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Balancing act

Summary

- Budget 2021 will be balancing act between fiscal consolidation and addressing some significant issues plaguing New Zealand.
- The economy has outperformed the Treasury's December Half-Year Update forecasts (which were very similar to our own at the time). That's been reflected in the recent fiscal data, with core Crown tax revenue running \$4bn above the Half-Year Update forecast and expenses \$0.3bn below in the nine months to March.
- The Budget Update is expected to bake this positive surprise into the outlook.
- We expect the updated forecasts to show net core Crown debt as a share of the economy peaking in the late 40s (compared to 52.6% at the Half-Year Update).
- A better forecast fiscal position, combined with the fact that NZDM appear to be sitting on a little more cash than they anticipated, is expected to see bond issuance guidance downgraded by around \$20bn on a cumulative basis to June 2025.
- While caution around the medium-term outlook is still warranted, risks are becoming increasingly skewed to the upside. Should upside activity and inflation risks materialise relative to the Treasury's forecasts, we could be looking at further downgrades to the bond programme come the December HYEPU. But as always, much will depend on the Government's discretionary policy decisions.

The detail

On May 20, the Treasury will open up the Government's books for the first time since December last year, and the Minister of Finance will table the Government's spending plans for the years ahead.

The Treasury's economic and fiscal outlook is ripe for an upgrade

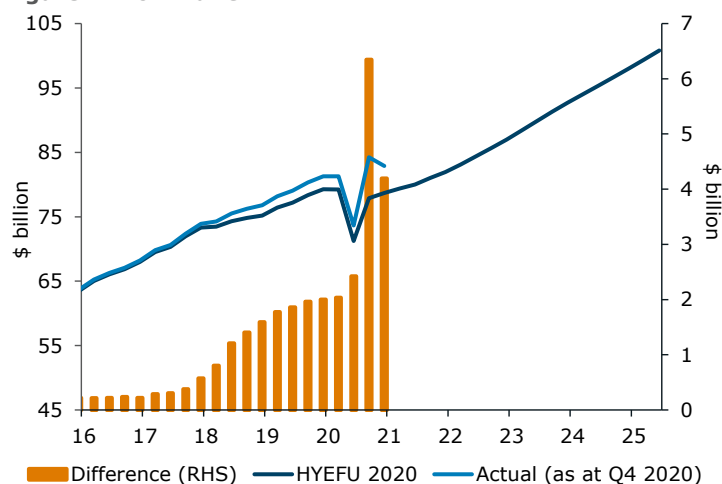
Practically every economic forecaster has been playing one big game of economic-outlook-upgrade leapfrog over the past year or so, and the 2021 Budget Economic and Fiscal Update (BEFU) will be the Treasury's turn to hop.

While the assumptions underpinning the outlook are important (such as the timing and pace of border reopening, migration, housing momentum, the impact of constraints on the supply of labour and other inputs, potential GDP, the terms of trade, and the exchange rate), what it all boils down to for the big fiscal picture is nominal GDP, which is a function of all these things and many more. And on that front, the BEFU outlook should be substantially stronger.

While nominal growth in Q4 2020 came in weaker than the Treasury's HYEPU expectation (-1.6% q/q vs +1.0% forecast), this was on the back of a much larger positive surprise in Q3 (+14.3% q/q vs +9.3% forecast). This, alongside upwards revisions, added an additional \$15bn to annual nominal GDP in 2020 above what the Treasury's economic forecasts had baked in at HYEPU – that's almost 5% of 2020 GDP.

Some of this will be meaningful for the fiscal outlook, while some of it won't. Specifically, for all the historical revisions to GDP where the Treasury has already observed fiscal outturns, all this will do is tweak their understanding of how "tax rich" the economy is. But there is some genuine positive surprise on the momentum side of the economy too, and that part of it will be associated with better forecast fiscal outturns.

Figure 1. Nominal GDP



Source: Statistics NZ, The Treasury, ANZ Research

Projecting the GDP surprise forward (including revisions), we wouldn't be startled to see the Treasury's updated nominal GDP forecasts upgraded by as much as \$70bn cumulatively to June 2025 compared to HYEFU. But after recalibrating for data revisions, we think the upgrade in terms of additional taxable GDP will be less than half that. Divvying this up over the forecast horizon points to around \$3bn additional tax take per fiscal year (on average).

Then there's the spending side of things to consider. First, the better economic outlook should translate into lower projected operational spending on things like unemployment benefits (provided policy settings are unchanged). But anecdotes around demand at food banks and emergency housing suggests there is a very real and urgent need for the Government to support some of our most vulnerable citizens. And things like emergency housing don't come cheap. With housing and living costs lifting at pace, pressure on Government is not poised to dissipate any time soon, despite the better-performing economy.

