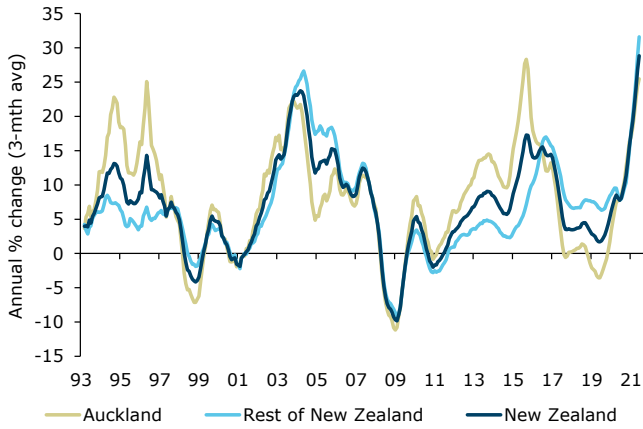


New Zealand Property Focus

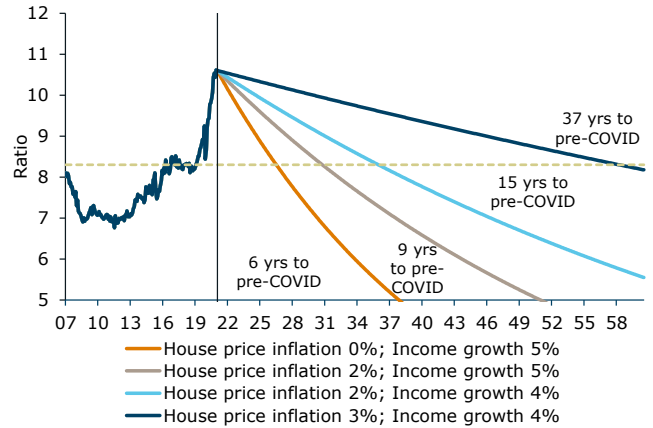
Headwinds gathering



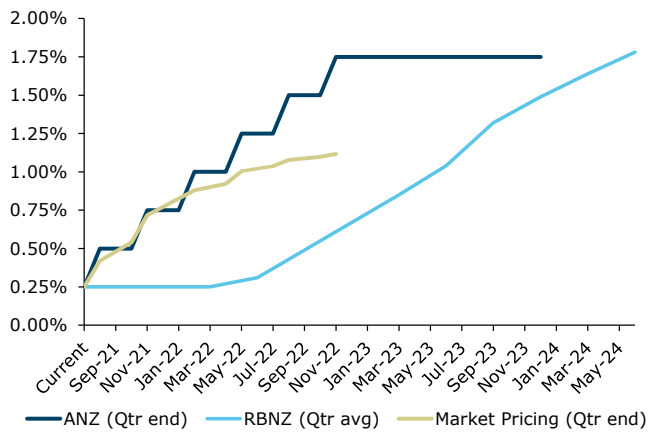
Anti-gravity house prices But annual inflation looks peaky



Affordability has deteriorated And it could take decades to improve



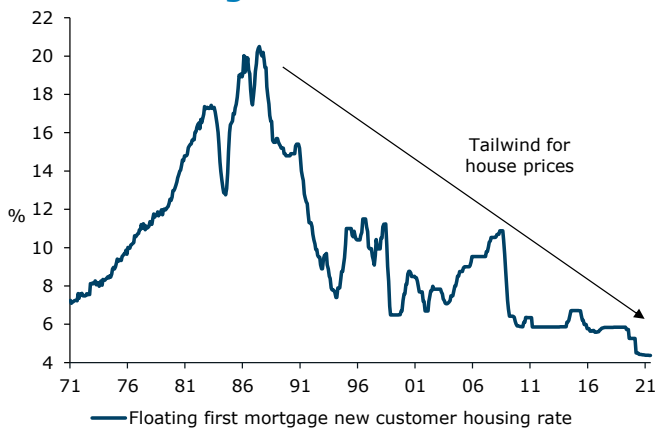
Hikes from August Should cool the market



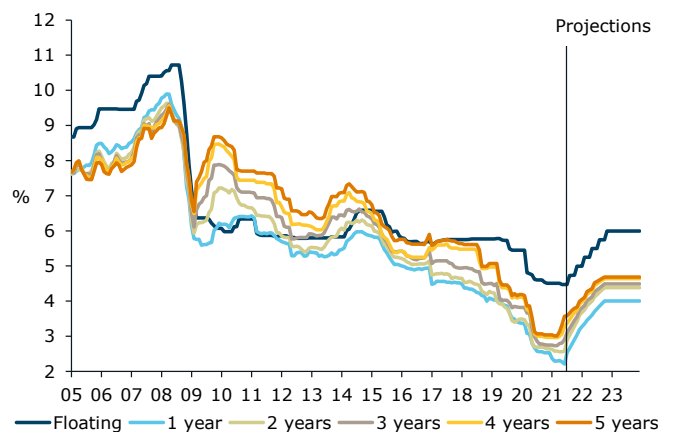
Higher wholesale (swap) rates Pricing in hikes



A multi-decade tailwind Is set to change direction



Mortgage rates likely to rise As OCR hikes flow into retail rates



Source: RBNZ, REINZ, Stats NZ, Macrobond, Bloomberg, ICAP, RealEstate.co.nz, ANZ Research

This is not personal advice nor financial advice about any product or service. The opinions and research contained in this document are provided for information only, are intended to be general in nature and do not take into account your financial situation or goals. Please refer to the [Important Notice](#).



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See [page 9](#).

INSIDE

At a glance	2
Housing Market Overview	4
Regional Housing Market Indicators	6
Feature Article: A pictorial essay on New Zealand interest rates and debt	7
Mortgage Borrowing Strategy	13
Weekly Mortgage Repayment Table	14
Mortgage Rate Forecasts	14
Economic Forecasts	14
Important Notice	16

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Summary

Our monthly *Property Focus* publication provides an independent appraisal of recent developments in the residential property market.

Housing market overview

A few months have now passed since the Government announced its suite of housing policy changes, and as the dust settles, a rather robust market is being revealed. It's still early days of course, but the experience to date suggests policy changes so far are not on their own going to bring about different, and more equitable, housing outcomes. House price inflation is still running at an elevated monthly pace, and while we think the annual profile is very close to its peak, the ratio of house prices to incomes is simply off the chart. Properties available for sale remain very low, and the only real solution to this madness in the longer run is to build more houses. For now, the market remains tight, but a higher OCR from August should help take some of the heat out.

See our [Market Overview](#).

