

Weekly Economic Commentary.

Building houses and milking cows.

While the tourism and hospitality sectors continue to struggle with the closure of our borders, the New Zealand economy as a whole has weathered the Covid storm better than expected. That's in large part due to firmness in domestically focused industries like construction. We're also seeing strength in the prices for some of our key commodity exports.

New Zealand's recovery from Covid-19 remains uneven. Our services sector is continuing to struggle with the massive reduction in demand resulting from ongoing border closures. Importantly, that loss of international tourist dollars, and the resulting impact on the demand for seasonal workers, is an even bigger drag now than when we first went into lockdown. That's because tourism is highly seasonal, and there is normally a strong net inflow of people into the country in the summer months. The resulting loss of demand has been

felt acutely in industries like hospitality, accommodation and transport.

But while the closure of the border and the loss of international tourists has clearly hit some areas hard, we're actually seeing solid demand in some other parts of the economy, such as the public sector and construction. That's meant that overall economic activity and the job market have both been more resilient than expected in recent months.

A temporary change in the Westpac Economics Team.

Our Chief Economist, Dominick Stephens, is taking up a ten-month secondment as the New Zealand Treasury's Deputy Secretary, Chief Economic Advisor. Michael Gordon will be Westpac's Acting Chief Economist until Dominick's return in January 2022. Michael has been second-in-charge of the Economics Team for the past 10 years and has performed the role in the past. The team will continue to provide all the same quality insights and analysis.



In fact, compared to January last year, the number of filled jobs has risen by 0.1%, despite the job losses in sectors such as retail and hospitality. In addition, recent data on job advertisements point to growing demand for workers. Those developments support our view that the unemployment rate has more or less peaked.

One of the key sectors that has helped to bolster New Zealand's economic fortunes in the wake of the outbreak has been the agricultural sector. Firming global demand has seen prices for some of our key commodity exports charging higher in recent months. Most notably, prices for whole milk powder (WMP) rose by 21% in the latest GlobalDairyTrade auction and are up by nearly 50% since November. Those strong gains have prompted us to lift our 2020/21 farmgate milk price forecast by 40 cents to \$7.90/kg (Fonterra has also revised up its forecast range to \$7.30/kg to \$7.90/kg). We have maintained our 2021/22 milk price forecast at \$7.25/kg, though the balance of risks here is to the upside.

Underpinning the strength in global dairy prices has been strong demand from China and, more recently, growing demand from other South East Asian nations. We expect this strength in demand will continue over the year ahead, helping to keep export prices at firm levels. Even so, some of the recent increase in prices is likely to be temporary. New Zealand has entered its autumn and the dairy production season is winding down. Markets know that New Zealand supply will not be able to catch up to surging demand until the spring, so prices are rising right now. But when spring rolls around, we expect WMP and milk fat prices to start to moderate as New Zealand production starts its spring flush. In addition, global dairy supply will eventually respond.

The other key area where we're seeing significant strength is the construction sector, with particular strength in new home building. Residential construction levels are already around 5% above the levels we saw prior to the outbreak of Covid, and the outlook for the coming year is looking increasingly strong. Dwelling consent numbers have been charging higher, with data last week showing that 39,881 new dwellings were consented over the 12 months to January. That's the highest level since 1974.

Underpinning the strong rise in consent issuance has been the combination of low interest rates and rising house prices, which have encouraged developers to bring new projects to market. Changes in building regulations that have allowed for greater intensification (such as Auckland's unitary plan) have also played an important role, with much of the lift in dwelling consents related to medium density projects like town houses and apartments.

This pickup follows an extended period where home building in New Zealand failed to keep pace with population growth. In fact, relative to changes in the population over the past decade, New Zealand built around 70,000 too few homes. Much of that shortfall has been in Auckland, but shortages of affordable housing are being felt in many corners of the nation.

However, the balance between home building and population growth is set to swing around dramatically in the wake of the Covid outbreak. At the same time as the boom in home building is getting underway, population growth has plummeted following the closure of our borders and the halt on migration. We estimate that population growth will slow from a peak of 2.4% to a low of 0.4%. This means that the shortages which have built up in recent years are now being rapidly eroded.

