

Link Asset Services' View on the Economic Background

- **UK.** The key quarterly meeting of the Bank of England Monetary Policy Committee kept **Bank Rate** unchanged on 5.11.20. However, it revised its economic forecasts to take account of a second national lockdown from 5.11.20 to 2.12.20 which is obviously going to put back economic recovery and do further damage to the economy. It therefore decided to do a further tranche of **quantitative easing (QE) of £150bn**, to start in January when the current programme of £300bn of QE, announced in March to June, runs out. It did this so that “announcing further asset purchases now should support the economy and help to ensure the unavoidable near-term slowdown in activity was not amplified by a tightening in monetary conditions that could slow the return of inflation to the target”.
- Its forecasts appeared, at that time, to be rather optimistic in terms of three areas:
 - The economy would recover to reach its pre-pandemic level in Q1 2022
 - The Bank also expected there to be excess demand in the economy by Q4 2022.
 - CPI inflation was therefore projected to be a bit above its 2% target by the start of 2023 and the “inflation risks were judged to be balanced”.
- Significantly, there was no mention of **negative interest rates** in the minutes or Monetary Policy Report, suggesting that the MPC remains some way from being persuaded of the case for such a policy, at least for the next 6 -12 months. However, rather than saying that it “stands ready to adjust monetary policy”, the MPC this time said that it will take “whatever additional action was necessary to achieve its remit”. The latter seems stronger and wider and may indicate the Bank’s willingness to embrace new tools.
- One key addition to **the Bank’s forward guidance in August** was a new phrase in the policy statement, namely that “it does not intend to tighten monetary policy until there is clear evidence that significant progress is being made in eliminating spare capacity and achieving the 2% target sustainably”. That seems designed to say, in effect, that even if inflation rises to 2% in a couple of years’ time, do not expect any action from the MPC to raise Bank Rate – until they can clearly see that level of inflation is going to be persistently above target if it takes no action to raise Bank Rate. Our Bank Rate forecast currently shows no increase, (or decrease), through to quarter 1 2024 but there could well be no increase during the next five years as it will take some years to eliminate spare capacity in the economy, and therefore for inflationary pressures to rise to cause the MPC concern. **Inflation** is expected to briefly peak at just over 2% towards the end of 2021, but this is a temporary short lived factor due to base effects from twelve months ago falling out of the calculation, and so is not a concern. Looking further ahead, it is also unlikely to be a problem for some years as it will take a prolonged time for spare capacity in the economy, created by this downturn, to be used up.
- **Public borrowing** was forecast in November by the Office for Budget Responsibility (the OBR) to reach £394bn in the current financial year, the highest ever peace time deficit and equivalent to 19% of GDP. In normal times, such an increase in total gilt issuance would lead to a rise in gilt yields, and so PWLB rates. However, the QE done by the Bank of England has depressed gilt yields to historic low levels, (as has similarly occurred with QE and debt issued in the US, the EU and Japan). This means that new UK debt being issued, and this is being done across the whole yield curve in all maturities, is locking in those historic low levels through until maturity. In addition, the UK has one of the longest average maturities

for its entire debt portfolio, of any country in the world. Overall, this means that the total interest bill paid by the Government is manageable despite the huge increase in the total amount of debt. The OBR was also forecasting that the government will still be running a budget deficit of £102bn (3.9% of GDP) by 2025/26. However, initial impressions are that they have taken a pessimistic view of the impact that vaccines could make in the speed of economic recovery.