Feature Article: A pictorial essay on New Zealand interest rates and debt

As 2021 has progressed, it has become increasingly clear that the economy has recovered well and is steaming ahead so quickly that it's high time for the Reserve Bank (RBNZ) to start unwinding the emergency stimulus delivered in response to the crisis. The RBNZ has already scaled back and then formally ended quantitative easing ("money printing") and the next logical step is to start lifting the OCR, with the first hike expected next month. While on the one hand that's an endorsement of the strength of the economic rebound and the lift in confidence (and house prices), it also means borrowers will face higher interest costs in the months and years ahead. This month we discuss what markets are telling us about how high interest rates might go, compare that to past cycles, and discuss some of the factors that will determine how high interest rates can go over coming years. See this month's [Feature Article](#).

Mortgage borrowing strategy

Average fixed mortgage rates offered by the four major banks all rose over the past month, with the biggest lifts seen in 1 and 2-year rates, and lesser rises seen in 4 and 5-year rates. The 1-year rate remains the cheapest rate, and at around 2½% it is still relatively low by historical standards. However, the average 5-year rate is now a shade above 4%, a level not seen since before the COVID crisis struck. The current term structure of mortgage rates poses a real challenge to borrowers. That's because longer-term rates are now much higher, but equally, if you fix for 1 year, it's very likely going to cost more to re-fix in the future. Our breakeven analysis shows that it might be marginally cheaper to fix for 2-3 years but it's a close call. The choice will depend on whether you prefer certainty or else think there's a good chance the RBNZ won't need to hike by as much as markets are expecting. See our [Mortgage Borrowing Strategy](#).



Housing market overview

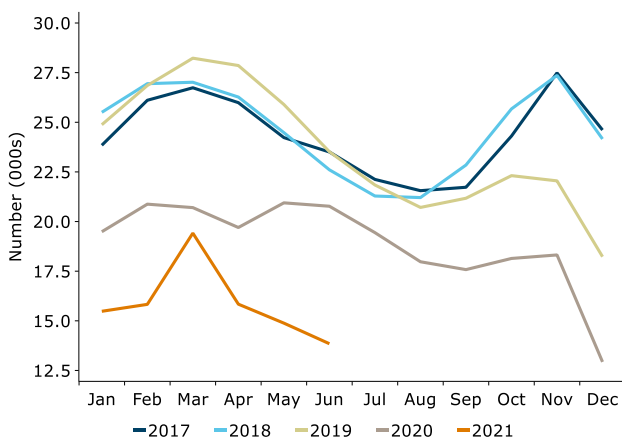
Summary

A few months have now passed since the Government announced its suite of housing policy changes, and as the dust settles, a rather robust market is being revealed. It's still early days of course, but the experience to date suggests policy changes so far are not, on their own, going to bring about different and more equitable housing outcomes. House price inflation is still running at an elevated monthly pace. While we think the annual profile is very close to its peak, the ratio of house prices to incomes is simply off the chart. Properties available for sale remain very low, and the only real solution to this madness is to build more houses. For now, the market remains tight, but a higher OCR from August should help take some of the heat out.

A tight market...

Housing indicators continue to point to a very tight market. Days to sell remain low, coming in at 30 in June (historical average: 39) and properties available for sale remain exceptionally low (figure 1). It's no wonder price pressures have remained elevated as investors have taken a back step – low inventory means first-home buyers are competing for properties just as hard as ever.

Figure 1. Properties available for sale



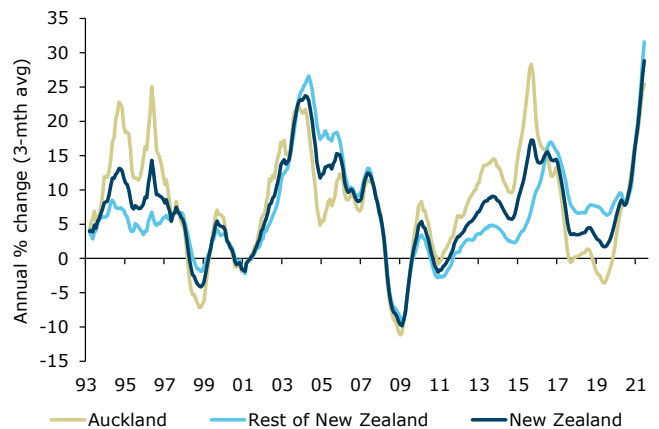
Source: Realestate.co.nz, ANZ Research

That said, house sales rebounded a sharp 10.1% m/m in June (ANZ seasonal adjustment) following two consecutive months of very weak sales growth. This is a tentative sign that the market is beginning to settle down in the aftermath of recent housing policy changes, but one data point does not make a trend. And we should also be cognisant that some investors (who have been sitting on the side lines) may decide to re-enter the market now that it's not looking like it will roll over. Policy changes and mortgage rate increases will make that both harder and less appealing than previously of course, but it's something worth keeping an eye out for.

...a widening divide...

The gap between the haves and have-nots widened further in June, when house prices lifted another 1.6% m/m. Annual house price inflation is now running at around 30% (figure 2). To put that into context, if you bought a \$1-million-dollar house a year ago with a 20% deposit, and fixed the \$800,000 loan at, say, 3% pa, the unrealised gain on your house less interest costs would be more than \$275,000. Conversely, if you didn't quite have the 20% deposit a year ago, it's extremely unlikely that you've gotten closer to your savings goal over the past year – you would have needed to save another \$60,000 just to maintain purchasing power to buy that same house (assuming debt servicing and credit availability isn't a constraint). That's an extra \$165 in savings per day required just to stand still, versus an unrealised daily gain of more than \$750 per day for those lucky enough to be on the other side of this thought experiment!

Figure 2. Annual house price inflation



Source: REINZ, Macrobond, ANZ Research

In an economy where the annual median household disposable income (ie net tax and transfer payments, but before housing costs) was \$72,939 as at June 2020, these numbers are simply bonkers. And if we look at median house prices relative to disposable incomes, the recent experience is even bonkerser!

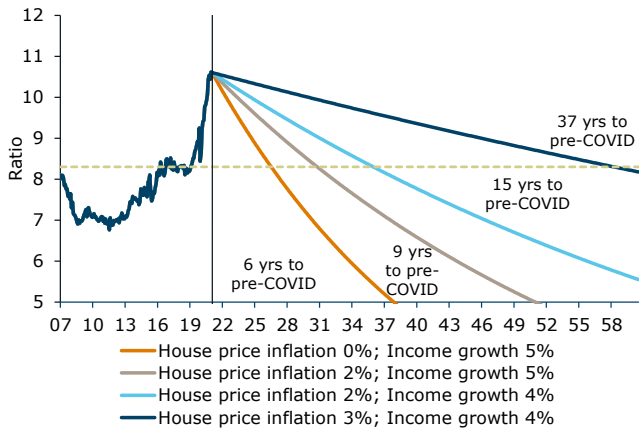
For the calculations in Figure 3 we've had to assume income growth for the year to June 2021, as these data have not yet been released. Here, we generously assume income growth of 5% y/y. As at June 2021 this suggests house prices were running at more than 10.5 times disposable incomes, that's up from an already-elevated 8.3 times in June 2019 (pre-COVID). But the scary thing is even if we assume house price inflation from here to the end of time is zero and that income growth can run at the very solid pace of 5% per annum, it would still take six years for this ratio to return to pre-COVID levels. But 0% house price inflation alongside 5% income growth is an extremely optimistic assumption for the growth gap. Figure 3



Housing market overview

shows a mix of different assumptions, and all of them are pretty sobering. Without outright house price falls, it's a slog.

