Life in the hot seat will be no bed of roses for the new boss of RBS

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It's a tough gig, taking over one of Britain's biggest companies, a business that has been restructuring for more than a decade and arriving as a fresh trade row gets going between the UK and its closest neighbours. Oh yes, and you are the first woman to do your job, have the government as your largest shareholder and a workforce who loved the last guy.

Alison Rose, 50, has a daunting task as she makes the final tweaks to her plan for the future of Royal Bank of Scotland, which she will unveil next week alongside its annual results. To succeed, she will need to balance what she has shown herself to be keen on already — commendable statements about the purpose of banking — with some cold, hard numbers.

But she does have the advantage of going first. Noel Quinn, HSBC's interim boss, is also preparing to reveal his vision, while Lloyds has started work on its next three-year plan, albeit not for public consumption until later in the year.

At RBS, top of the list are likely to be management changes. Ms Rose has navigated tricky waters to get the top job despite internal and external opposition. She will want to put in place a team who swear loyalty to her.

The old guard at RBS's investment bank, Natwest Markets, went in December with permanent replacements to be named. A change is likely, too, at the retail bank, which may take a bit longer to complete. Mark Bailie, a long-time RBS executive who has been running Bó, its retail digital bank, is also leaving.

Ms Rose will take the knife to the business. RBS has shrunk its workforce from 200,000 to 65,000 since the financial crisis, but the sheer enormity of the task means there is still more to do. She is expected to announce further cost-cutting in the retail division, but her main focus is likely to be the investment bank, an area that the government has always wanted RBS to shed owing to its perceived lack of social usefulness.

RBS is Britain's biggest lender to companies, for which it will want to retain some investment banking services. Other areas are less secure. At the highest risk is the rates business, where traders buy and sell products relating to interest rates. Rates can be highly profitable, but it also absorbs lots of capital. Closing it would be a tangible step Ms Rose could take. She probably will.

In addition, she will need to prove that she is signed up to the future. There is likely to be a fresh commitment to RBS's digital bank, potentially bringing Bó closer to Mettle, which is aimed at small businesses.

Then there is the love and attention required for retail lending. It is a tough story. Retail banking has borne the brunt of steep job cuts and more are on the way. Ms Rose needs to enthuse the troops. Putting her own person in the top job will help her to enforce her message.

Amid the tough actions, Ms Rose has one nice surprise up her sleeve: she can hand out some cash. RBS is holding more capital that it needs to, with a stonking core equity tier one ratio of 15.7 per cent. She probably will say that will come down, giving greater scope for dividends and share buybacks.

That, in turn, would be music to the ears of RBS's government masters, who want to sell more of the 62 per cent the state still owns. The Treasury previously had drawn a line in the sand at not offloading more RBS shares below 271p, the price it sold at in the summer of 2018 when it crystallised a £2.1 billion loss. Times have changed. The opposition is in disarray. This government may seize the opportunity to sell shares, perhaps at between 240p and 250p a share. They were trading at 222p yesterday.

Being the boss who takes the government holding below majority control would be a win for Ms Rose. For her shareholders and employees, she will need to deliver more.

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