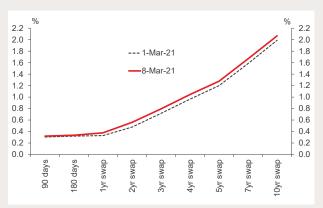
Even after the borders reopen, net migration is expected to remain below pre-Covid levels due to tighter Government migration policy. That means housing shortages will continue to shrink even after migration resumes. This erosion of housing shortages is likely to cause a reduction in the annual rate of increase in rents – one more reason to expect low inflation in the coming years. Eroding shortages is also one reason that we expect house price inflation to start gradually cooling from later in 2021 (although rising interest rates will play a more important role).

Fixed vs Floating for mortgages.

We expect mortgage rates to rise over coming years. Based on our forecasts, taking a longer-term fixed rate (from three years to five years) will prove less expensive for borrowers than taking a short-term rate now and refixing later.

Longer-term fixed mortgage rates may rise soon, in response to a large increase in wholesale fixed rates over the past two months. We expect shorter-term fixed rates, and floating rates, will be stable over the coming months.

NZ interest rates



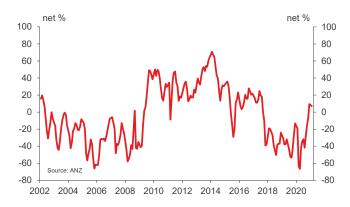
The week ahead.

NZ Mar ANZ Business Outlook survey

Mar 9, Business confidence - Last: 7.0

- Overall business conditions have picked up in recent months and are now around average levels. However, the recovery has been uneven. Firmness in domestically focused sectors like construction has been balanced against softness in those areas linked to the international border.
- We expect that business confidence will take a small step down in the March survey. As well as the ongoing drag from the lack of international tourists, the temporary dialling up of Covid Alert settings will have added to uncertainty around the outlook, especially among service sector firms.
- We'll be keeping a close eye on the survey's pricing gauges which spiked higher in recent months following disruptions to global supply chains.

NZ business confidence

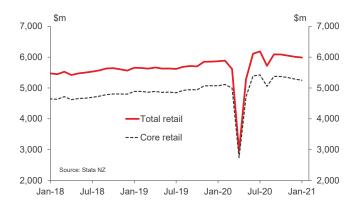


NZ Feb Retail Card Spending

Mar 10, Last: -0.4%, Westpac f/c: -3%

- Retail spending fell by 0.4% in January. That was the fourth decline in as many months. Spending has been softening in most categories, however, there has been particular softness in the hospitality sector. While spending by New Zealanders has been resilient, the lack of international tourists remains a significant drag.
- We expect to see another decline in spending in February. In addition to the lack of international visitors, the Covid Alert Level was dialled up for several days late in the month. That took a bite out of spending in Auckland and the hospitality sector.

Retail card spending



NZ Feb REINZ house prices and sales

Mar 12 (TBC), Sales last: -22.2%, Prices last: +19.2%yr

- The New Zealand housing market continued to run hot in January, with the REINZ price index up 19.2% on a year ago. Monthly increases have arguably started to slow though, compared to the unsustainable pace seen in late 2020.
- We expect a further 17% rise in prices over 2021, albeit with the pace slowing over the course of the year. Low mortgage rates remain an important driver, but these have bottomed out and are likely to rise gradually over time. In addition, near-zero migration and strong homebuilding activity mean that housing shortages are starting to be eroded.
- House sales went from red-hot to around average in January. This may have just been due to the usual New Year's lull; partial data points to a pick-up again in February.

REINZ house prices and sales



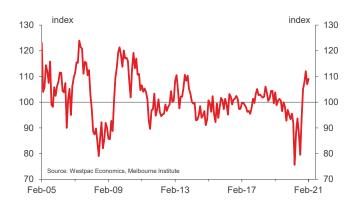
The week ahead.

Aus Mar Westpac-MI Consumer Sentiment

Mar 10, Last: 109.1

- Consumer sentiment increased 1.9% to 109.1 in Feb from 107 in Jan, recouping about half of the loss seen in the previous month when several states temporarily reinstated tighter COVID restrictions. Overall, sentiment has remained relatively buoyant throughout early 2021, having come off a 10 year high in Dec.
- Local virus-related developments have mostly been positive over the last month, brief lockdowns in Perth and Victoria having been lifted and vaccinations commencing. Developments have also been positive around the economy, with the December national accounts recording a robust 3.1% gain, labour markets continuing to surprise to the upside and a strong pick up now clearly evident across housing markets. On policy, the RBA again reaffirmed its commitment to an extended period of extraordinary policy stimulus at its March meeting.

