHS Trust Development Authority forecast NHS trusts and NHS foundation trusts would have a £2.2 billion deficit by 31 March 2016.<sup>10</sup> But at the time of our evidence session, NHS Improvement told us trusts were heading towards a deficit of more than £2.5 billion in the current financial year. However, the Department and NHS Improvement said that capital revenue transfers and accounting adjustments would reduce the 2015–16 deficit to £1.8 billion.<sup>11</sup>

8. We heard that, in 2016–17, trusts will have access to NHS England’s Sustainability and Transformation Fund of £2.14 billion. Of this, £1.8 billion will be spent on sustainability to stabilise NHS operational performance, and £340 million for transformation to continue the vanguard programme and other areas of the Five Year Forward View.<sup>12</sup> NHS Improvement told us that the sustainability support will “bring organisations back into balance” in 2016–17 but will not clear the deficit accumulated in the current financial year.<sup>13</sup>

9. In response to our concerns about the 2015–16 planning process for trusts, NHS Improvement acknowledged that it was “not acceptable” that foundation trusts did not provide Monitor with their financial projections until October 2015, seven months into the financial year. As the new regulator bringing together Monitor and the NHS Trust Development Authority, NHS Improvement said that work to change how these organisations supported trusts was ongoing. It admitted that the 2015–16 “plans should have been earlier” and there should have been “more rigour” and “more challenge”.<sup>14</sup> The Department explained that providers’ challenge of the tariff also had an impact on the planning timetable.<sup>15</sup>

## Setting informed targets

10. The Department’s team led by Lord Carter of Coles is examining how acute trusts can make savings and has reported that the NHS could save £5 billion every year by 2020 by making better use of staff, using medicines more effectively and getting better value from the products it buys. For example, the Department told us that Lord Carter’s work has “revealed huge variation” in how NHS staff are deployed and this could be improved through changes to the way rosters are run, and making sure sick leave and other absences

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7 [C&AG’s Report, Figure 3, paras 3.2–3.3.](#)

8 [Qq 26, 42](#)

9 [C&AG’s Report, Key Facts](#)

10 [Qq 34, 48; C&AG’s Report, para 1.8 and figure 4](#)

11 [Qq 49, 140, 141](#)

12 [Q 77](#)

13 [Qq 74, 76](#)

14 [Q 96; C&AG’s Report, para 3.11](#)

15 [Q 52](#)

are better managed.<sup>16</sup> We asked if the Department is using its position as a large landowner to help government meet targets to build affordable homes and it told us that Lord Carter's team is looking at how the NHS estate is used. The Department said that is looking to generate around £2 billion of capital receipts from estate disposals in this parliament, partly to free up money for investment in transformation and partly to support wider the government initiative to dispose of public land and make it available for new homes. It also told us it will start to implement Lord Carter's savings targets for acute trusts in 2016–17.<sup>17</sup>

11. While it is positive that the Department is taking steps to identify how trusts can make savings, we have serious concerns about the accuracy of the data supporting these targets, which is primarily based on reference costs—the average unit cost to the NHS of providing healthcare. The National Audit Office reported that the quality of reference costs data relies on accurate data being submitted by trusts, and a recent audit by Monitor of reference costs for 2013–14 found that 49% of trusts sending these data had made 'materially inaccurate' submissions. NHS Improvement told us that in the past reference cost data was not well-used and so trusts did not put effort into ensuring its quality. We note that Lord Carter's work uses reference costs data collected in 2014–15.<sup>18</sup>

12. There was general agreement that good data was a key part of improving financial management in trusts.<sup>19</sup> Time and again this Committee has seen how inadequate data collection, by health bodies and more widely across government, impacts on decision making.<sup>20</sup> For example, we recently reported that data gaps are affecting the Department and NHS England's ability to make well-informed decisions on how to improve access to general practice or where to direct their limited resources.<sup>21</sup> NHS Improvement told us that it has a huge job to improve the quality of data and to make it more meaningful. It said organisations needed to agree how to get accurate costings to set savings targets and it argued that costings data will become more accurate each year it is used as trusts see its benefits.<sup>22</sup>

13. The NHS has historically achieved annual efficiency savings of 0.8% which have increased to 1.5–2% in recent years, against a target of 4% set by Monitor and NHS England.<sup>23</sup> NHS Improvement told us that trusts had not believed that 4% efficiency savings was achievable.<sup>24</sup> The National Audit Office reported that acute trusts made fewer efficiencies in 2014–15 than in 2013–14, £2.2 billion compared with £2.3 billion, and that acute trusts' have increasingly planned to make non-recurrent efficiencies.<sup>25</sup> We heard from Yeovil District Hospital NHS Foundation Trust that the "easier things to make

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16 [Qq 105, 120; C&AG's Report, para 3.20](#)

17 [Qq 82, 98](#)

18 [Qq 105, 107, 110; C&AG's Report, para 3.20](#)

19 [Qq 105–107](#)

20 [Q 105; Committee of Public Accounts, \*The work of the Committee of Public Accounts 2010–15\*, Fifty-second Report of Session 2014–15, HC 1141, 23 March 2015](#)

21 [Committee of Public Accounts, \*Access to general practice in England\*, Twenty-eighth Report of Session 2015–16, HC 673, 9 March 2016](#)