- Overall, **the pace of recovery** was not expected to be in the form of a rapid V shape, but a more elongated and prolonged one. The initial recovery was sharp after quarter 1 saw growth at -3.0% followed by -18.8% in quarter 2 and then an upswing of +16.0% in quarter 3; this still left the economy 8.6% smaller than in Q4 2019. While the one month second national lockdown that started on 5th November caused a further contraction of 5.7% m/m in November, this was much better than had been feared and showed that the economy is adapting to new ways of working. This left the economy 'only' 8.6% below the pre-crisis level.
- **Vaccines – the game changer.** The Pfizer announcement on 9th November of a successful vaccine has been followed by approval of the Oxford University/AstraZeneca and Moderna vaccines. The Government has set a target to vaccinate 14 million people in the most at risk sectors of the population by 15th February; as of mid-January, it has made good, and accelerating progress in hitting that target. The aim is to vaccinate all adults by September. This means that the national lockdown starting in early January, could be replaced by regional tiers of lighter restrictions, beginning possibly in Q2. At that point, there would be less reason to fear that hospitals could become overwhelmed any more. Effective vaccines have radically improved the economic outlook so that it may now be possible for GDP to recover to its pre-virus level as early as Q1 2022. These vaccines have enormously boosted confidence that **life could largely return to normal during the second half of 2021**. With the household saving rate having been exceptionally high since the first lockdown in March, there is plenty of pent-up demand and purchasing power stored up for when life returns to normal.
- Provided that both monetary and fiscal policy are kept loose for a few years yet, then it is still possible that in the second half of this decade, the economy may be no smaller than it would have been if COVID-19 never happened. The significant risk is if another mutation of COVID-19 appears that defeats the current batch of vaccines. However, now that science and technology have caught up with understanding this virus, new vaccines ought to be able to be developed more quickly to counter such a development, and vaccine production facilities are being ramped up around the world.

This recovery of growth which eliminates the effects of the pandemic by about the middle of the decade, would have major repercussions for public finances as it would be consistent with the government deficit falling to around 2.5% of GDP without any tax increases. This would be in line with the OBR's most optimistic forecast in the graph below, rather than their current central scenario which predicts a 4% deficit due to assuming much slower growth. However, Capital Economics forecasts assumed that politicians do not raise taxes or embark on major austerity measures and so, (perverse!), depress economic growth and recovery.

- There will still be some **painful longer term adjustments** as e.g. office space and travel by planes, trains and buses may not recover to their previous level of use for several years, or possibly ever, even if vaccines are fully successful in overcoming the current virus. There is also likely to be a **reversal of globalisation** as this crisis has exposed how vulnerable long-distance supply chains are. On the other hand, **digital services** are one area that has already seen huge growth.
- **Brexit.** The final agreement of a trade deal on 24.12.20 has eliminated a significant downside risk for the UK economy. The initial agreement only covers trade so there is further work to be done on the services sector where temporary equivalence has been granted in both directions between the UK and EU; that now needs to be formalised on a permanent basis. As the forecasts in this report were based on an assumption of a Brexit agreement being reached, there is no need to amend these forecasts.
- **Monetary Policy Committee meeting of 17 December.** All nine Committee members voted to keep interest rates on hold at +0.10% and the Quantitative Easing (QE) target at £895bn. The MPC commented that the successful rollout of vaccines had reduced the downsides risks to the economy that it had highlighted in November. But this was caveated by it saying, “Although all members agreed that this would reduce downside risks, they placed different weights on the degree to which this was also expected to lead to stronger GDP growth in the central case.” So, while vaccines are a positive development, in the eyes of the MPC at least, the economy is far from out of the woods in the shorter term. The MPC, therefore, voted to extend the availability of the Term Funding Scheme, (cheap borrowing), with additional incentives for small and medium size enterprises for six months from 30.4.21 until 31.10.21. (The MPC had assumed that a Brexit deal would be agreed.)
- **Fiscal policy.** In the same week as the MPC meeting, the Chancellor made a series of announcements to provide further support to the economy: -
 - An extension of the COVID-19 loan schemes from the end of January 2021 to the end of March.
 - The furlough scheme was lengthened from the end of March to the end of April.
 - The Budget on 3.3.21 will lay out the “next phase of the plan to tackle the virus and protect jobs”. This does not sound like tax rises are imminent, (which could hold back the speed of economic recovery).
- The **Financial Policy Committee** (FPC) report on 6.8.20 revised down their expected credit losses for the banking sector to “somewhat less than £80bn”. It stated that in its assessment, “banks have buffers of capital more than sufficient to absorb the losses that are likely to arise under the MPC’s central projection”. The FPC stated that for real stress in the sector, the economic output would need to be twice as bad as the MPC’s projection, with unemployment rising to above 15%.
- **US.** The Democrats gained the presidency and a majority in the House of Representatives in the November elections: after winning two key Senate seats in Georgia in elections in early January, they now also have a very slim majority in the Senate due to the vice president’s casting vote. President Biden will consequently have a much easier path to implement his election manifesto. However, he will not have a completely free hand as more radical Democrat plans

may not be supported by all Democrat senators. His initial radical plan for a fiscal stimulus of \$1.9trn, (9% of GDP), is therefore likely to be toned down in order to get through both houses.

