

NZ Insight: 2020 Hindsight

5 September 2022



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2020 Hindsight

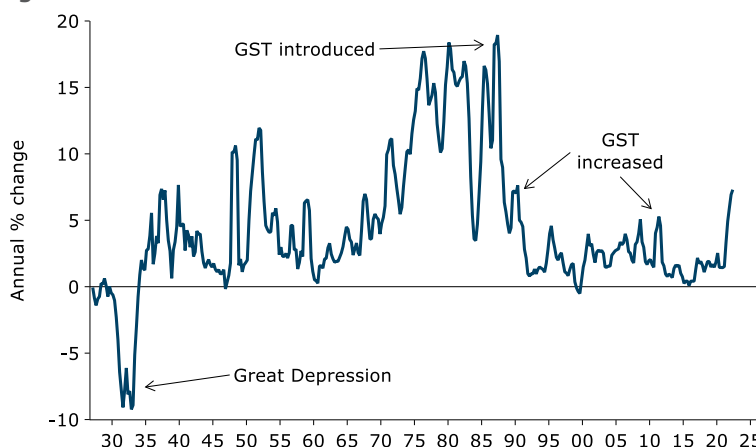
Summary

- Inflation in New Zealand is running hot (hitting 7.3% y/y in Q2 this year). In this insight note we take a detailed look at why.
- In over-simplified terms, we've been hit by a perfect storm of supply-side constraints largely relating to the pandemic, while demand has been overstimulated by what in hindsight was an overly powerful policy response.
- Russia's invasion of Ukraine has only added fuel to the inflation inferno, though New Zealand is less exposed than other countries, particularly Europe.
- In our next Insight, we will outline our inflation forecasts and where we see the balance of risks from here.

How did we get here?

Annual CPI inflation reached 7.3% in the June quarter 2022, ending three decades of being relatively low and stable. That's far above the Monetary Policy Committee's [objective](#) to "keep future annual inflation between 1 and 3 percent over the medium term, with a focus on keeping future inflation near the 2 percent midpoint." Excluding the GST hike in July 1989, CPI inflation is now the highest it's been since 1988 (figure 1).

Figure 1. CPI inflation

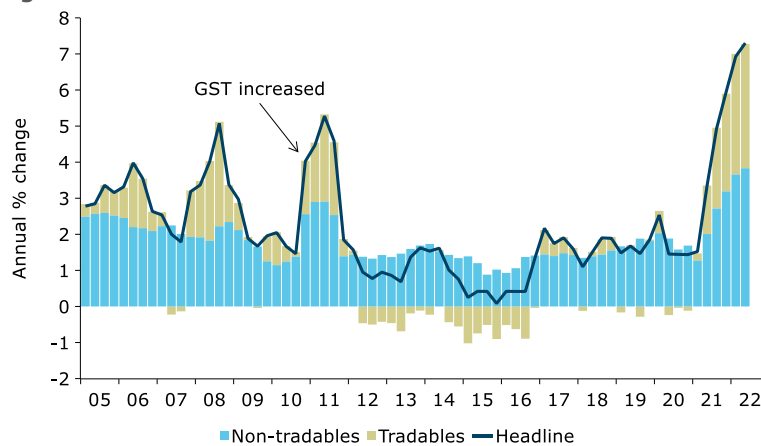


Source: Stats NZ, Macrobond, ANZ Research

So how did we get here?

Not surprisingly, there are many competing explanations for high inflation, including COVID, global supply disruptions, geopolitical tensions, high government spending, tight labour markets (partly related to the closed border), and central bank policy stimulus. All of these explanations have a part to play, and there is no one single factor that can explain the inflation that we now see. Indeed, figure 2 shows just over half of the inflation we're seeing is non-tradables (ie primarily "made in NZ", reflecting the state of the NZ economy), and just under half is tradables (imported goods – or those that could be – more reflective of global inflation pressures). So there's a lot to unpack.