Figure 3. House price to income projections

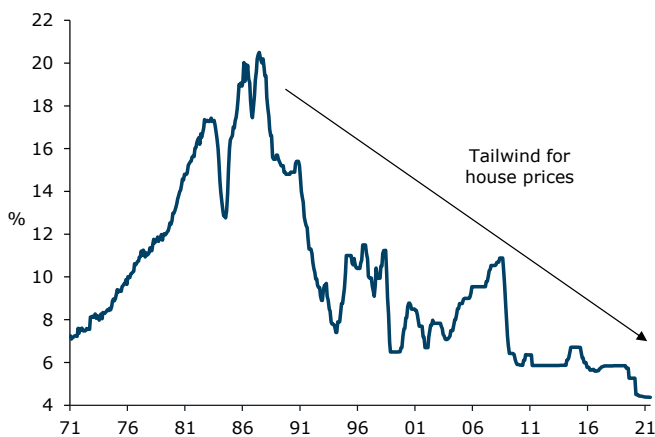


Source: Stats NZ, ANZ Research

Relative to their 10-year average, all of the above scenarios are "optimistic". That is, annual growth in disposable incomes has averaged around 4% pa over the past decade, while annual growth in median house prices has averaged around 6%. If we were to put these assumptions into the chart above, the ratio continues to push higher.

However, we just don't think it's feasible for growth in house prices to significantly outpace income growth for much longer, as at the end of the day someone has to pay the rent or service the mortgage sitting behind such exorbitant house prices. Further, while the picture might change, on current forecasts, the multi-decade tailwind of low interest rates (figure 4) is probably finding a bottom.

Figure 4. 50 years of floating mortgage rates

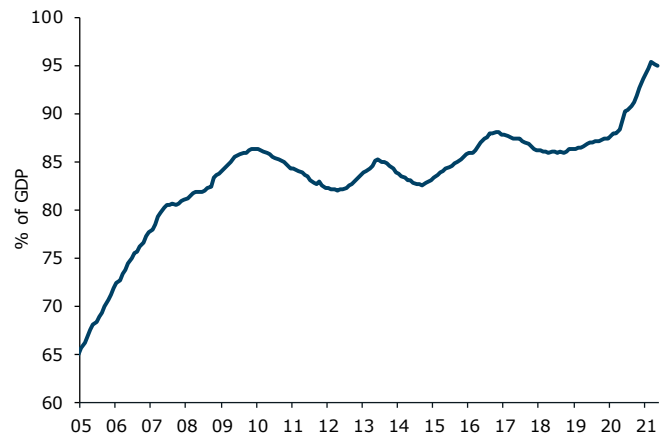


Source: RBNZ

While interest rates are expected to remain structurally low, we do expect the RBNZ to start lifting the OCR from next month (to a terminal rate of 1.75% by end-2022). And with that already getting passed through to

mortgage rates, we expect the housing market to slow. Because the stock of mortgage debt is now so high relative to the size of the economy (figure 5), interest rate increases will be a little more powerful than before. The implied 150 basis points of OCR hikes from here on a stock of around \$315 billion (and growing) of lending secured by residential mortgages represents almost \$5bn more a year that borrowers will need to find to service their debt.

Figure 5. Mortgage lending share of GDP



Source: Stats NZ, RBNZ, ANZ Research

...and a long road to affordability

Overall, what the house price to income projections highlight is just how difficult it is for policy makers to make housing more affordable in a timely manner without a house price crash. While in the long run the take-your-medicine approach certainly has some appeal as the quickest solution, it would unfortunately cause a lot of collateral damage to the likes of economy-wide employment; it wouldn't just be recent home buyers' problem. The New Zealand housing market and economic cycle are intertwined so tightly that the confidence and wealth effects associated with a sharp house price fall would result in weaker-than-otherwise income growth, undermining affordability progress to some extent, at least for a while.

Over the next couple of years, it's our expectation that progress towards housing affordability (and reducing associated poverty) will be very slow going. But the Government could speed this up with more aggressive supply-side policies, such as freeing up land, cutting red tape, funding greenfield infrastructure, and importing the right skills. There's scope to cool the housing market without spooking the horses too much. Housing matters hugely for the economy, but New Zealand isn't a one-trick pony. Key export returns are looking good, the labour market is close to full employment, and there's also a little extra fiscal stimulus in the pipeline. We don't need this housing party to carry on; it's doing a lot more harm than good at this point.



Housing market overview

Housing market indicators for June 2021 (based on REINZ data seasonally adjusted by ANZ Research)

	Median house price			House price index		# of monthly sales	Monthly % change	Average days to sell
	Level	Annual % change	3-mth % change	Annual % change	3-mth % change			
Northland	\$715,164	32.5	5.8	25.8	6.0	220	+27%	33
Auckland	\$1,147,796	25.0	4.9	25.7	4.9	2,887	+10%	31
Waikato	\$740,345	19.5	5.1	33.7	8.2	768	+20%	27
Bay of Plenty	\$850,907	31.4	3.2	35.0	6.0	477	+8%	30
Gisborne	\$630,272	37.4	15.0			44	-12%	40
Hawke's Bay	\$712,932	24.8	8.0	32.8	6.6	203	-2%	28
Manawatu-Whanganui	\$585,294	36.0	7.2	48.8	8.6	345	+27%	24
Taranaki	\$588,570	41.1	8.8	34.7	8.3	192	+21%	29
Wellington	\$900,463	29.6	4.0	43.1	8.0	711	+1%	29
Tasman, Nelson & Marlborough	\$734,530	24.4	6.5			243	+25%	27
Canterbury	\$578,712	21.2	6.3	26.3	7.3	1,125	+5%	25
Otago	\$673,382	17.4	5.3	27.0	4.5	378	+2%	32
West Coast	\$289,204	28.8	2.7			59	+1%	35
Southland	\$427,268	22.9	4.2	24.2	3.5	162	+18%	23
New Zealand	\$812,046	28.7	3.2	30.0	6.4	7,869	+10%	30



