Industry Forum September Newsletter

Hedging our bets

For European politicians and businesses of all sizes, today’s outlook is uncertain, at best. Despite non-stop expert analysis, no one can predict the decisions that will be taken in Washington and Moscow. And no one can rule out the potentially dramatic consequences of the internal pressures on the regimes in the US and Russia. Nevertheless, European governments need to manage their economies and plan for the future, and businesses large and small, need to do likewise.

An inevitable consequence of the current uncertainties is that European countries, and companies operating in Europe, are hedging their bets. Wherever possible European leaders are flattering the volatile US president while frantically building up independent European defence capabilities and new trade and cooperation links. Many companies, already caught by heavy US tariffs are taking steps to reduce their dependencies on US markets. Even the US tech companies rushing to build data centres in the UK could be seen as taking out insurance against unpredictable US policies and stringent EU ones.

At the Industry Forum, we are taking our own advice and widening our horizons towards Europe and Asia. On economic grounds, we opposed Brexit and so we are enthusiastic about the current government’s plans to work more closely with the rest of Europe because this is the best way to compete in the new world order. We have a number of major European companies as members and we would like to gradually increase this. We will work with IF members and friends to build business contacts and links across Europe, and also Canada, India, Japan and possibly some other countries. We intend to hold more meetings on international trade, geopolitical trends and especially technology developments in digital and life sciences. These meetings will be in addition to our primary focus on key issues in the UK economy. We continue to believe that, despite strong headwinds, the government's measures to bring stability and growth to the UK economy, and improve public services, will increase productivity and bring productive growth. One sign that this is happening was headlined in the Financial Times this week: 'NHS hospital productivity rebounds in boost for Reeves’ spending plans'.

Our next meetings are on addressing the UK housing shortage and using pension funds for UK infrastructure investment, both subjects that relate to the need to get the UK economy moving again.

Delivering the homes that the UK desperately needs

6 October 2025

Speaker:
Florence Eshalomi MP
Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee

Adequate housing is essential for the social and economic functioning of a nation. Nevertheless, the UK suffers from a serious shortage of housing to buy or to rent at affordable prices, and this adversely affects living standards and labour mobility. After the destruction of WW2, the country had a continuous and successful house building programme. Much of the housing stock in this period, was owned and managed by councils who could adjust rents to allow for the circumstances of tenants. However, policy changes in the 1980s allowed council tenants to buy their homes and also drastically reduced council house building programmes. Since then, house purchase prices and rental prices have climbed greatly in relation to incomes, and the rate of building of new housing has declined. The current government has undertaken to address the housing shortage by overseeing the building of 300,000 houses per year for the five-year duration of this parliament. Florence Eshalomi MP, Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee, will lead this roundtable looking at the plans for this programme and the obstacles that must be addressed.

Can pension funds help finance infrastructure investment?

29 October 2025

Speaker:
Lauren Edwards MP

Co-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Insurance and Financial Services

There is a great need to find more ways to finance a big increase in UK infrastructure investment. One way to do this might be for pension funds to allocate more money to infrastructure projects, provided this can be done without reducing investor returns. The government is already encouraging consolidation of pension funds and, perhaps, encouragement and incentives to increase infrastructure investment could, if properly managed, get more infrastructure built and also boost investor returns. This roundtable discussion will be led by Lauren Edwards MP, Co-Chair of the Insurance and Financial Services All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG); Co-Chair of the Skills, Employment and Careers APPG, and member of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee.

Our other meeting plans for 2025 include:

- Budget 2025: spotting the opportunities
- Working closely with Europe
- Regulation versus growth: lessons from consumer credit
- International relations and defence diplomacy
- Decarbonising homes - making it happen
- Improving our digital infrastructure would be a win/win for businesses and the economy
- Crypto opportunities and threats for the UK
- Policy priorities for safe and sustainable, high-quality buildings.
- An integrated plan for the UK road and rail networks
- How mobile infrastructure investment can boost UK growth

These are all major topics which we hope to cover in some depth at meetings and possibly policy workshops.

What IF ?

Big Change Research Programme 2025

Work is proceeding on the following topics:

The big decisions facing Europe in the Trump II era
Our work so far suggests that the 40 plus democratic European nations are in a new environment in which Russia is more overtly hostile, the US will not provide dependable military guarantees, and the US is prepared to interfere in the internal politics of European nations. These changes frame the decisions Europeans need to take on building an independent European military capability, working together to establish a distinct, cohesive European identity, and strengthening mutual industrial and trade cooperation. We are planning to publish the results of our research, for discussion, later in 2025.