- **The economy** had been recovering quite strongly from its contraction in 2020 of 10.2% due to the pandemic with GDP only 3.5% below its pre-pandemic level and the unemployment rate dropping below 7%. However, the rise in new cases during quarter 4, to the highest level since mid-August, suggests that the US could be in the early stages of a fourth wave. The latest upturn poses a threat that the recovery in the economy could stall. This is **the single biggest downside risk** to the shorter term outlook – a more widespread and severe wave of infections over the winter months, which is compounded by the impact of the regular flu season and, as a consequence, threatens to overwhelm health care facilities. Under those circumstances, individual states might feel it necessary to return to more draconian lockdowns.
- The restrictions imposed to control the spread of the virus are once again weighing on the economy with employment growth slowing sharply in November and declining in December, and retail sales dropping back. The economy is set for further weakness into the spring. **GDP growth** is expected to rebound markedly from the second quarter of 2021 onwards as vaccines are rolled out on a widespread basis and restrictions are loosened.
- After Chair Jerome Powell unveiled the **Fed's adoption of a flexible average inflation target** in his Jackson Hole speech in late August 2020, the mid-September meeting of the Fed agreed by a majority to a toned down version of the new inflation target in his speech - that *"it would likely be appropriate to maintain the current target range until labour market conditions were judged to be consistent with the Committee's assessments of maximum employment and inflation had risen to 2% and was on track to moderately exceed 2% for some time."* This change was aimed to provide more stimulus for economic growth and higher levels of employment and to avoid the danger of getting caught in a deflationary "trap" like Japan. It is to be noted that inflation has actually been under-shooting the 2% target significantly for most of the last decade, (and this year), so financial markets took note that higher levels of inflation are likely to be in the pipeline; long-term bond yields duly rose after the meeting. The FOMC's updated economic and rate projections in mid-September showed that officials expect to leave the fed funds rate at near-zero until at least end-2023 and probably for another year or two beyond that. There is now some expectation that where the Fed has led in changing its inflation target, other major central banks will follow. The increase in tension over the last year between the US and China is likely to lead to a lack of momentum in progressing the initial positive moves to agree a phase one trade deal.
- The Fed's meeting on **5 November** was unremarkable - but at a politically sensitive time around the elections. At its **16 December** meeting the Fed tweaked the guidance for its monthly asset quantitative easing purchases with the new language implying those purchases could continue for longer than previously believed. Nevertheless, with officials still projecting that **inflation** will only get back to 2.0% in 2023, the vast majority expect the Fed funds rate to be still at near-zero until 2024 or later. Furthermore, officials think the balance of risks surrounding that

median inflation forecast are firmly skewed to the downside. The key message is still that policy will remain unusually accommodative – with near-zero rates and asset purchases – continuing for several more years. This is likely to result in keeping Treasury yields low – which will also have an influence on gilt yields in this country.