On the capital spending side, the Government is facing many of the same materials and labour supply disruptions that the private sector is, and in some cases (such as building residential social houses) the Government is in direct competition for resources with the private sector. We expect delays will continue to push spending out, possibly more so than is typical for Government investment.

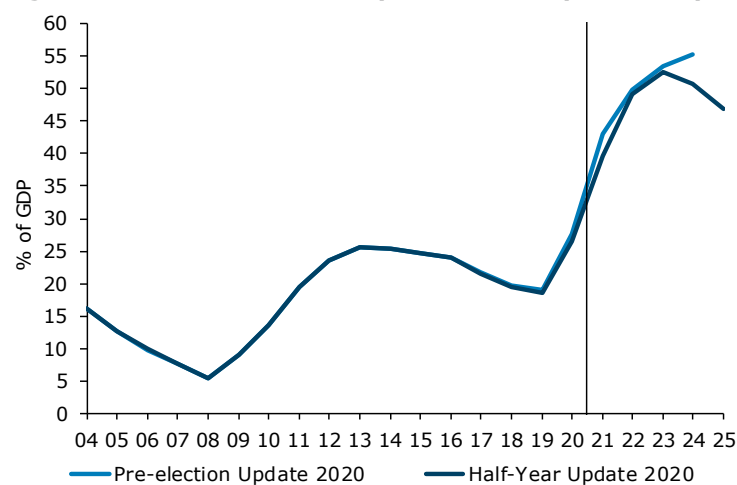
In terms of discretionary fiscal policy decisions we wouldn't be surprised to see the Government increase operational allowances a touch (by a few hundred million or so) and perhaps even increase the multi-year capital envelope. The former, we have no doubt will be put to use pretty easily, but we'd be pretty dubious that any increase in capital spending will actually translate into higher activity, particularly in the near term. We've been arguing for a very long time that the Government's focus needs to remain heavily skewed towards boosting capacity through supply-side policies. And while they are doing a lot already, they can always do more. However,

supply-side policies don't really fit under the "tax and spend" umbrella where Budgets live, so perhaps we shouldn't expect too much on this front on Budget day.

In addition to the above, the Minister of Finance has already signalled that Ministers have found \$926 million of COVID underspending ("savings") that can be returned to the COVID Response and Recovery Fund (CRRF) and reprioritised where it is needed most. It's unclear at this stage whether these funds (and possibly more) will actually be allocated at Budget, or if they will just go back into the unallocated portion of the fund. As at HYEFU, the unallocated portion of the CRRF was sitting at \$10.3bn, and the Government's stance at the time was that if these funds are not needed they will not be spent. Not spending these funds represents a significant upside risk to the fiscal outlook. However, the term "needed" is open to interpretation, and a little extra spending closer to the election could become pretty tempting, particularly if it's already baked into the fiscal outlook. But in the near term, it would be irresponsible not to leave a sizable contingency in the fiscals. We're not out of the COVID woods just yet.

Putting it all together, we're expecting a decent improvement in the fiscals, with GDP revisions flattering the ratios further. Forecast OBEGAL deficits will be narrower on average to June 2025, and could get pretty close to zero by 2025. The forecast peak in net core Crown debt should just squeeze in below 50% of GDP (52.6% in 2023 at HYEFU).

Figure 2. Net core Crown debt (recent Treasury forecasts)



Source: The Treasury, ANZ Research

The big picture: Fiscal stimulus has faded, but its impacts remain widely felt

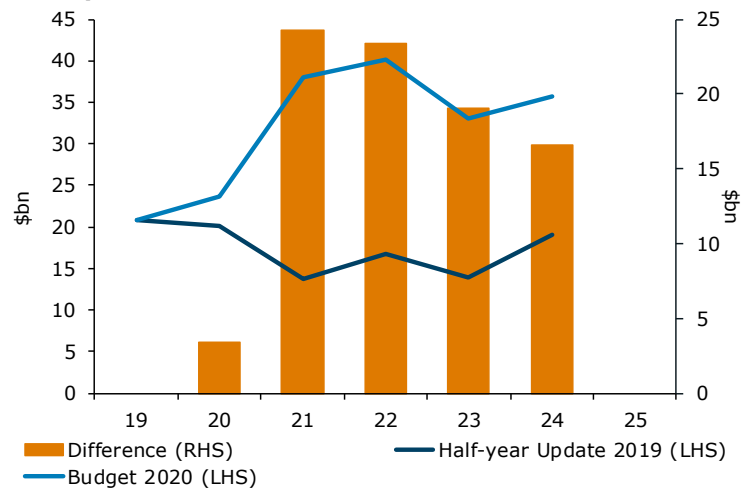
The Government may put a different spin on it, but the direct impetus to economic growth from fiscal settings is now negative as the Government enters the technical consolidation phase of its fiscal response (ie deficits are shrinking). To be fair, the sheer size of stimulus delivered on the back of the great lockdown (chiefly the wage subsidy) means there is no reasonable amount of fiscal stimulus that would see the fiscal impulse turn positive over the year ahead. It's inevitable and entirely appropriate that the Government's stimulatory fiscal stance fades (subject to downside economic risks not materialising).