Aus Consumer Sentiment Index

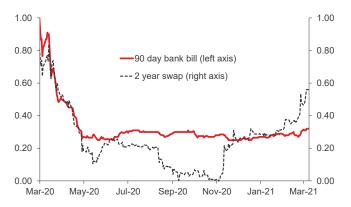


New Zealand forecasts.

Economic forecasts		Quai	rterly	Annual				
	2020		2021					
% change	Sep (a)	Dec	Mar	Jun	2019	2020f	2021f	2022f
GDP (Production)	14.0	-0.7	0.0	1.9	2.3	-2.8	4.5	3.8
Employment	-0.7	0.6	-0.1	0.2	1.3	0.7	1.0	3.0
Unemployment Rate % s.a.	5.3	4.9	5.0	5.1	4.1	4.9	4.9	4.2
CPI	0.7	0.5	0.8	0.6	1.9	1.4	1.9	0.9
Current Account Balance % of GDP	-0.8	-0.8	-1.1	-1.8	-3.3	-0.8	-2.7	-2.8

Financial forecasts	Mar-21	Jun-21	Sep-21	Dec-21	Mar-22	Jun-22
Cash	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25
90 Day bill	0.30	0.30	0.30	0.30	0.30	0.30
2 Year Swap	0.40	0.40	0.40	0.40	0.45	0.50
5 Year Swap	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.05	1.10	1.20
10 Year Bond	1.90	1.90	1.90	1.95	2.00	2.10
NZD/USD	0.73	0.74	0.75	0.76	0.78	0.78
NZD/AUD	0.94	0.94	0.94	0.93	0.92	0.92
NZD/JPY	75.9	77.0	78.0	79.0	81.9	81.9
NZD/EUR	0.60	0.60	0.60	0.61	0.62	0.61
NZD/GBP	0.53	0.54	0.54	0.55	0.55	0.55
TWI	75.5	75.9	76.2	76.5	77.6	77.4

2 year swap and 90 day bank bills



NZ interest rates as at market open on 8 March 2021

Interest rates	Current	Two weeks ago	One month ago		
Cash	0.25%	0.25%	0.25%		
30 Days	0.26%	0.26%	0.26%		
60 Days	0.29%	0.27%	0.27%		
90 Days	0.32%	0.28%	0.28%		
2 Year Swap	0.56%	0.36%	0.38%		
5 Year Swap	1.28%	0.89%	0.85%		

NZD/USD and NZD/AUD



NZ foreign currency mid-rates as at 8 March 2021

Exchange rates	Current	Two weeks ago	One month ago
NZD/USD	0.7164	0.7294	0.7221
NZD/EUR	0.6011	0.6022	0.5993
NZD/GBP	0.5179	0.5204	0.5255
NZD/JPY	77.65	76.87	75.97
NZD/AUD	0.9325	0.9279	0.9378
TWI	75.06	75.55	75.19

Data calendar.