22 [Qq 107, 110](#)

23 [C&AG's Report, para 3.21](#)

24 [Q 71](#)

25 [C&AG's Report, para 16 and 17](#)

efficiencies on have been done”.<sup>26</sup> The Department noted, however, that Lord Carter’s work had revealed big variations in how trusts use their resources and there was scope for some trusts to exceed the target of 4%.<sup>27</sup>

14. The Department, NHS England and NHS Improvement acknowledged that the efficiency target of 4% was driven by the shortage of resources across the NHS overall. NHS England explained that in 2015–16 the efficiency target for acute hospital trusts was closer to 3.5% than 4% for those that had opted for the ‘enhanced tariff option’ payment arrangements.<sup>28</sup>

15. In response to our concerns that the overly ambitious efficiency target had damaged trusts’ financial positions, NHS England agreed that the target had created pressure in the system and that it was logical to assume this had damaged trusts’ financial positions.<sup>29</sup> In 2016–17, Monitor and NHS England will reduce the efficiency target to 2% and this was described by NHS Improvement as a “more reasonable” requirement for trusts to deliver.<sup>30</sup>

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26 [Q 4](#)

27 [Q 94](#)

28 [Qq 71, 90–93](#)

29 [Qq 91, 94](#)

30 [Qq 72, 73, 78, 90](#)

## Formal Minutes

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**Monday 7 March 2016**

Members present:

Meg Hillier, in the Chair

Chris Evans

John Pugh

Caroline Flint

Karin Smyth

Mr Stewart Jackson

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan

Stephen Phillips

Draft Report (*Sustainability and financial performance of acute hospital trusts*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 15 read and agreed to.

Introduction agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the Thirtieth Report of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

*Ordered*, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Wednesday 9 March 2016 at 2.00 pm]

## Witnesses

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The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

### Monday 18 January 2016

*Question number*

**Paul Mears**, Chief Executive, Yeovil District Hospital, **Paul von der Heyde**, Chairman, Yeovil District Hospital, **Tim Newman**, Chief Finance Officer, Yeovil District Hospital, and **Ms Shahana Khan**, President of the Healthcare Financial Management Association

[Q1–47](#)

**David Williams**, Director General of Finance, Department of Health, **Dame Una O'Brien**, Permanent Secretary, Department of Health, **Simon Stevens**, Chief Executive, NHS England, and **Jim Mackey**, Chief Executive, NHS Improvement

[Q48–146](#)

## Published written evidence

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The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

HSP numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 Anonymous NHS Finance Director ([HSP0004](#))
- 2 Ashby Civic Society ([HSP0002](#))
- 3 NHS Improvement ([HSP0003](#))
- 4 NHS Providers ([HSP0001](#))
- 5 The Health Foundation ([HSP0005](#))

## List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

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All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

### Session 2015–16

First Report	Financial sustainability of police forces in England and Wales	HC 288 (Cm 9170)
Second Report	Disposal of public land for new homes	HC 289 (Cm 9170)
Third Report	Funding for disadvantaged pupils	HC 327 (Cm 9170)
Fourth Report	Fraud and Error Stocktake	HC 394 (Cm 9190)
Fifth Report	Care leavers' transition to adulthood	HC 411 (Cm 9190)
Sixth Report	HM Revenue & Customs performance 2014–15	HC 393 (Cm 9190)
Seventh Report	Devolving responsibilities to cities in England: Wave 1 City Deals	HC 395 (Cm 9190)
Eighth Report	The Government's funding of Kids Company	HC 504 (Cm 9190)
Ninth Report	Network Rail's: 2014–2019 investment programme	HC 473 (Cm 9220)
Tenth Report	Care Act first-phase reforms and local government new burdens	HC 412 (Cm 9220)
Eleventh Report	Strategic financial management of the Ministry of Defence and Military flying training	HC 391 (Cm 9220)
Twelfth Report	Care Quality Commission	HC 501 (Cm 9220)
Thirteenth Report	Overseeing financial sustainability in the further education sector	HC 414 (Cm 9220)
Fourteenth Report	General Practice Extraction Service	HC 503 (Cm 9220)
Fifteenth Report	Economic regulation in the water sector	HC 505
Sixteenth Report	Sale of Eurostar	HC 564
Seventeenth Report	Management of adult diabetes services in the NHS: progress review	HC 563

Eighteenth Report	Automatic enrolment to workplace pensions	HC 581
Nineteenth Report	Universal Credit: progress update	HC 601
Twentieth Report	Cancer Drugs Fund	HC 583
Twenty-first Report	Reform of the rail franchising programme	HC 600
Twenty-second Report	Excess Votes 2014–15	HC 787
Twenty-third Report	Financial sustainability of fire and rescue services	HC 582
Twenty-fourth Report	Services to people with neurological conditions: progress review	HC 502
Twenty-fifth Report	Corporate tax settlements	HC 788
Twenty-sixth Report	The Common Agricultural Policy Delivery Programme	HC 642
Twenty-seventh Report	e-Borders and successor programmes	HC 643
Twenty-eighth Report	Access to General Practice in England	HC 673
Twenty-ninth Report	Making a whistleblowing policy work: progress update	HC 602
First Special Report	Unauthorised disclosure of draft Report in the previous Parliament	HC 539