Feature Article: A pictorial essay on New Zealand interest rates and debt

Summary

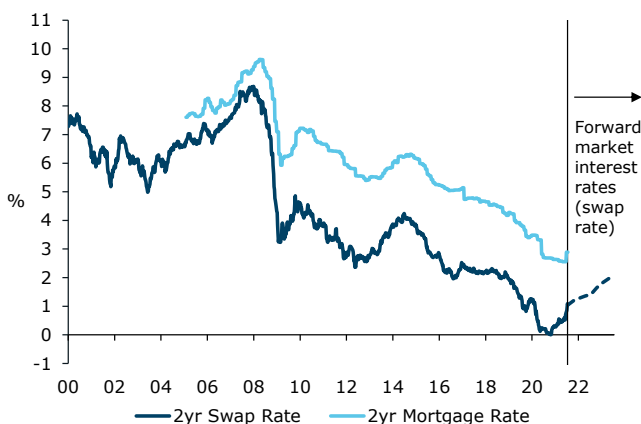
As 2021 has progressed, it has become increasingly clear that the economy has recovered well and is steaming ahead so quickly that it's high time for the Reserve Bank (RBNZ) to start unwinding the emergency stimulus delivered in response to the crisis. The RBNZ has already scaled back and then formally ended quantitative easing ("money printing") and the next logical step is to start lifting the OCR, with the first hike expected next month.

While on the one hand that's an endorsement of the strength of the economic rebound and the lift in confidence (and house prices), it also means borrowers will face higher interest costs in the months and years ahead. In this Feature, we discuss what markets are telling us about how high interest rates might go, compare that to past cycles, and discuss some of the factors that will determine how high interest rates can go over coming years.

Setting the scene

Figure 1 captures the lay of the land well. It shows where the 2-year swap rate (the benchmark wholesale rate that most heavily influences 2-year mortgage rates) has been, and where markets expect it to go in the future. The chart plots the 2-year fixed mortgage rate, demonstrating the influence that swap rates have on mortgage rates. It is worth noting that forward swap rates are actual market-traded rates that reflect the collective expectations of financial market participants. They are not our forecasts, but we will discuss that later.

Figure 1. NZ 2-year swap rate (with market forward expectations) alongside the 2-year fixed mortgage rate



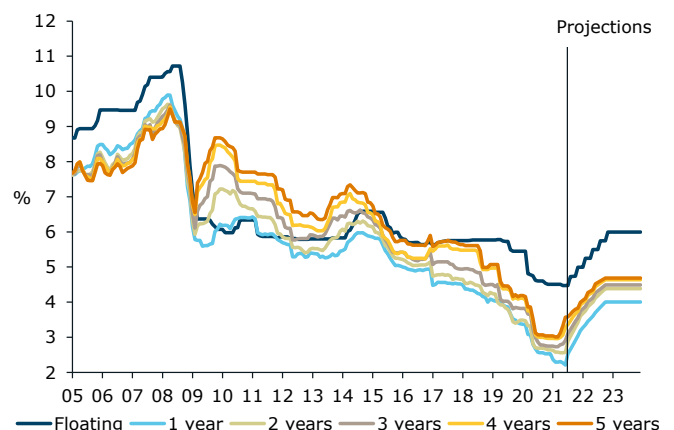
Source: Bloomberg, ANZ Research

At the moment, the 2-year swap rate is around 1.05%, and markets expect it to rise to around 1.65% in 2 years' time, then on to around 1.8% in 3 years' time, and just above 2% in 5 years' time. That's not a

large rise in the context of where the 2-year swap rate has been in the past 20 years or so. However, remember that this rate went negative (yes!) at the end of 2020 and it has already doubled from around 0.5% a couple of months ago. Yet 2-year mortgage rates have only risen recently, and by much less than that. That being the case, there are some clear signs here that mortgage rates (which tend to follow swap rates fairly closely) are likely to continue to rise.

Figure 2 is similar, but it shows ANZ's projections for fixed mortgage rates, these being the rates that actually end up impacting household wallets. There are too many uncertainties and moving parts to call this a formal forecast – it's more of a 'what if' scenario. It takes our 2-year swap forecasts (itself influenced very heavily by our OCR forecast), and assumes for the sake of argument that mortgage margins (the spread between the swap rate and the mortgage rate) gravitate towards historic averages, to show where mortgage rates may go.

Figure 2. ANZ mortgage rate history and projections



Source: RBNZ, ANZ Research

This exercise shows that all mortgage rates could top 4% over the next year (figure 2). Some mortgage holders will be relatively ready for that, especially those who have fixed for longer terms over the past year or so. But even that will only delay inevitable rises, unless we see market interest rates fall in the future. That is certainly possible, if for example another crisis were to come along, prompting the RBNZ to slash interest rates again. But that's probably a case of 'be careful what you wish for' in terms of comfortably making your mortgage payments! And rate cuts are not something we currently expect based on the outlook as it stands now.

New Zealand has experienced many episodes of rising interest rates in the past, so the idea that debt will cost more to service is not in itself particularly novel. But it's fair to say we're a bit rusty at confronting rate



Feature Article: A pictorial essay on New Zealand interest rates and debt

rises. And what will make the upcoming increase in interest rates unique is that household debt levels have never been as high they are now, nor grown as quickly as they have over the preceding 12 months. And on top of that, households have minimal levels of time-certainty, having understandably opted for shorter rather than longer-term fixed mortgage terms for cost reasons. The Government has gone in the other direction, having extended the term of its borrowing to beyond 20 years.

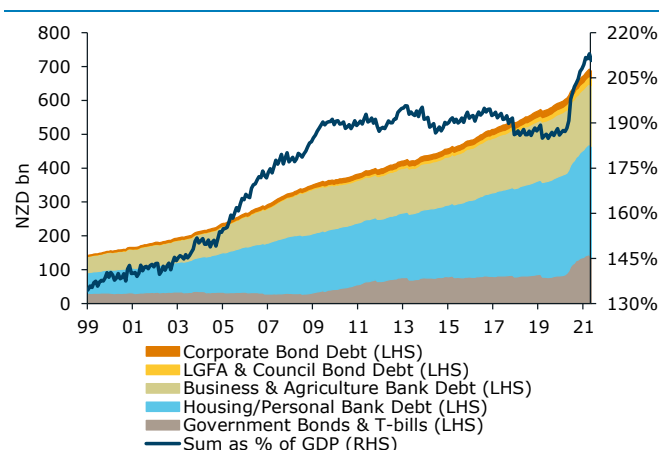
Leveraging up

Figure 3 plots our best estimate of total debt across various sectors of the economy in a way that tries to avoid double-counting. Broadly speaking, there are five main categories of debt in the economy. In the order we have put them on the chart, they comprise:

- central government debt (mostly bonds or Treasury bills),
- housing and personal debt (mostly provided by banks),
- business and agriculture debt (also mostly provided by banks),
- LGFA and local council debt (mostly bonds), and
- corporate debt that's not provided by banks but rather raised in bond markets.

In total, these categories of debt stood at \$692bn (around 213% of GDP) in April.

