

The Group's accounting policies are set out on pages 151 to 160. Certain of these policies, as well as estimates made by management, are considered to be important to an understanding of the Group's financial condition since they require management to make difficult, complex or subjective judgements and estimates, some of which may relate to matters that are inherently uncertain. The following accounting policies include estimates which are particularly sensitive in terms of judgements and the extent to which estimates are used. Other accounting policies involve significant amounts of judgements and estimates, but the total amounts involved are not significant to the financial statements. Management has discussed the accounting policies and critical accounting estimates with the Board Accounts Committee.

Fair value of financial instruments

Some of the Bank's financial instruments are carried at fair value through profit or loss, including derivatives held for trading or risk management purposes. The fair value of a financial instrument is the amount at which the instrument could be exchanged in a current transaction between willing parties, other than in a forced or liquidation sale. Financial instruments entered into as trading transactions, together with any associated hedging, are measured at fair value and the resultant profits and losses are included in net trading income, along with interest and dividends arising from long and short positions and funding costs relating to trading activities. Assets and liabilities resulting from gains and losses on financial instruments held for trading are reported gross in trading portfolio assets and liabilities or derivative financial instruments, reduced by the effects of netting agreements where there is an intention to settle net with counterparties.

Financial instruments are either priced with reference to a quoted market price for that instrument or by using a valuation model. Where the fair value is calculated using financial markets pricing models, the methodology is to calculate the expected cash flows under the terms of each specific contract and then discount these values back to a present value. These models use as their basis independently sourced market parameters including, for example, interest rate yield curves, equities and commodities prices, option volatilities and currency rates. Most market parameters are either directly observable or are implied from instrument prices. However, profits or losses are recognised upon initial recognition only when such profits can be measured solely by reference to observable current market transactions or valuation techniques based solely on observable market inputs.

The calculation of fair value for any financial instrument may also require adjustment of the quoted price or model value to reflect the cost of credit risk (where not embedded in underlying models or prices used), or to reflect hedging costs not captured in pricing models (to the extent they would be taken into account by a market participant in determining a price). The process of calculating fair value on illiquid instruments or from a valuation model may require estimation of certain pricing parameters, assumptions or model characteristics. These estimates are calibrated against industry standards, economic models and observed transaction prices.

The effect of changing these assumptions for those financial instruments for which the fair values were measured using valuation techniques that are determined in full or in part on assumptions that are not supported by observable market prices to a range of reasonably possible alternative assumptions, would be to provide a range of £123m (2005: £87m) lower to £139m (2005: £121m) higher than the fair values recognised in the financial statements. The fair value of financial instruments is provided in Note 58 to the accounts.

Allowances for loan impairment

Allowances for loan impairment represent management's estimate of the losses incurred in the loan portfolios as at the balance sheet date. Changes to the allowances for loan impairment and changes to the provisions for undrawn contractually committed facilities and guarantees provided are reported in the consolidated income statement as part of the impairment charge.

Within the retail and small businesses portfolios, which comprise large numbers of small homogeneous assets with similar risk characteristics where credit scoring techniques are generally used, statistical techniques are used to calculate impairment allowances on a portfolio basis, based on historical recovery rates and assumed emergence periods. These statistical analyses use as primary inputs the extent to which accounts in the portfolio are in arrears and historical information on the eventual losses encountered from such delinquent portfolios. There are many such models in use, each tailored to a product, line of business or customer category. The models are updated from time to time. However, experience suggests that the models are reliable and stable, stemming from the very large numbers of accounts from which the model building information is drawn. Judgement and knowledge is needed in selecting the statistical methods to use when the models are developed or revised. The impairment allowance reflected in the financial statements for these portfolios is therefore considered to be reasonable and supportable. The impairment charge reflected in the income statement for these portfolios is £1,809m (2005: £1,254m) and amounts to 87% (2005: 80%) of the total impairment charge in 2006.

For larger accounts, impairment allowances are calculated on an individual basis and all relevant considerations that have a bearing on the expected future cash flows are taken into account, for example, the business prospects for the customer, the realisable value of collateral, the Group's position relative to other claimants, the reliability of customer information and the likely cost and duration of the work-out process. The level of the impairment allowance is the difference between the value of the discounted expected future cash flows (discounted at the loan's original effective interest rate), and its carrying amount. Subjective judgements are made in this process. Furthermore, judgements change with time as new information becomes available or as work-out strategies evolve, resulting in frequent revisions to the impairment allowance as individual decisions are taken, case by case. Changes in these estimates would result in a change in the allowances and have a direct impact on the impairment charge. The impairment charge reflected in the financial statements in relation to larger accounts is £265m (2005: £320m) or 13% (2005: 20%) of the total impairment charge in 2006. Further information on impairment allowances is set out on pages 83 to 85.