- **EU.** In early December, the figures for Q3 GDP confirmed that the economy staged a rapid rebound from the first lockdowns. This provides grounds for optimism about growth prospects for next year. In Q2, GDP was 15% below its pre-pandemic level. But in Q3 the economy grew by 12.5% q/q leaving GDP down by “only” 4.4%. That was much better than had been expected earlier in the year. However, growth is likely to stagnate during Q4 and in Q1 of 2021, as a second wave of the virus has seriously affected many countries. The €750bn fiscal support package eventually agreed by the EU after prolonged disagreement between various countries, is unlikely to provide significant support, and quickly enough, to make an appreciable difference in the countries most affected by the first wave.
- With **inflation** expected to be unlikely to get much above 1% over the next two years, **the ECB** has been struggling to get inflation up to its 2% target. It is currently unlikely that it will cut its central rate even further into negative territory from -0.5%, although the ECB has stated that it retains this as a possible tool to use. The ECB’s December meeting added a further €500bn to the PEPP scheme, (purchase of government and other bonds), and extended the duration of the programme to March 2022 and re-investing maturities for an additional year until December 2023. Three additional tranches of TLTRO, (cheap loans to banks), were approved, indicating that support will last beyond the impact of the pandemic, implying indirect yield curve control for government bonds for some time ahead. The Bank’s forecast for a return to pre-virus activity levels was pushed back to the end of 2021, but stronger growth is projected in 2022. The total PEPP scheme of €1,850bn of QE which started in March 2020 is providing protection to the sovereign bond yields of weaker countries like Italy. There is therefore unlikely to be a euro crisis while the ECB is able to maintain this level of support. However, as in the UK and the US, the advent of highly effective vaccines will be a game changer, although growth will struggle before later in quarter 2 of 2021.
- **China.** After a concerted effort to get on top of the virus outbreak in Q1, economic recovery was strong in Q2 and then into Q3 and Q4; this has enabled China to recover all of the contraction in Q1. Policy makers have both quashed the virus and implemented a programme of monetary and fiscal support that has been particularly effective at stimulating short-term growth. At the same time, China’s economy has benefited from the shift towards online spending by consumers in developed markets. These factors help to explain its comparative outperformance compared to western economies. However, this was achieved by major central government funding of yet more infrastructure spending. After years of growth having been focused on this same area, any further spending in this area is likely to lead to increasingly weaker economic returns in the longer term. This could, therefore, lead to a further misallocation of resources which will weigh on growth in future years.
- **Japan.** A third round of fiscal stimulus in early December took total fresh fiscal spending this year in response to the virus close to 12% of pre-virus GDP. That’s

huge by past standards, and one of the largest national fiscal responses. The budget deficit is now likely to reach 16% of GDP this year. Coupled with Japan's relative success in containing the virus without draconian measures so far, and the likelihood of effective vaccines being available in the coming months, the government's latest fiscal effort should help ensure a strong recovery and to get back to pre-virus levels by Q3 2021 – around the same time as the US and much sooner than the Eurozone.

- **World growth.** World growth will have been in recession in 2020 and this is likely to continue into the first half of 2021 before recovery in the second half. Inflation is unlikely to be a problem for some years due to the creation of excess production capacity and depressed demand caused by the coronavirus crisis.
- Until recent years, world growth has been boosted by increasing **globalisation** i.e. countries specialising in producing goods and commodities in which they have an economic advantage and which they then trade with the rest of the world. This has boosted worldwide productivity and growth, and, by lowering costs, has also depressed inflation. However, the rise of China as an economic superpower over the last thirty years, which now accounts for nearly 20% of total world GDP, has unbalanced the world economy. The Chinese government has targeted achieving major world positions in specific key sectors and products, especially high tech areas and production of rare earth minerals used in high tech products. It is achieving this by massive financial support, (i.e. subsidies), to state owned firms, government directions to other firms, technology theft, restrictions on market access by foreign firms and informal targets for the domestic market share of Chinese producers in the selected sectors. This is regarded as being unfair competition that is putting western firms at an unfair disadvantage or even putting some out of business. It is also regarded with suspicion on the political front as China is an authoritarian country that is not averse to using economic and military power for political advantage. The current trade war between the US and China therefore needs to be seen against that backdrop. It is, therefore, likely that we are heading into a period where there will be a **reversal of world globalisation and a decoupling of western countries** from dependence on China to supply products. This is likely to produce a backdrop in the coming years of weak global growth and so weak inflation.

Summary

Central banks are, therefore, likely to support growth by maintaining loose monetary policy through keeping rates very low for longer. Governments could also help a quicker recovery by providing more fiscal support for their economies at a time when total debt is affordable due to the very low rates of interest. They will also need to avoid significant increases in taxation or austerity measures that depress demand and the pace of recovery in their economies.

If there is a huge surge in investor confidence as a result of successful vaccines which leads to a major switch out of government bonds into equities, which, in turn, causes government debt yields to rise, then there will be pressure on central banks to actively manage debt yields by further QE purchases of government debt; this would help to suppress the rise in debt yields and so keep

the total interest bill on greatly expanded government debt portfolios within manageable parameters. It is also the main alternative to a programme of austerity.