The key thing here is not about how much fiscal policy is or is not adding to headline growth, but whether or not additional macro-stimulus is actually needed. And in our view, it's not. Fiscal policy (alongside monetary policy and successful virus containment) has done a great job of limiting the economic fallout from this crisis, but now it's time to start rebuilding fiscal buffers for the next one as underlying economic momentum gathers pace. But that's not to say consolidation can't happen a little more slowly if that means addressing some of the structural issues plaguing the NZ economy – particularly our housing and infrastructure deficits. But as we've highlighted many times before, just throwing money at these problems isn't going to solve them. Addressing supply constraints is an increasingly important part of the policy mix. And while the Government's new implementation unit will help cut through the chains of bureaucratic-driven holdups, there's all those other bottlenecks to construction to contend with.

Another downgrade to bond issuance guidance on the cards

When it comes to bond issuance guidance, there are a lot of moving parts to consider – and many of them involve guessing the assumptions the Treasury will make and NZDM's preference to hold a large quantum of liquid assets (given the economic vibe is improving). By looking at the change in forecast financial assets held by the Treasury between HYEFU 2019 (pre-COVID) and Budget 2020 (post COVID), we can surmise that building up a sizeable buffer of liquid assets was always part of NZDM's plan (Figure 3). But the better economy means this is a little larger than they were anticipating.

Figure 3. Forecast financial assets held by the Treasury (pre and post COVID)



Source: The Treasury, ANZ Research

Overall, we think the direction for bond guidance is pretty clear: a downgrade is on the cards, and depending on how far it goes and how the COVID crisis evolves, there will likely be further downgrades to come (perhaps December's Half Year Update and/or Budget 2022).

Table 1 provides a ready reckoner for issuance guidance since HYEFU. It's crude, but given the amount of guesswork involved, it's about as close as we can get. Indeed, interpretation of some key fiscal indicators, such as core Crown residual cash, has become a lot more difficult since the implementation of unconventional monetary policy tools. Over time, we expect the Treasury to adapt key fiscal indicators to ensure they are fit for purpose. We'd put a new cash balance that's a close representation of NZDM's funding requirement pretty high on our wish list.

Table 1. Bond guidance ready reckoner

Influence on bond programme	Implication for Budget	Possible implication beyond Budget
Better than expected starting point – which has led to NZDM overfunding.	The better economy means the Government's funding requirements have been lower than expected, and as a result NZDM are sitting on more cash than they were anticipating at HYEFU. Given risks are skewed towards an even stronger fiscal position come the December HYEFU, we think it makes sense to make adjustments now rather than risk having even more cash to manage later in the year. Containing the Treasury's liquid holdings could take anything from \$5-10bn out of the programme over 2021/22 to 2022/23. However, choosing not to fund NZGB maturities by as much as otherwise would be another way to run down the cash and reduce net issuance. The 23s, 24s and 25s will bring opportunities to do so. So it's not clear if the impact on issuance will be concentrated in the near term or spread over the whole forecast horizon.	NZDM will likely choose to hold a larger than normal cash buffer for a long while yet (possibly permanently). But we think some eventual further reductions will be in store once COVID risks subside. After all, a lower bond supply implies lower funding costs to the tax payer (all else equal).
Upgrade to economic and fiscal outlook – which means more revenue and lower expenses	We think this is worth around \$3-5bn per fiscal year on average, but spending decisions will be key. And re-phasing of spending suggests there could be some lumpiness.	No implications beyond Budget (assuming Budget forecasts are correct).
Successful virus containment – which means the remaining unallocated COVID contingency is not needed.	We think the Treasury accountants will keep this in the fiscal outlook for now, so no implications at BEFU other than potential allocation and timing assumption changes.	A key source of further downward pressure on the Government's funding requirement, and one we think will be phased out only slowly (if the Government doesn't reprioritise these funds in the future).
Issuing more while the RBNZ is still in the market with the LSAP (ie to June 2022).	This isn't expected to change the overall amount of bonds issued, but it could skew the issuance profile to be more front loaded if NZDM thinks yields might rise after LSAP purchases end, or are concerned about how much bond supply the market can absorb.	Really only relevant to 2021/22 given that the LSAP only runs through till June 2022.
Discretionary fiscal policy decisions (ie changes to tax and spending settings).	No major impact expected. Broad fiscal policy settings should be little changed. An extra hundred million or two in the near term will only be a partial offset to the higher tax receipts.	A big unknown with magnitude uncertain. Risks are skewed towards the Government spending more. But this could equally be facilitated by further positive surprises in the fiscals (if the data evolves that way) – ie increased Government spending may not need additional funding.
Delays in government spending (particularly capex) causing a re-phasing of issuance guidance.	Could push some funding requirement into subsequent fiscal years. NZDM would likely smooth issuance guidance through relatively minor timing changes.	Similar story for future updates; not a game changer.
Treasury forecast assumptions, such as funding costs (interest rate), and the maturity profile.	Yields have lifted since HYEFU, meaning less money in the door for a given face value of bonds that go out. This could add \$1bn or so to the programme per fiscal year from 2021/22.	An ongoing influence
Changes to Treasury bill issuance	T-bills on issue could be decreased slightly (\$1-2bn pa) in the interest of keeping the bond programme stable.	An ongoing influence