Figure 3. Categories of debt in New Zealand



Source: Bloomberg, NZDM, ANZ Research

A staggering \$99bn of that debt has been accumulated since the end of 2019, which was just before COVID struck. In percentage of GDP terms, the jump was 27%pts (from 186% to 213% of GDP), making the five years after the GFC (when the total grew from 181% to 192%) look like child's play. In per capita terms, total debt by this measure rose

from \$118k per person at the end of 2019 to \$135.5k in April. Again, that's a big jump. With 2.7 people on average per household, that's an increase of approximately \$47k per household. To put things in perspective, in the year to June 2020, average annual household income rose by only \$3k, from \$104k to \$107k.

It's difficult to see clearly on Figure 3, so for completeness, Table 1 shows the change in dollar terms for each of the debt groupings. Of note, the only category where debt fell was the businesses and agriculture grouping, whose debt shrank by \$4.9bn. The big borrowers were the Government (that boils down to you and me – and even more so, our kids), who borrowed an additional \$63bn, and households, who borrowed an additional \$32.6bn.

Table 1. Increases in New Zealand debt since 2019 (NZD bn)

Category	Dec-19	Apr-21	Change
Government Bonds & T-bills	\$82.0	\$145.0	\$63.0
Housing/Personal Bank Debt	\$293.5	\$326.1	\$32.6
Business & Agriculture Bank Debt	\$183.6	\$178.7	-\$4.9
LGFA & Council Bond Debt	\$15.3	\$22.1	\$6.8
Corporate Bond Debt	\$18.7	\$20.4	\$1.7
Sum of all categories	\$593.2	\$692.3	\$99.1

Source: Bloomberg, NZDM, ANZ Research

It's worth noting that we have deliberately omitted categories such as bank debt raised in the bond market because this is on-lent to households and businesses, which we have already counted. We have also omitted debt raised in the bond market by offshore companies, as this is not a liability of anyone resident in New Zealand. We could have cut the data differently, but this snapshot captures the overall situation pretty well. Had we added some of the excluded categories, the picture would look even starker.

No matter how you cut it, the more debt there is in the economy, the more sensitive the economy is to rising interest rates, with more pressure on indebted households, businesses and the government to either cut back on spending or increase prices or taxes, and that will have knock-on impacts on the wider economy.

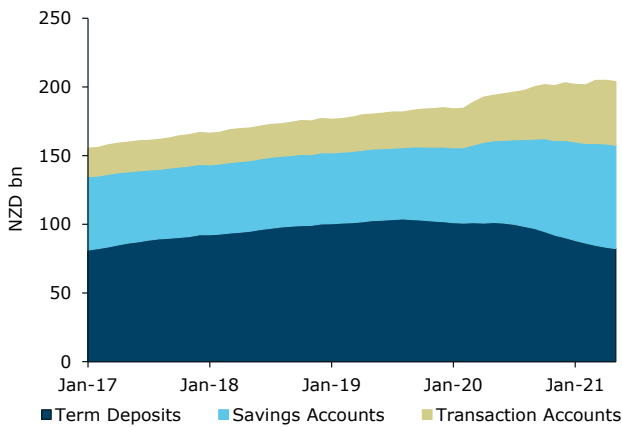
What about savers? They're better off when rates rise, if their cash is in the bank. Figure 4 (overleaf) shows the volume of household deposits at New Zealand banks. They ticked up when the wage subsidy was distributed, but most of the growth seen was in transaction and savings accounts, which earn little or no interest. The volume of term deposits has



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actually shrunk since last year, thanks mainly to less-attractive term deposit rates recently. Since the GFC, term deposits have generally paid interest at a rate that significantly exceeds the OCR. However, with the OCR at 0.25%, even with a wide margin, term deposit rates have been low, and the lack of take-up at the household level will dilute the positive impact of rising interest rates.

Figure 4. Household deposits

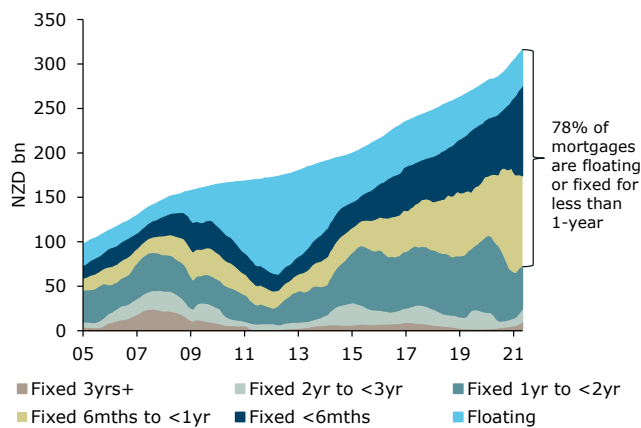


Source: RBNZ, ANZ Research

Time certainty – or the lack of it

It's not just the volume of debt out there that determines how borrowers will be affected by rising interest rates, but also the structure of that debt.

Figure 5. Residential mortgages by fixed term



Source: RBNZ, ANZ Research

Figure 5 plots the aggregate volume of New Zealand mortgage debt (secured over residential property) split by remaining fixed term. Households have benefitted from last year's dramatic falls in mortgage rates, with the average special rate on a 1-year mortgage term falling as low as 2.21%, according to the RBNZ. But because it has cost more to fix for longer throughout the entire time since the COVID

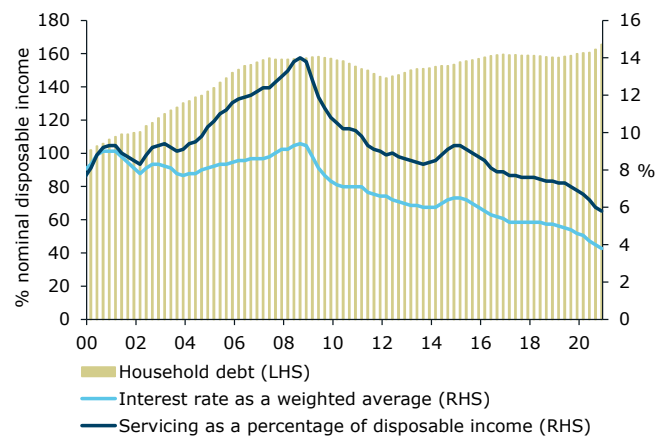
crisis began, households have traded off longer-term certainty for immediate savings. As a result, a historically high proportion (nearly 80%) of mortgage debt is now either floating, or fixed for less than 1 year. That, as well as the level of debt, leaves households more vulnerable now that interest rates are rising.

Put bluntly, households will feel the pinch of rising interest rates harder and sooner this time around. Based on the latest data, a 1% increase in interest rates will cost households \$3.1bn extra a year, which is around 1% of GDP. Of course, the staggered nature of fixed rate roll-offs does mean that households will have time to think about that, but the prospect of these increases is likely to weigh on sentiment immediately, even if it doesn't hit cashflow till later.