Figure 2. Contributions to CPI inflation



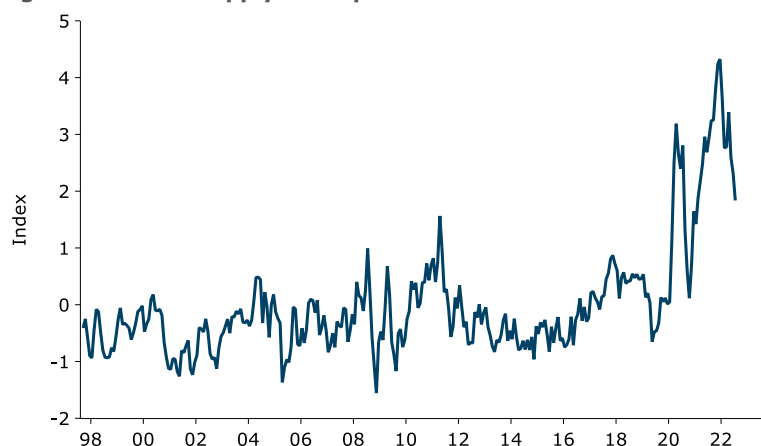
Source: Stats NZ, Macrobond, ANZ Research

Global factors and COVID

As inflation started to pick up in early 2021, it very much seemed to reflect global supply chain issues and ongoing disruption from COVID-19. There were a few key pressures here.

First, lockdowns and ongoing social-distancing requirements contributed to big backlogs in ports. Moving goods within and between countries became an expensive and time-consuming process. The Federal Reserve Bank of New York's [Global Supply Chain Pressure Index](#) shows just how disrupted things became (figure 3). Supply chain pressures are now easing as we head into the second half of 2022, but they are still far from normal. As China perseveres with its zero-COVID policy and geopolitical tensions continue to rumble, a sudden easing in supply chain pressure back to levels seen in the 2010s seems unlikely.

Figure 3. Global supply chain pressure index

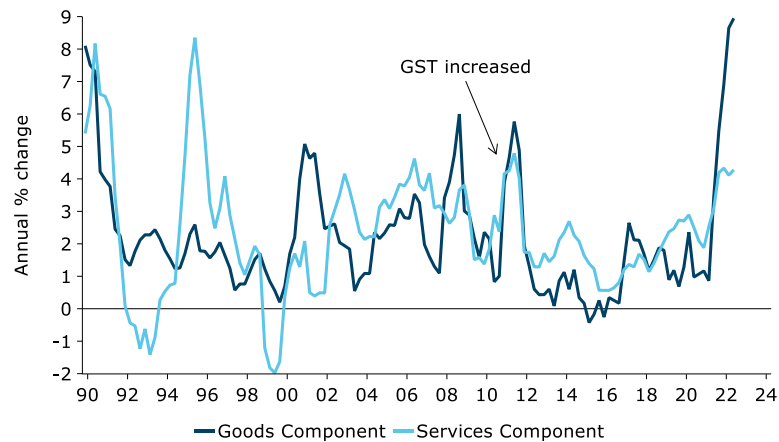


Source: FRBNY, Macrobond, ANZ Research

A second pressure point was that household consumption baskets shifted significantly towards goods and away from services. International travel and many face-to-face services were either prohibited or significantly disrupted, but consumers were flush with cash due to the significant fiscal responses seen around the world (more on this later). That saw a global surge in demand for 'things', which put further pressure on already-disrupted supply chains. And that's not to mention the huge increase in working from home, which put pressure on the global supply of semiconductors, driving up prices for electronics, cars, and pretty much anything with some form of electronic brain.

Given these global pressures, it's not surprising that the biggest price increases we've seen so far in New Zealand have been for goods, up 8.9% y/y in Q2 2022 (figure 4).

Figure 4. Goods and services inflation



Source: Stats NZ, Macrobond, ANZ Research

At the time, these inflation pressures appeared to be driven by transitory factors, and therefore something to which central banks shouldn't necessarily respond. The thinking was, inflation would fall by itself as COVID disruption eased, supply chains adjusted, and the chip shortage worked itself out. One of the wonders of capitalism is meant to be that high prices beget a supply response, hence the saying, "the best cure for high prices is high prices."