Goodwill

Management have to consider at least annually whether the current carrying value of goodwill is impaired. The first step of the impairment review process requires the identification of independent operating units, by dividing the Group business into as many largely independent income streams as is reasonably practicable. The goodwill is then allocated to these independent operating units. The first element of this allocation is based on the areas of the business expected to benefit from the synergies derived from the acquisition. The second element reflects the allocation of the net assets acquired and the difference between the consideration paid for those net assets and their fair value. This allocation is reviewed following business reorganisation. The carrying value of the operating unit, including the allocated goodwill, is compared to its fair value to determine whether any impairment exists. If the fair value of an operating unit is less than its carrying value, goodwill will be impaired. Detailed calculations may need to be carried out taking into consideration changes in the market in which a business operates (e.g. competitive activity, regulatory change). In the absence of readily available market price data this calculation is based upon discounting expected pre-tax cash flows at a risk adjusted interest rate appropriate to the operating unit, the determination of both of which requires the exercise of judgement. The estimation of pre-tax cash flows is sensitive to the periods for which detailed forecasts are available and to assumptions regarding the long-term sustainable cash flows. While forecasts are compared with actual performance and external economic data, expected cash flows naturally reflect management's view of future performance. The most significant amounts of goodwill relate to the Absa and Woolwich acquisitions. The goodwill impairment testing performed in 2006 indicated that none of the goodwill was impaired.

Intangible assets

Intangible assets that derive their value from contractual customer relationships or that can be separated and sold and have a finite useful life are amortised over their estimated useful life. Determining the estimated useful life of these finite life intangible assets requires an analysis of circumstances, and judgement by the Bank's management. At each balance sheet date, or more frequently when events or changes in circumstances dictate, intangible assets are assessed for indications of impairment. If indications are present, these assets are subject to an impairment review. The impairment review comprises a comparison of the carrying amount of the asset with its recoverable amount: the higher of the assets' or the cash-generating unit's net selling price and its value in use. Net selling price is calculated by reference to the amount at which the asset could be disposed of in a binding sale agreement in an arms-length transaction evidenced by an active market or recent transactions for similar assets. Value in use is calculated by discounting the expected future cash flows obtainable as a result of the asset's continued use, including those resulting from its ultimate disposal, at a market-based discount rate on a pre-tax basis. The most significant amounts of intangible assets relate to the Absa acquisition.

Retirement benefit obligations

The Group provides pension plans for employees in most parts of the world. Arrangements for staff retirement benefits vary from country to country and are made in accordance with local regulations and customs. For defined contribution schemes, the pension cost recognised in the profit and loss account represents the contributions payable to the scheme. For defined benefit schemes, actuarial valuation of each of the scheme's obligations using the projected unit credit method and the fair valuation of each of the scheme's assets are performed annually in accordance with the requirements of IAS 19.

The actuarial valuation is dependent upon a series of assumptions, the key ones being interest rates, mortality, investment returns and expense inflation. Mortality estimates are based on standard industry and national mortality tables, adjusted where appropriate to reflect the Group's own experience. The returns on fixed interest investments are set to market yields at the valuation date (less an allowance for risk) to ensure consistency with the asset valuation. The returns on UK and overseas equities are set relative to fixed interest returns by considering the long-term expected equity risk premium. The expense inflation assumption reflects long-term expectations of both earnings and retail price inflation.

The difference between the fair value of the plan assets and the present value of the defined benefit obligation at the balance sheet date, adjusted for any historic unrecognised actuarial gains or losses and past service cost, is recognised as a liability in the balance sheet. An asset arising, for example, as a result of past over-funding or the performance of the plan investments, is recognised to the extent that it does not exceed the present value of future contribution holidays or refunds of contributions. To the extent that any unrecognised gains or losses at the start of the measurement year in relation to any individual defined benefit scheme exceed 10% of the greater of the fair value of the scheme assets and the defined benefit obligation for that scheme, a proportion of the excess is recognised in the income statement.

The Group's IAS 19 pension deficit across all pension and post-retirement schemes as at 31st December 2006 was £817m (2005: £2,879m). This comprises net recognised liabilities of £1,719m (2005: £1,737m) and unrecognised actuarial gains of £902m (2005: losses of £1,142m). The net recognised liabilities comprises retirement benefit liabilities of £1,807m (2005: £1,823m) relating to schemes that are in deficit, and assets of £88m (2005: £86m) relating to schemes that are in surplus. The Group's IAS 19 pension deficit in respect of the main UK scheme as at 31st December 2006 was £0.5bn (2005: £2.5bn). The estimated actuarial funding position of the main UK pension scheme as at 31st December 2006, estimated from the triennial valuation in 2004, was a surplus of £1.3bn (2005: £0.9bn). Cash contributions to the main UK scheme were £351m (2005: £354m).

Further information on retirement benefit obligations, including assumptions is set out in Note 35 to the accounts.