

#### ESG INVESTMENT

ESG funds have performed well in turbulent times

#### STATE PENSION SHORTFALL

Women may have been underpaid by DWP

#### BUY-TO-LET OPPORTUNITIES

Do stamp duty changes benefit property investors?

AUTUMN 2020



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WEALTH MANAGEMENT

# Quarterly Newsletter

## Looking to the next Budget

*What can we expect in the second Budget of the year?*





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With people starting to return to the office and schools and universities reopening, it appears that life is beginning to tentatively resume its usual rhythms this autumn. As the longer term effects of the lockdown become apparent, we look at some short-term future implications of the pandemic – such as student loans and the upcoming Budget. We explore how ESG funds have been performing during the last few months and investigate whether the summer changes to stamp duties make buy-to-let a more attractive investment. We also explore how some women's state pensions may have been underpaid. As ever, if you are affected by any of the topics, we're here to help.

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News in brief

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# Technology stocks define a new era for digital growth

*The Covid virus instigated an extremely volatile period in February and March for most global stock market investors and we have subsequently witnessed a real polarisation of returns over the last five months since the March 23rd market low.*

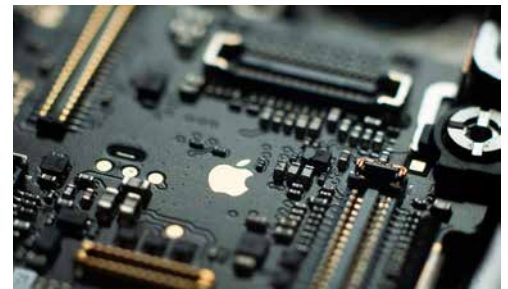
Year to date, markets around the world have performed in markedly contrasting directions. The difference in performance over the 8-month period from January 1st to August 31st between the Nasdaq, (the best performing main index), and the FTSE 100, (the worst) is 58%. That performance differential is unprecedented.

US markets have been very robust with their focus on large technology companies – the top 5 US companies now make up around 25% of the S&P 500 with its largest company, Apple, now worth over \$2 trillion. Technology companies have been a massive beneficiary of covid, with their strong business franchises, raised profiles through remote working – Zoom for example – and significantly increased demand for their products and services – Amazon.

We are witnessing a change in the guard of global corporate leaders and the key to success is not necessarily whether a company is a tech company or not, but how companies are approaching the transformation to digital.

Remote working has laid bare those companies ill prepared for this change or unable to adapt.

Companies like Apple, whose value increased from a \$1 trillion company to a \$2 trillion company in just five months this year, is successful not just because of a product, but a process built around digital engagement.



Apple has become the World's first \$2 trillion-dollar company

The iPod started the journey for Apple on becoming the largest company and of course, when the iPhone was launched in June 2007 by Steve Jobs, the world changed. A digital product was created that the world fell in love with and has become a digital tool for many aspects of life as well as a status symbol for many. The iPhone product upgrade continues for Apple, but less than half of their revenue now comes from the phone. The majority of revenue is coming from wearables and a plethora of services that gives Apple an annuity like recurring revenue stream.

Apple has been a great story and provides a window into what most businesses will need to thrive in the new world. Apple's market capitalisation is now larger than all the FTSE 100 combined (our 100 largest UK companies) and whether that can continue is open to debate. To carve out corporate success stories post Brexit, the UK needs to direct additional resource to areas such as pharmaceutical research and AI where we have genuine expertise. In the interim, and without embracing digital transformation, many of our leading FTSE 100 companies are starting to look like businesses in terminal decline.

The covid period is highlighting why passive investment in the UK is potentially really challenged going forward, while we have an index built around oil companies, banks and pharmaceuticals. With active investment, we task fund managers with making judicious stock picks identifying future trends and opportunities and it has been very positive to witness large numbers of fund managers and asset managers making very good calls this year through one of the most challenging periods in investment history.

With a welcome return to school for children this week and the start of a new university year imminent, we consider higher education costs in this issue. In addition, there are articles on current topical industry and financial planning issues. Please do contact us if you wish to review any of the articles, or individual investment portfolios.

**Rob Sandwith** | Chief Executive  
September 4th, 2020



## INVESTMENT

# ESG investment comes into its own

*Taking a more principled approach to investing doesn't mean you necessarily have to sacrifice returns.*

**T**his year has been a rollercoaster ride for investors, with markets falling sharply in March as the economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic became clear. There has been some recovery, although prices remain volatile.

Yet certain funds seem to have fared better than others during this period of turbulence. In many cases, these are funds that engage with a range of environmental, social and governance (ESG) factors alongside standard financial metrics for selecting shares. This is also often labelled 'responsible investing'.