So even though inflation was rising sharply in 2021, central banks were slow to respond, insisting the pressures were "transitory". With the immense benefit of hindsight, it's clear that it was optimistic to expect inflation to just go away. An underappreciated reason the supply side was struggling to keep up was that demand had been severely over-stimulated by fiscal and monetary policy. At the time, given unprecedented data volatility and lots of moving parts, that wasn't as obvious as it is now.

Ongoing waves of COVID have drawn out the supply disruption over several years, while the strong demand has contributed to a broadening of inflation pressures into the domestic side of many economies, including here in New Zealand. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, and ongoing adverse climatic events around the world have only added to the inflation pressure.

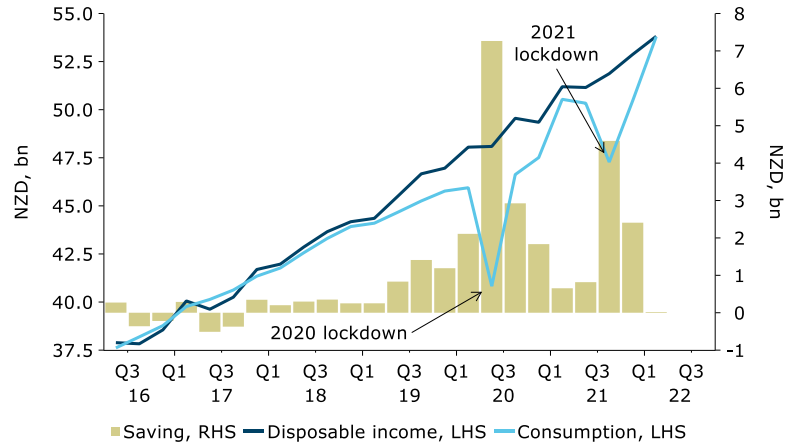
Domestic factors

The domestic policy response to COVID in New Zealand was large. On the health front, lockdowns enabled us to initially eliminate the virus, allowing the domestic economy to operate more freely than in other countries (albeit completely lacking our biggest export – international tourism).

Policymakers, very understandably, threw everything they had at the economy in 2020, fearing a deep and protracted recession. And the economic policy response, most importantly the wage subsidy, was critical in allowing the economy to bounce back from lockdown in 2020. The Ministry of Social Development [estimates that](#) "62% of jobs (excluding sole traders) were supported by at least one wage subsidy" up to September 2020. The RBNZ rolled out plenty of monetary policy stimulus as well, cutting the OCR 75bps to 0.25%, announcing quantitative easing, easing housing lending restrictions, and implementing the funding for lending program over the course of 2020.

The upshot of all this was that unemployment didn't increase anywhere near as much as was feared (peaking at 5.3% in Q3 2020 before turning around, versus the RBNZ's May 2020 MPS baseline scenario of a 9.0% peak). While GDP fell just over 10% in Q2 2020, household disposable incomes barely budged (figure 5). Consumption spending took a big hit during both the 2020 and 2021 lockdowns, because shops were shut, but household balance sheets made it through in very good shape, with huge increases in saving over the past few years (at the expense of fiscal dis-saving).

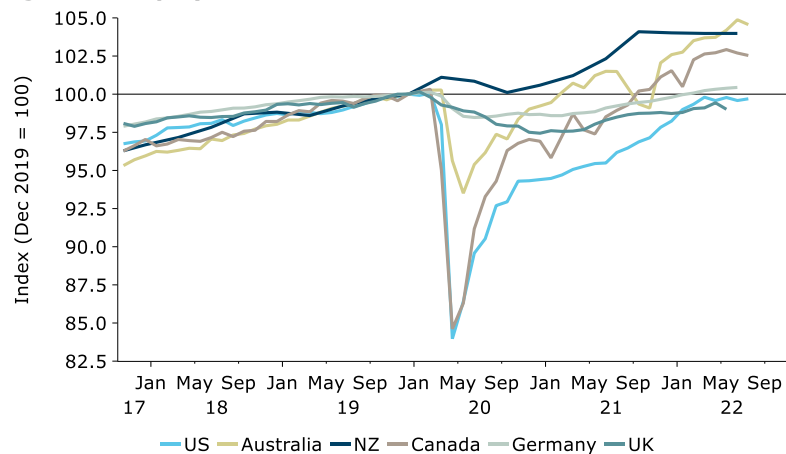
Figure 5. Household disposable income, consumption, and savings



Source: Stats NZ, Macrobond, ANZ Research

Employment in New Zealand also came through relatively unscathed, especially compared with the experiences other countries (figure 6). Employment fell modestly over 2020, but because the wage subsidy kept most employment relationships intact, the labour market took much less of a hit than feared, and bounced back much faster. Employment is now significantly higher than before the pandemic, while unemployment reached a new record low of 3.2% at the end of 2021 (and remains very low).