Debt servicing costs

While the amount of mortgage debt has risen sharply over the past year, adding to already-high levels of debt, lower mortgage rates have cushioned the blow. This is demonstrated in Figure 6, which shows that debt-servicing costs as a percentage of household income (dark blue line) have continued to fall as interest rates have fallen (light blue line). Higher incomes have also helped, but lower interest rates have provided most of the tailwind. So the obvious corollary is, what might happen to house prices and confidence once this tailwind becomes a headwind?

Figure 6. Household debt and servicing costs



Source: RBNZ, ANZ Research

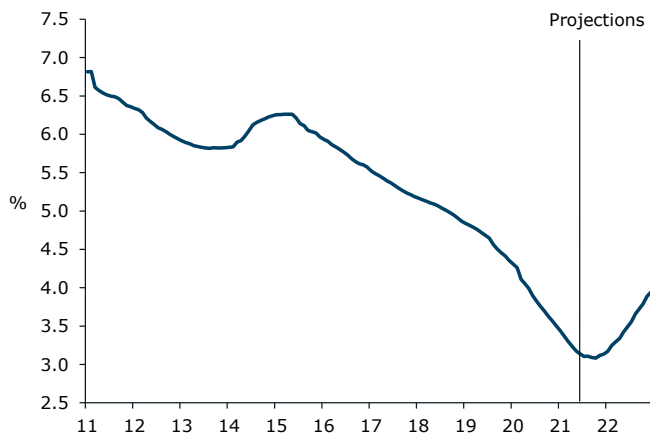
Higher interest rates won't impact most existing mortgage holders immediately, thanks to the popularity of fixed-rate mortgages. But as noted earlier, it will feed through quickly. Our modelling of this is encapsulated in what we call the "effective mortgage rate", which captures the actual interest rate that most home-owners are paying when we account for the date they fixed their mortgage rates.



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As figure 7 shows, the effective mortgage rate is set to rise from the end of this year as those on historically cheap rates roll into new, higher rates. The effective mortgage rate is unlikely to rise to the levels prevailing pre-COVID, but it will probably rise more rapidly than it has in past cycles, bringing a swift end to the tailwind of years of falling rates.

Figure 7. ANZ Estimate of the effective mortgage rate



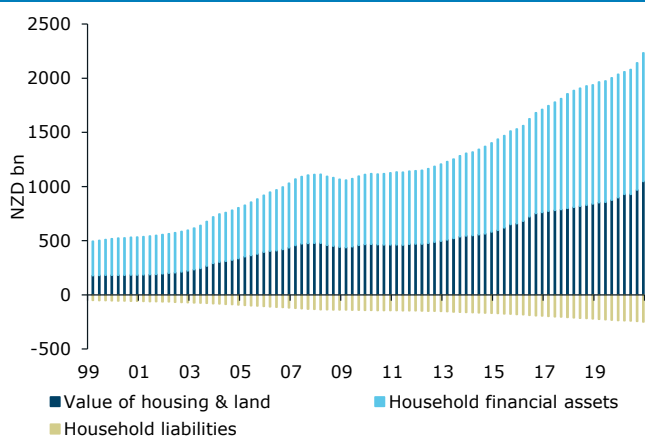
Source: ANZ Research

So is it the change in the mortgage rate that matters, or the level? Both do, of course. While the former is arguably more related to confidence effects, the latter is pretty 'real' in terms of cashflow.

Balancing things out

Of course, it hasn't been just the debt side of the balance sheet that has grown over the past year; so too has the asset side of the ledger.

Figure 8. Household assets and liabilities



Source: RBNZ, ANZ Research

Figure 8 shows that while household debt has grown rapidly, household financial assets and the value of housing and land have grown even more rapidly. Despite the rise in indebtedness, household balance sheets are technically in better shape than they were a year ago, or have ever been. That said, those gains are unrealised, and could be fleeting – asset or house prices can easily fall, whereas the value of the debt will only fall if it's paid back or defaulted on.

This is important, as financial asset prices (and house prices) tend to be very sensitive to the level of interest rates. If some of the wealth created by falling interest rates is wiped out as interest rates rise, that could weigh severely on confidence and spending, which may in turn limit how many OCR hikes the Reserve Bank actually ends up delivering.

What else is going on?

There are also other reasons to expect interest rates to rise by less over the coming cycle than in past cycles. One key reason is the unknown impact on the economy of the cessation of quantitative easing (QE), which is the modern day equivalent of money printing. As many readers will be aware, the Reserve Bank has been buying significant volumes of bonds since the COVID crisis struck, via its Large Scale Asset Purchase (LSAP) programme.

The LSAP delivered three main benefits to the economy (though certainly debate rages about the scale of its real impacts, which will never be demonstrable).

- First, it helped keep long (10-year) and ultra-long (20-year) interest rates low, particularly when the Government had to borrow a massive amount of money quickly in order to finance the huge fiscal support package in the first lockdown.
- Second, it put additional liquidity into the banking system, which helped keep short-end interest rates low and facilitated loan growth.
- Third, it likely kept the NZD lower than it otherwise would have been, which in turn added to inflation and boosted exports.

While QE did not directly impact the housing market, the build-up of additional liquidity in the banking system did mean that it indirectly supported asset prices, including house prices. When talking about its monetary policy options, the RBNZ actually warned the Government that QE could inflate house prices, and it now seems clear that it was one of the driving factors. So as a result, it's reasonable to assume that there will be some impacts on the other side too, as QE is ceased and eventually unwound. The LSAP QE



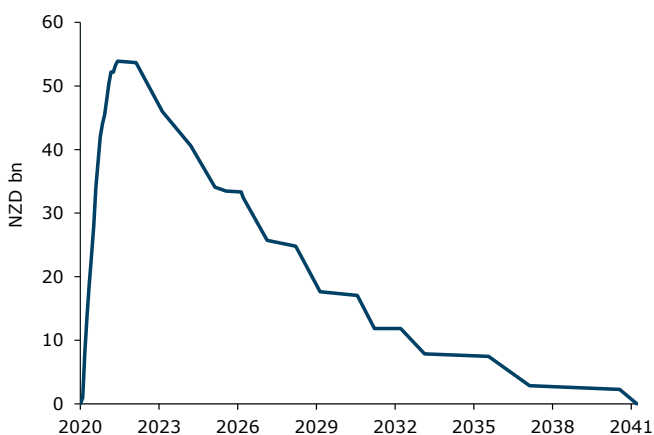
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programme has now ceased, and that does mean there is less stimulus coming through those three channels, and less liquidity chasing asset prices, including housing.