Whereas some ethical funds (see text box) automatically avoid whole sectors, ESG funds do not. Instead they assess how, for example, a company's environmental policies — or lack of them — might impact its future share price. These are investment judgements, of course, so may not always turn out to be correct in retrospect.

ESG funds have generally weathered the recent market storms well. Research from Morningstar shows that in the first quarter of 2020 70% of ESG funds were ranked in the top halves of their investment categories which consist of funds invested in the same assets or geographic region. By contrast, just 11% of ESG funds were in their category's bottom quartile, indicating that they performed better than

funds that did not look at these wider ESG factors when selecting stocks.

Bear in mind that this information covers a very short timeframe and there is no guarantee that ESG funds will continue to outperform. However, there are several reasons why these funds may have performed better during recent volatile markets and may continue this trend in the coming years.

One factor is that many have less exposure to oil companies, which have been hit by collapsing oil prices. The Covid-19 crisis has boosted other sectors too, such as those delivering technology solutions to help businesses and people work remotely. This may play into ESG themes about reducing travel and carbon emissions.

While much of the focus around ESG is on environmental issues, it's important to remember that the selection process most of these funds undertake also considers how well a company is run and its corporate policies on such issues as executive pay, gender equality and transparent supply chains.

Over the longer term it remains to be seen whether ESG fund managers will identify the companies that will prosper in future, but with many more people thinking carefully about where to invest their savings, ESG investment is

## ETHICAL VS ESG FUNDS

**Ethical funds:** These funds may screen out whole sectors or companies. For example, many ethical funds avoid investing in tobacco, alcohol or armament companies for moral reasons. Guidelines vary from fund to fund. Some ethical funds take a 'best of breed' approach, particularly about such issues as climate change.

**ESG funds:** Rather than making moral judgements, ESG investing relies on a screening or risk assessment tool, that the fund managers use to assess potential risks and opportunities. They analyse a range of environmental, social and governance factors to see how these might affect share prices.

no longer a fringe area. As with all investment decisions, you should take expert advice.

✦ *The value of your investments and the income from them can go down as well as up and you may not get back the full amount you invested. Past performance is not a reliable indicator of future performance. Investing in shares should be regarded as a long-term investment and should fit with your overall attitude to risk and financial circumstances.*





## TAX

# Looking to the next Budget

*The second Budget of 2020 could mark the start of a round of tax increases.*

**W**hen 2019 passed without a Budget, it seemed an unusual year. 2020, already out of the ordinary, will more than make up for it with two.

The first Budget of 2020 took place on 11 March, the day that the World Health Organisation declared Covid-19 a pandemic. At the time, the Office for Budget

Responsibility (OBR) calculated that the UK government would need to borrow around £55bn in 2020/21. By mid-July, the OBR updated its projections, and that estimate rose to £322bn – almost six times the original figure.

No government can continue to borrow at such a rate and many economists regard the autumn Budget as the moment when the brakes will start to be applied. The Chancellor

is somewhat constrained by his party's 2019 election manifesto pledge not to increase income tax, National Insurance contributions and VAT rates.

However, as his predecessors have consistently demonstrated, there are many ways to increase tax that do not involve changing the rates. In particular, three areas of reform are already being considered.

## Pandemic lessons

*The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the low level of social security benefits*

### Do you know the weekly value of Statutory Sick Pay (SSP)?

Before Covid-19, most people would probably have struggled to give even a half-accurate answer. Now that so many people have received SSP for the first time, there is an increased awareness. The size of the sum was a surprise for many – just £95.85 per week for up to 28 weeks. The same could be said for other benefits that came under the spotlight because of the pandemic, such as Universal Credit (UC) and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA).

The government's partial response was to increase some benefits temporarily, e.g. adding £1,000 a year to the UC standard allowance. More important was the introduction of the furlough scheme, which meant that over nine million people remained 'employed' on up to 80% of their pre-pandemic pay. Without the scheme, a large group of its beneficiaries could otherwise have lost their jobs and received the markedly smaller UC payments.

The furlough scheme is due to close by November, while the rest of the temporary social security increases are set to finish next April. One of the many lessons from the pandemic is that the UK's social security system supplies minimal benefits and these are often subject to means-testing. Another lesson is that private insurance cover, such as income protection which pays out if someone is ill and unable to work, can have a vital role in filling the gaps.

**“** *Many economists regard the Autumn Budget as when the brakes on borrowing will start to be applied.*

distinct possibility that, in his next Budget, the Chancellor could try to claw some money back by reducing tax relief for higher and additional rate taxpayers.

### INHERITANCE TAX

A report was commissioned over two years ago by the then Chancellor, Philip Hammond, on simplifying inheritance tax (IHT) from the Office of Tax Simplification (OTS). The OTS issued two reports, but no action was taken in the subsequent Budgets.