		Last	Market median	Westpac forecast	Risk/Comment
Mon 8					
Chn	Feb foreign direct investment %yr	4.6%	-	-	Annual pace moderating from peak in September.
Eur	Mar Sentix investor confidence	-0.2	-	-	Recovery stalled in Feb on extended lockdowns/slow rollout.
Tue 9					
NZ	Mar ANZ business confidence	7.0	-	-	Around average, likely to fall due to Covid restrictions.
Aus	Feb NAB business survey	7	-	-	Conditions trended higher to be at a robust +7, on reopening.
Chn	Feb new loans, CNYbn	3580.0	950.0	-	Set to pull back following pre-Golden Week surge.
	Feb M2 money supply %yr	9.4%	9.4%	-	Has eased from high of 11.1%yr in June.
Eur	Q4 GDP	-0.6%	-0.6%	-	Final update unchanged from prevous estimate.
US	Feb NFIB small business optimism	95	96	-	Small business will be buoyed by stimulus prospects.
Wed 10					
NZ	Feb retail card spending	-0.4%	-	-3.0%	Drag from Covid restrictions and border closure.
Aus	RBA Governor Lowe	-	-	-	'The Recovery, Investment and Monetary Policy' in Sydney.
	Mar WBC-MI Consumer Sentiment	109.1	-	-	Sentiment remains buoyant despite mini-lockdowns.
Chn	Feb CPI %yr	-0.3%	-0.3%	-	Slow services price growth a drag.
	Feb PPI %yr	0.3%	1.4%	-	Reversal from deflation points to upstream price pressures.
US	Feb CPI	0.3%	0.4%	-	Base effects will see abrupt rise in annual growth.
	Feb monthly budget statement	-162.8	-	-	Deficit will continue to widen as stimulus comes online.
Thu 11					
NZ	Feb food price index	1.3%	-	0.5%	Annual inflation has eased since mid-2020.
Aus	Mar MI inflation expectations	3.7%	-	-	Has improved 0.6ppt since the trough of the crisis.
Eur	ECB policy decision	0.0%	0.0%	-	Will be looking for commentary around rising yields.
US	Initial jobless claims	745k	-	-	Ticked higher on weather disruptions last week.
	Jan JOLTS job openings	6646	6600	-	December rise led by business services and retail.
Fri 12					
NZ	Feb manufacturing PMI	57.5	-	-	Conditions have been firming in recent months.
	Feb REINZ house prices %yr	19.2%	-	-	TBC. Price growth remains strong
	Feb REINZ house sales	-22.2%	-	-	supported by low mortgage rates and a lack of listings.
Eur	Jan industrial production	-1.6%	-0.2%	-	Output still down around 0.8% on the year.
UK	Jan trade balance £bn	-6202	_	_	Remained extremely volatile into year end.
US	Feb PPI	1.3%	0.4%	-	Rising energy and commodity prices a source of pressure.
	Mar Uni. of Michigan sentiment	76.8	78.0	-	Supported by vaccine rollout and likelihood of stimulus.

International forecasts.

Economic Forecasts (Calendar Years)	2017	2018	2019	2020f	2021f	2022f
Australia						
Real GDP %yr	2.4	2.8	1.9	-2.6	4.2	3.3
CPI inflation %yr	1.9	1.8	1.8	0.9	2.6	2.2
Unemployment rate %	5.5	5.0	5.2	6.8	6.0	5.3
Current account % of GDP	-2.6	-2.1	0.7	2.4	1.9	-0.1
United States						
Real GDP %yr	2.3	3.0	2.2	-3.5	4.4	4.5
CPI inflation %yr	2.1	2.4	1.9	1.1	1.8	1.9
Unemployment rate %	4.4	3.9	3.7	8.1	5.7	4.5
Current account % of GDP	-2.3	-2.3	-2.6	-2.5	-2.4	-2.4
Japan						
Real GDP %yr	2.2	0.3	0.7	-5.5	2.5	2.2
Euro zone						
Real GDP %yr	2.6	1.8	1.3	-6.8	4.0	3.5
United Kingdom						
Real GDP %yr	1.9	1.3	1.5	-10.5	5.0	5.5
China						
Real GDP %yr	6.9	6.8	6.1	2.3	10.0	5.7
East Asia ex China						
Real GDP %yr	4.7	4.4	3.7	-2.6	5.2	5.0
World						
Real GDP %yr	3.8	3.5	2.8	-3.2	5.8	4.6
Forecasts finalised 5 February 2021						

Interest rate forecasts	Latest	Mar-21	Jun-21	Sep-21	Dec-21	Mar-22	Jun-22	Dec-22
Australia								
Cash	0.10	0.10	0.10	0.10	0.10	0.10	0.10	0.10
90 Day BBSW	0.04	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.04	0.06	0.08	0.10
10 Year Bond	1.83	1.85	1.85	1.90	2.05	2.20	2.35	2.50
International								
Fed Funds	0.125	0.125	0.125	0.125	0.125	0.125	0.125	0.125
US 10 Year Bond	1.57	1.65	1.70	1.80	1.95	2.10	2.25	2.40

Exchange rate forecasts	Latest	Mar-21	Jun-21	Sep-21	Dec-21	Mar-22	Jun-22	Dec-22
AUD/USD	0.7713	0.79	0.80	0.82	0.85	0.85	0.84	0.82
USD/JPY	107.99	106	106	106	107	107	107	107
EUR/USD	1.1961	1.23	1.24	1.25	1.26	1.27	1.28	1.28
GBP/USD	1.3898	1.40	1.40	1.41	1.41	1.41	1.42	1.42
USD/CNY	6.4725	6.35	6.25	6.20	6.15	6.10	6.05	6.00
AUD/NZD	1.0753	1.07	1.07	1.08	1.09	1.09	1.09	1.09

Contact the Westpac economics team.



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