We need to be clear about the phasing of this. During the initial “purchase” phase of QE, liquidity is being created (that’s the “money printing” bit), and as this liquidity makes its way through the plumbing of the financial system, it drives down bond yields, suppresses the exchange rate, and fuels lending, which in turn helps boost house prices. That phase spanned the period from March 2020 until last week. The second phase (which began this week) is the “neutral” period, where no more bonds are being purchased. That takes away a tailwind, but there isn’t yet a headwind. The final phase begins when the bonds that were purchased mature. At this stage, if the proceeds are not reinvested (and it is likely that they won’t be, or at least not fully – after all, QE was only supposed to be temporary), we will see a reduction in liquidity. This is known as quantitative tightening (QT) and it is akin to the “printed money” being “burnt”.

It is not clear what impact this third phase (QT) will have on the economy, but historic international experience and logic suggest that it will have a negative impact on growth, and that could temper the need (or the ability) for the OCR to go higher. In essence, QT could see longer-term interest rates rise (which affect business and the government more), leaving less room for short-term interest rates (which affect households more) to rise.

Figure 9. Evolution and run-off of the RBNZ's LSAP portfolio (in face value terms) since inception



Source: Bloomberg, RBNZ, ANZ Research

Figure 9 shows the run-off profile of the approximately \$54bn of bonds that have been purchased. It runs off a lot more gently than it was ramped up, and that will help soften the blow. The

first major QT date to diarise is April 2023, when around \$7.7bn of bonds mature. If not all of those are rolled over, QT will have begun.

QE also occurred via the Reserve Bank’s Funding for Lending (FLP) programme, under which the Reserve Bank pledged to lend banks up to \$28bn (approximately) over three years. This programme remains in place, so even though LSAP purchases have now ceased, there is still more QE to come.

The FLP was introduced to make cheap funds available to banks to on-lend. The drawdown window of the programme spans 2 years, between December 2020 and December 2022. If banks make full use of this programme, that will add around \$28bn to the amount of “printed money” to the system (on top of the roughly \$54bn of bonds already purchased).

Because banks have not yet taken their full allocations allowed under this facility (only \$3.7bn of the \$28bn has been drawn), the near-term impact will be more QE, as the remaining \$24bn or so of it is drawn down. But as these loans mature in three years’ time, that will lead to further QT as they roll off (forcing banks to replace this funding elsewhere).

Bringing it all together

Forecasters and markets alike are flagging the likelihood that interest rates are likely to rise later this year, taking the OCR back above 1% by the first half of next year, and nearer to 2% by the end of the year. If that does occur, mortgage rates are almost certainly going higher. Yet many households are relatively unprepared for this, having opted for shorter-term fixed mortgage terms that have been cheaper than longer terms, which obviously offer greater certainty.

Household balance sheets have never been stronger, with growth in housing and financial asset values outstripping growth in debt. Indeed, this goes a long way to explaining why in aggregate households are currently spending so freely, though the gains have been extremely unevenly distributed. But while the asset side of the balance sheet has enjoyed strong paper gains, much of this is unrealised, and could easily be eroded if the economy sours, another crisis comes along, or if a tightening of monetary policy causes asset prices to stop increasing, or even fall.

Overall levels of debt remain very high, and servicing this debt has been made easier by the multi-decade fall in interest rates. But that trend is now coming to an end, and what was a tailwind will soon become a headwind.



Feature Article: A pictorial essay on New Zealand interest rates and debt

As threatening as that sounds, it's this very phenomenon (ie the sense that higher interest rates might start to bite) that has the potential to temper how high interest rates may go this coming cycle, and that's a key reason why we have the OCR peaking at "only" 1.75%. Such a rate would have seemed very low historically (in fact, the OCR bottomed out at 2.50% in the immediate aftermath of the GFC), but in the current environment we are confident that unless inflation gets away on the Reserve Bank (which is a possibility, but not our central scenario), 1.75% ought to do it. The unknown impact of the end of QE and an eventual move towards QT will also limit the extent to which interest rates can or need to go higher as the resultant tightening in financial and funding conditions bite, taking some pressure off the OCR.

Stepping back, it's worth thinking about the bigger picture – which is one of an economy that has taken on another \$100bn of additional debt since the end of 2019 (an increase of around 17%), yet the number of filled jobs only rose 1%. Had they also been up by a similar amount, and there were perhaps 17% more cows on farms being milked, or 17% more orchards producing fruit, or perhaps 17% more manufacturing output, that extra debt might not be a problem. But the productive capacity of the economy hasn't grown by anything like that amount. That doesn't mean interest rates can't rise – it just limits how far they can rise without becoming a serious drag on economic activity in New Zealand.



Mortgage borrowing strategy

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Summary

Average fixed mortgage rates offered by the four major banks all rose over the past month, with the biggest lifts seen in 1 and 2-year rates, and lesser rises seen in 4 and 5-year rates. The 1-year rate remains the cheapest rate, and at around 2½% it is still relatively low by historical standards. However, the average 5-year rate is now a shade above 4%, a level not seen since before the COVID crisis struck. The current term structure of mortgage rates poses a real challenge to borrowers. That's because longer-term rates are now much higher, but equally, if you fix for 1 year, it's very likely going to cost more to re-fix in the future. Our breakeven analysis shows that it might be marginally cheaper to fix for 2-3 years but it's a close call. The choice will depend on whether you prefer certainty or else think there's a good chance the RBNZ won't need to hike by as much as markets are expecting.

Our view

July was the first month since the COVID crisis hit that mortgage rates rose across the board (on average across the four major banks). Until now, we have only seen rises in longer terms, which has happened while the 1-year has continued to decline. But all fixed rates are now higher, leaving the floating rate as the only unchanged offering.

These changes – and the way things have evolved over the past few months – present borrowers with a real challenge. That's because the lower the 1-year rate has gone, the more attractive it has become, especially as longer-term rates have risen. But as pleasant as it may have been to fix at ever-lower rates, opting for a 1-year fix offers very little time certainty, and now that the consensus is that the OCR is headed up, all of a sudden time certainty is what people want.

Unfortunately, the situation remains just as challenging after this month's changes for new borrowers (or those on floating, or rolling off an historic fixed rate). Shorter-term rates have risen by more (that in itself won't be welcome news to borrowers), but the yawning gap between 1-year rates and longer-term rates means that it takes some conviction to pay up for certainty. Most borrowers will be aware that the RBNZ is now expected to steadily raise the OCR. With inflation rising and the economy well and truly back on its feet, we expect the first hike to be delivered next month, followed by five further hikes, taking the OCR from its current level of 0.25% to 1.75%. That in turn speaks to fixed mortgage rates all heading towards, and likely above, 4% over the next 18 months.

That picture could change, of course, but against this backdrop, for borrowers there are really only two choices: pay up now and fix for longer, or fix for a shorter period knowing that it is probably going to cost more – potentially a lot more – later. At the moment, we think the former is likely the better choice, but only just. Indeed, our breakeven analysis shows that interest rates will need to rise by a little less than we expect for fixing for longer to be worth it. If borrowers place any value on certainty, and it might cost less over the long run to fix for longer (even if only just), then it is still probably worth it. The main risk would be if the RBNZ end up hiking by less (or more slowly) than we currently expect.