Matters may be different, come autumn 2020. Recent statistics from HMRC show that last year IHT receipts fell for the first time since 2017/18. The drop is possibly attributable to the impact of the Residence Nil Rate Band (RNRB), introduced in April 2017. The OTS reports did not make any recommendations about the RNRB on the grounds that it had only just come into being, but it did note widespread criticism of its complexity.

A Chancellor with an eye towards a 'levelling-up' agenda and a need for more revenue could pick and choose from the recommendations in the OTS reports to collect more IHT.

### CAPITAL GAINS TAX

Out of the blue, the Chancellor gave the OTS another tax review to undertake in mid-July 2020. Capital gains tax (CGT) was the subject and this time there was less emphasis on simplification and more on ensuring 'the system is fit for purpose'.

There's a real possibility that CGT rates will once again be aligned with income tax rates, which could see the top CGT rate increase from 20% (28% for non-exempt residential property) to 45%.

Ahead of the autumn Budget, there are mitigating measures that could be taken in any of the three areas mentioned here. However, pre-Budget tax planning requires advice to avoid unnecessary or inappropriate actions.

✦ *The levels and bases of taxation and tax reliefs are subject to change and their value depends on individual circumstances. Tax laws can change. The Financial Conduct Authority does not regulate tax advice.*

### PENSIONS

The gross cost of income tax relief for pensions has been put at over £37bn by HMRC in its latest figures (for 2017/18), with a further £16.5bn for employee and employer National Insurance contributions relief.

The government launched a consultation in July 2020 on a technical aspect of pension income tax relief, a move that could be a precursor to a broader reworking. A flat rate of tax relief for all pension contributions has long been argued over by a variety of stakeholders.

In the March Budget, the Chancellor *added* to the cost of pensions tax relief by relaxing the annual allowance rules. There is a now a



## INVESTMENT

# A buy-to-let opportunity?

*Cuts to stamp duty land tax (SDLT) and its Scottish equivalent have reduced the purchase costs of buy-to-let property. But property investors should also evaluate other factors.*

**I**n his Summer Statement, the Chancellor increased the nil rate threshold for SDLT in England and Northern Ireland from £125,000 to £500,000 for all purchases until 31 March 2021. At most that means a saving of £15,000 in SDLT on a property purchase.

The Scottish Government then increased its equivalent nil rate threshold from £145,000 to £250,000. Both governments kept their surcharges on the full purchase price for buy-to-let (BTL) properties and second homes (3% in England and Northern Ireland and 4% in Scotland). Wales took a different stance and excluded BTL and second home buyers from the new Welsh £250,000 nil rate threshold (up from £180,000).

The higher thresholds prompted press headlines suggesting that the BTL market would enjoy a recovery (outside of Wales). While the tax saving can be significant, particularly in London and south east England, investors should consider the other tax changes from past years before making a BTL purchase:

- If you are borrowing money to make the purchase, you can no longer offset the interest you pay against the rent you receive for income tax relief at your highest marginal rate. Instead you will be given a tax credit equal to the basic rate of income tax on the interest charged. This could mean that all the rent is included in your income tax calculations, minus non-interest expenses, resulting in more income tax or even tipping over one of the tax system's income thresholds.
- Capital gains tax (CGT) is levied at a higher rate on disposals of non-exempt residential property than on other assets. Higher and additional rate taxpayers face a 28% tax charge once they have used up their CGT annual exempt amount.
- Any CGT due on residential property is now payable within 30 days of the completion of the sale, along with an appropriate interim tax return.
- The days of a 10% 'wear and tear' allowance for furnished properties are long gone: relief is now only given for actual expenditure.



*While the tax saving can be significant, investors should consider the other tax changes from past years before making a BTL purchase.*

More changes could be coming in England on the non-tax front. Last year the government consulted on "resetting the balance of rights and responsibilities between landlords and tenants". The consultation's proposals included the potential abolition of assured shorthold tenancies and an end to 'no-fault evictions.' Both measures could reduce the value of BTL property in England by making it less readily saleable.

The tax holiday may already be driving up prices. Nationwide reported a 1.7% monthly increase in July 2020 after taking into account seasonal factors, more than reversing the 1.6% fall in June. If you are considering investing in BTL property in the current market, however, take advice on alternative investment options first. As ever, you shouldn't let the tax tail wag the investment dog.

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## PENSIONS

# Women's state pension shortfall

**M**ore women should ask the Department for Work and Pensions to check their state pensions, according to former pensions minister Sir Steve Webb.

Rumours abound ahead of the expected Autumn Budget that the government may need to loosen the pension triple lock to help recover stretched public finances following the Covid-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, research from a leading law firm has highlighted how relying on the intricacies of the state pension system could mean many are losing out.