Figure 6. Employment levels



Source: BLS, ABS, Stats NZ, StatCan, DESTATIS, ONS, Macrobond, ANZ Research

So domestically, we came out of 2020 in far better shape than anyone expected heading into the pandemic. But it also meant that the policy response ended up being too powerful, in hindsight. That's a much better problem to have than double-digit unemployment, but it's still a problem. With household incomes intact, savings high, the labour market rapidly tightening, but the supply side of the economy still hobbled by supply chain and COVID disruption, it became increasingly clear over 2021 that demand in the economy was looking overheated relative to now-diminished supply.

The first place where we really started to see this play out was in the housing market. Turns out, lowering interest rates to record lows and suspending LVR restrictions was a pretty potent mix for house prices. Despite a massive surge in house building (and a dramatic drop in population growth thanks to the border closure), 2021 saw house prices soar, peaking 45% above their 2019 levels in November 2021.

The construction sector also bounced back rapidly, with building activity leading the economy out of the 2020 recession. Given an unprecedented rate of house-building and the resulting difficulty in finding materials and workers, it's no surprise that construction costs surged, up over 18% in the year to June 2022 (figure 7). In Q2, the housing and household utilities CPI group (which includes construction costs, rents, rates, property services, and household energy) added 2.6ppts to the 7.3% CPI inflation print. Indeed, it explained two thirds of annual domestic inflation in the June quarter.

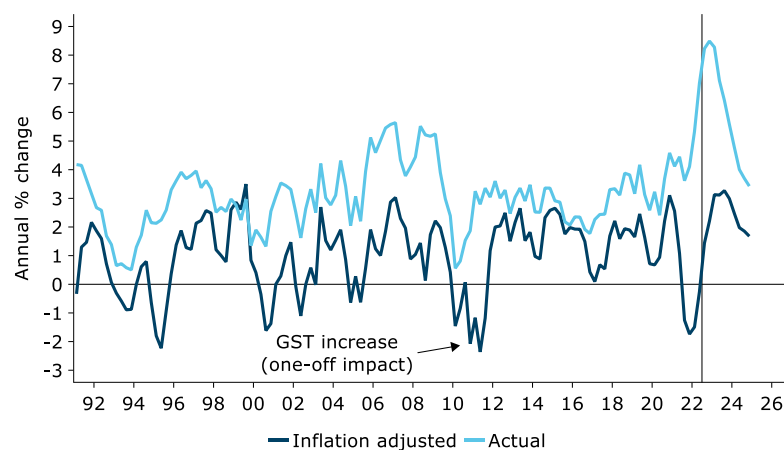
Figure 7. Housing market and construction cost inflation



Source: REINZ, Stats NZ, Macrobond, ANZ Research

It's not just construction costs though. Inflation pressures have now spread into every nook and cranny of this overheated economy, including the labour market. Private sector wage growth hit 7.0% y/y in Q2, with extremely low unemployment, overstimulated demand, and the rising cost of living creating the perfect backdrop for a potential wage price spiral. Wage growth is expected to exceed inflation imminently, sending real wage growth back into positive territory (figure 8).