Crunching the numbers, our breakeven analysis shows that for the 2-year to be cheaper than back-to-back 1-year fixes, you'd need to expect the 1-year rate to rise 0.77%pts (from 2.44% to 3.31%). That seems fair, given that we expect the OCR to rise by 1.00% over the next year. The analysis also shows that the 1-year rate needs to rise by a further 0.65%pts (from 3.31% to 3.96%) over the second year. That's 1.42%pts over 2 years, during which we expect the OCR to rise by 1.50%. Breakevens for the 2-year rise by a similar amount, and collectively this suggests that it could be worth fixing for perhaps 2 or 3 years. But fixing for 4 or 5 years close to 4% looks expensive given our expectation that the OCR will peak at 1.75%.

Figure 1. Carded special mortgage rates[^]

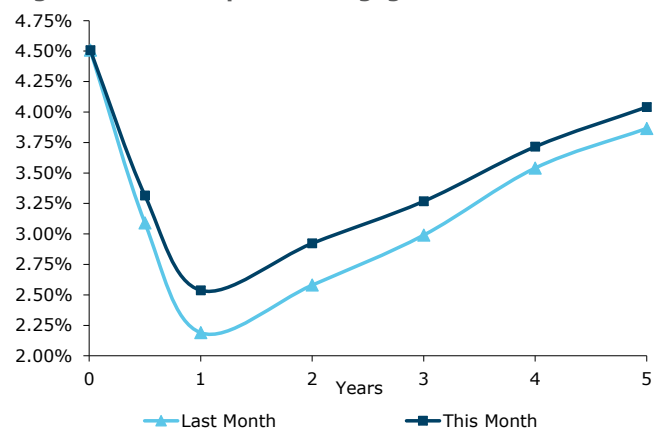


Table 1. Special Mortgage Rates

Term	Current	Breakevens for 20%+ equity borrowers			
		in 6mths	in 1yr	in 18mths	in 2 yrs
Floating	4.51%				
6 months	3.32%	1.76%	3.12%	3.50%	3.79%
1 year	2.54%	2.44%	3.31%	3.64%	3.96%
2 years	2.92%	3.04%	3.63%	4.06%	4.51%
3 years	3.27%	3.52%	4.11%	4.45%	4.79%
4 years	3.72%	3.95%	4.42%		
5 years	4.04%	#Average of "big four" banks			

[^] Average of carded rates from ANZ, ASB, BNZ and Westpac.

Source: interest.co.nz, ANZ Research



Key forecasts

Weekly mortgage repayments table (based on 25-year term)

Mortgage Size (\$'000)	Mortgage Rate (%)													
	2.00	2.25	2.50	2.75	3.00	3.25	3.50	3.75	4.00	4.25	4.50	4.75	5.00	5.25
200	196	201	207	213	219	225	231	237	243	250	256	263	270	276
250	244	251	259	266	273	281	289	296	304	312	320	329	337	345
300	293	302	310	319	328	337	346	356	365	375	385	394	404	415
350	342	352	362	372	383	393	404	415	426	437	449	460	472	484
400	391	402	414	426	437	450	462	474	487	500	513	526	539	553
450	440	453	466	479	492	506	520	534	548	562	577	592	607	622
500	489	503	517	532	547	562	577	593	609	625	641	657	674	691
550	538	553	569	585	601	618	635	652	669	687	705	723	741	760
600	587	604	621	638	656	674	693	711	730	750	769	789	809	829
650	635	654	673	692	711	730	750	771	791	812	833	854	876	898
700	684	704	724	745	766	787	808	830	852	874	897	920	944	967
750	733	754	776	798	820	843	866	889	913	937	961	986	1,011	1,036
800	782	805	828	851	875	899	924	948	974	999	1,025	1,052	1,078	1,105
850	831	855	879	904	930	955	981	1,008	1,035	1,062	1,089	1,117	1,146	1,174
900	880	905	931	958	984	1,011	1,039	1,067	1,095	1,124	1,154	1,183	1,213	1,244
950	929	956	983	1,011	1,039	1,068	1,097	1,126	1,156	1,187	1,218	1,249	1,281	1,313
1000	978	1,006	1,035	1,064	1,094	1,124	1,154	1,186	1,217	1,249	1,282	1,315	1,348	1,382

Mortgage rate projections (historic rates are special rates; projections based on ANZ's wholesale rate forecasts)

Interest rates	Actual			Projections						
	Dec-20	Mar-21	Jun-21	Sep-21	Dec-21	Mar-22	Jun-22	Sep-22	Dec-22	Mar-23
Floating Mortgage Rate	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.7	5.0	5.3	5.5	5.8	6.0	6.0
1-Yr Fixed Mortgage Rate	2.5	2.3	2.2	2.8	3.2	3.5	3.7	3.9	4.0	4.0
2-Yr Fixed Mortgage Rate	2.6	2.6	2.6	3.2	3.6	3.9	4.1	4.3	4.4	4.4
5-Yr Fixed Mortgage Rate	3.0	3.0	3.6	3.7	4.0	4.3	4.5	4.6	4.7	4.7

Source: RBNZ, ANZ Research

Economic forecasts

Economic indicators	Actual			Forecasts						
	Sep-20	Dec-20	Mar-21	Jun-21	Sep-21	Dec-21	Mar-22	Jun-22	Sep-22	Dec-22
GDP (Annual % Chg)	0.4	-0.8	2.4	15.3	1.8	3.6	2.8	3.4	3.8	3.9
CPI Inflation (Annual % Chg)	1.4	1.4	1.5	3.3(a)	4.2	4.1	3.8	3.0	2.4	2.3
Unemployment Rate (%)	5.2	4.9	4.7	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.4	4.2	4.1	4.0
House Prices (Quarter % Chg)	4.3	7.9	7.7	6.4(a)	3.4	1.6	-0.1	0.3	0.3	0.3
House Prices (Annual % Chg)	10.0	15.7	21.3	28.8(a)	27.8	20.3	11.7	5.2	2.0	0.8

Interest rates	Actual			Forecasts						
	Dec-20	Mar-21	Jun-21	Sep-21	Dec-21	Mar-22	Jun-22	Sep-22	Dec-22	Mar-23
Official Cash Rate	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.50	0.75	1.00	1.25	1.50	1.75	1.75
90-Day Bank Bill Rate	0.27	0.35	0.35	0.76	1.06	1.32	1.57	1.82	1.90	1.90
10-Year Bond	0.99	1.81	1.77	1.70	2.00	2.25	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50

Source: ANZ Research, Statistics NZ, RBNZ, REINZ



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