Under the previous system, married women who reached state pension age before 6 April 2016 were able to claim a basic state pension of 60% of the full rate based on their husbands' contribution record, if this was larger than the pension they could get based on their own contributions.

**“** *To avoid missing out, potentially affected women should call the DWP to see if they have been underpaid their state pension.*

This uplift in the state pension should have been given automatically since 17 March 2008, but before then a married woman had to make a 'second claim' when her husband reached age 65 – and many women did not make this claim.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is checking its records, but the chances are that many women will miss out and should call the department to see if they have been underpaid.

The main groups of people affected, according to the research, are:

- Married women whose husbands turned 65 before 17 March 2008 and have never claimed the 60% uplift.
- Widows with pensions that weren't increased after their husbands' deaths.
- Widows who think they may have been underpaid when their deceased husband was still alive, even if their pension is now correct.
- Women in their 80s receiving a basic pension of less than £80.45 per week, if they satisfied the basic residence test at age 80.
- Widowers and heirs of women who have now died but were underpaid state pension while alive.
- Divorced women who might not be benefiting from their ex-husbands' contributions.

Some married women who did not realise they needed to make a claim for the uplift pre-March 2008 are planning to make a complaint of maladministration to the Parliamentary Ombudsman. They will say that the DWP failed to make sure that they knew about the need to make the second state pension claim when their husband turned 65. Currently the payments for women in that category can only be backdated 12 months rather than the 12 years or more of pension uplift that has been missed.

If you think you or someone in your family may be affected, please get in touch.

## INVESTMENT

## Sharp fall for dividends

*UK dividends were down more than 50% in the second quarter of 2020*

The pandemic has hit the global economy hard and devastated the dividend payments of many leading UK companies. Between April and June 2020, total UK dividend payments were 57.2% lower than in the second quarter of 2019, according to Link Asset Services. Many companies – notably the big banks – stopped dividend payments altogether.

Despite the cuts, Link's worst-case-scenario is that UK shares will provide an income yield of 3.3% over the next year – still much better than current deposit rates.

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*Investing in shares should be regarded as a long-term investment and should fit in with your overall attitude to risk and financial circumstances.*



## News in Brief...

### Beat the scammers

Investment and pension scams are becoming ever more sophisticated, from fancy fake websites to the 'cloning' of authorised businesses. Rule number one is always to reject unexpected offers. Rule two is that, if it looks too good to be true, it probably is. If in doubt, check the FCA ScamSmart site ([www.fca.org.uk/scamsmart](http://www.fca.org.uk/scamsmart)) and ask our advice.

### A long wait...

A third of people born in the 1980s will be over age 70 when they receive an inheritance from their last surviving parent, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS). This is a big change compared with the experience of the previous generation. The IFS reports that the average age of inheritance is 58 for those born in the 1960s.

### Video witnessing for wills

The government is changing rules to allow remote witnessing of wills via video calls in England and Wales. It is already legal in Scotland, but not yet in Northern Ireland. New legislation in September 2020 will backdate the measure to 31 January 2020, but two witnesses will still be required. The change will last through to 31 January 2022 or as long as necessary through the pandemic.

✚ *The FCA does not regulate will-writing*

#### EDUCATION

## Higher education costs: to pay or not to pay?

*The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the way higher education is delivered, with a new emphasis on online learning mixed with some in-person teaching. But this hasn't reduced the cost of going to university and the debt that will come with it.*



This autumn sees the latest intake of undergraduates begin their studies. Most students in England will have taken out tuition loans (of up to £9,250 a year) plus maintenance loans to cover living costs. Different systems apply in the devolved nations, with Scottish students charged up to £1,820 a year in tuition fees at Scottish institutions.

In general, it usually makes sense to use surplus funds to pay off debts early. But graduates – or parents looking to help out – should think carefully before using capital to repay student loans. This is because of the way repayments are structured, with any outstanding debt wiped out after 30 years.

Student loans attract interest like any other debt. This is charged when students are studying, at a rate of the Retail Prices Index (RPI) plus 3%— giving a current rate of 5.4%, with rates afterwards dependent on earnings.

Repayments on student loans only start once graduate salaries reach a certain threshold. For the 2020/21 year this is £2,214 a month – or around £26,500 a year. Students then pay 9% of their salary over this amount. So those earning £3,000 a month will pay 9% of £786 – or £70.74 a month. This is the same monthly repayment whether they owe £20,000 or £80,000 – so paying off a chunk of capital will not reduce this monthly bill.

The larger the loan, the longer it will take to repay. But this still does not necessarily mean students will pay back more overall, as current projections suggest that 83% of students who have taken out a loan since 2012 (when this system was introduced) will not repay the full amount.

For these students there may be little financial benefit to paying part of this debt off early: it will not reduce monthly repayments and may simply mean a smaller sum is written off at the end of the term.



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