Could proportional representation combat the threat of populism?

The 2024 UK general election gave the winning Labour party a flattering proportion of parliamentary seats at the expense of some of the four smaller parties. Analysis indicates that in the present environment of a five-party system, there is a real possibility that the current first-past-the-post electoral system could produce a populist Government with a small proportion of the popular vote, perhaps around 30%. Proportional representation could avert such an outcome and be fairer to all parties and electors. We will publish the full results of this research study, for discussion, later in the year.

If you are interested to participate in these projects, in any way, please contact jwyer@industry-forum.org

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Executive Chair of the Industry Forum, Rod Dowler, was invited to speak recently at the 42nd Cambridge International Symposium on Economic Crime. He reports back:

Organised by Professor Barry Rider OBE, this well attended conference has been held annually at Jesus College Cambridge for 42 years. It is a unique gathering bringing together, from across the globe, the people at the sharp end of fighting economic and financial crime. These include lawyers, prosecutors, police, forensic specialists and more, and they love their jobs. As one conference veteran said, ‘I love my job because I can help protect real people from real harm like losing their entire life savings.’ At a time of rapidly increasing risks from AI and proliferating crypto assets, it is vital to share information and techniques on fighting economic crime and this is clearly why the conference has a fiercely loyal following. I was invited by my long-term friend and colleague, Professor Chizu Nakajima to co-lead a small think tank meeting on Governance, Compliance and Corporate Social Responsibility. I felt that this was a bit like discussing building safety in a notorious earthquake zone. Nevertheless, we made good progress in identifying deep and widespread governance failures in governments, regulators and companies. These have serious consequences for democracy, the climate emergency, the behaviour of companies, and much more. The solutions proved more elusive.

Our most recent Industry Forum events were:

Policy priorities for the Middle East, Afghanistan and Pakistan

18 September 2025

Speaker:
Hamish Falconer MP
Minister for the Middle East, North Africa, Afghanistan and Pakistan

Widening our horizons, the Industry Forum discussed UK 'Policy Priorities for the Middle East, Afghanistan and Pakistan'. Our expert guide to this vast subject was Hamish Falconer MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Middle East, Afghanistan and Pakistan who was elected MP for Lincoln last July. Prior to this he worked in Britain's Diplomatic Service, the Foreign Office's Terrorism Response Team, the Department of International Development and the National Crime Agency, on a whole range of problems relevant to his current brief. The meeting was hosted by the Iraq Britain Business Council and chaired by Rod Dowler. Ashley Goodall represented IBBC at the meeting and he outlined their work and the buoyant state of the Iraq economy which continues to offer big opportunities for UK firms. Discussion ranged broadly over the many serious conflicts in the region and also its great economic depth and potential. Perhaps, when the Ukraine and Gaza conflicts are finally settled, a new more stable regional architecture will emerge, but meanwhile, it is good to know that FCDO is closely in touch with developments and also working to actively promote UK commercial interests and companies in the region.

Fixing the skills crisis

16 June 2025

Speaker:
Rt Hon Baroness Jacqui Smith
Minister for Skills

The key to the success of the government's ambitious plans for the economy and improved public services, is the supply of skilled workers for eight key priority industrial sectors, and public services, particularly the NHS. So, the Industry Forum was delighted that Baroness Jacqui Smith, Minister for Skills was able join us to lead a roundtable on, 'Fixing the skills crisis.' The meeting was hosted by Checkatrade, and Benjamin Bell their Director of Corporate Affairs welcomed the minister and guests to the meeting at their Kings Cross HQ. It was clear that the skills strategy is a vital component of the soon-to-be-revealed industrial strategy which will encompass the delivery of net zero emissions, increased defence spending and major infrastructure investments - all programmes that will need specialist skilled workers, and provide well-paid jobs. A previously piecemeal approach to skills which confused many business people is being transformed into a framework of initiatives which will aid understanding by young people entering work, and businesses that need predictability of skilled labour supply in order to justify investments.

New members welcome

The Industry Forum was established in 1993, and has held over 500 meetings with top policy-makers since then. It is one of the most experienced, and well-networked, business policy think-tanks in the UK. If you're not already a member, and would like to help shape our agenda, host events, and receive invitations to all meetings, get in touch by email at info@industry-forum.org, or give us a call to find out more on 0207 434 0090.