Overall, we're expecting a cumulative downgrade to issuance guidance over 2021/22 to 2024/25 of around \$20bn, but as table 1 suggests, it's pretty easy to go around in circles when it comes to determining the possible phasing. Acknowledging NZDM's preference for stability in their guidance, we've landed at a \$5bn downgrade per fiscal year. Of this \$20bn, we think around \$15bn will be driven by the better economic outlook, with slightly higher spending and the impact of higher yields expected to provide a partial offset. The remaining \$5bn is just the beginning of NZDM looking towards holding fewer liquid assets – we think there will be more to come on that front in time. Risks to our central expectation are probably skewed to a slightly larger downgrade, which all else equal implies there will be less for NZDM to strip out later. But we'd rather not get too cute about it. NZDM are likely to continue rounding to the nearest \$5bn, using flexibility in T-bills to make up the difference. But swapping out one of the below 25s with a 20 certainly isn't inconceivable.

Table 2. Bond issuance guidance

	Jun-21	Jun-22	Jun-23	Jun-24	Jun-25	Total (22-25)
2020 Half Year Update	45	30	30	30	25	115
2021 Budget Update (ANZ expectations)	45	25	25	25	20	95

In addition to the above, we wouldn't be surprised to see T-bills on issue clipped by a billion or so per fiscal year (ie from \$6bn to \$5bn).

For the LSAP, fewer bonds on issue in 2021/22 is expected to be met with a mechanical downgrade to the pace of purchases. Overall, the LSAP programme has been a wonderful thing for NZDM, taking a significant amount of worry out of the equation when it comes to how many bonds the market can absorb. But with an issuance downgrade on the cards (and probably more to follow), the LSAP is expected to fade into the background as June 2022 approaches.

It's also possible that NZDM signal their intention to syndicate a new bond in 2021/22. The next 4-year gap on the nominal curve to fill is a 2035, which we think is more likely than a "curve extender" (which could be a 2045 if NZDM follow their past practice of extending the curve by 4 years, or a 2051 if NZDM wish to match the longest Australian bond and extend the NZGB curve to 30 years). There are also a few other gaps to fill – on the nominal curve – namely 2030, 2034 and 2036. If NZDM were to extend the linker curve, they would likely bring in a 2045, but we think that is likely to be a while off. Each option has its merits, but on balance we think a 2035 nominal is the most likely option should NZDM flag a new maturity (mindful that a new 2032 nominal is coming in June).

A balancing act

Managing the ongoing COVID recovery, housing affordability, child poverty and climate change will be the key themes of Budget 2021, but overall spending increases are likely to be relatively contained. After all, the Government has to consider the almost \$120 billion increase in projected net debt (to 2023/24) between HYEFU 2019 and HYEFU 2020. And while that amount of debt accumulation represents a lot of saved jobs and livelihoods, it also represents a need to remain focused on fiscal consolidation so that the Government has the ammunition it will need to respond to the next inevitable crisis. And unfortunately, that consolidation must be achieved via higher than otherwise taxes and/or fewer than otherwise Government services.



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