Figure 8. Wage growth forecast (actual and inflation adjusted)



Source: Stats NZ, Macrobond, ANZ Research

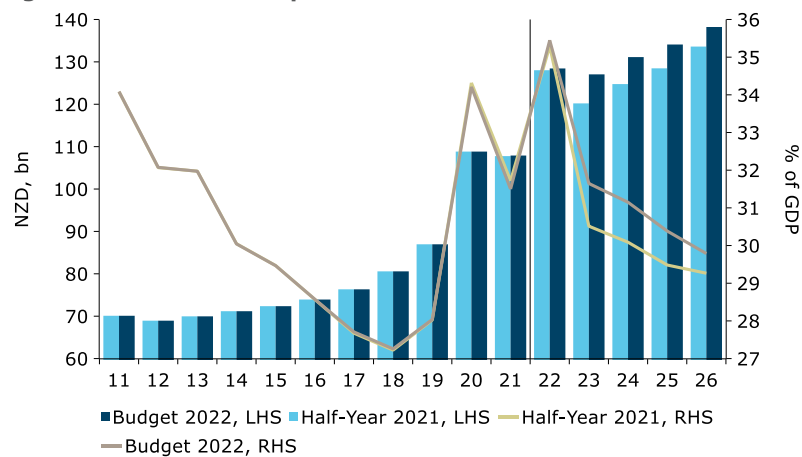
Rising wages are not inflationary if they reflect rising productivity. But the challenge for businesses is that while they're paying much higher labour costs (and other input cost as well), on balance COVID has been a negative productivity shock, for example due to worker illness or social distancing and cleaning requirements. So firms are paying more for workers and other inputs to production, but are not getting a commensurate increase in output (similar to the productivity impacts of climate change). And that means that at some point those higher costs have to be passed on to consumers (ie generating more inflation).

This cycle of high inflation driving high wages driving high inflation can be hard to break, particularly as firms and workers realise which way the wind is blowing in a tight labour market and change their behaviour accordingly. This results in things like indexation of wages to previous years' inflation, which might seem only fair and reasonable, but which builds more persistence ('stickiness') into the inflation process. If that kind of dynamic gets entrenched, beating inflation will likely require a sustained period of higher interest rates and slower economic growth.

A final domestic point to note is that the stance of fiscal policy has been, and remains, very expansionary. The initial response to COVID-19, including the wage subsidy, was necessary and extremely effective in keeping workers attached to their employers. But with the domestic economy becoming increasingly capacity constrained, there are limits to how much we can increase government spending without crowding out private sector activity and making the inflation problem worse.

Core Crown expenses remain very elevated relative to pre-COVID levels, and planned expenditure was revised upwards at [Budget 2022](#) (figure 9). Adding demand into an already overheated economy risks higher interest rates being needed to realign supply and demand, and thereby bring inflation down.

Figure 9. Core Crown expenses



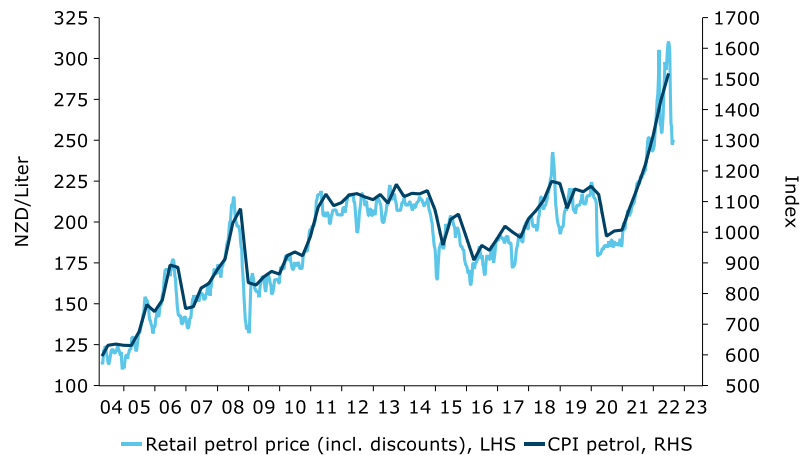
Source: New Zealand Treasury, Macrobond, ANZ Research

Geopolitics and war

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has had tragic consequences in terms of loss of life, mass displacement of people, and physical destruction. It has also sent shockwaves through the global economy. Europe has striven to rapidly reduce its reliance on Russian gas, sending energy prices skyrocketing. Oil prices traded at around USD100/barrel for much of the June quarter. And while prices have dropped to closer to USD90/barrel over the past few months, they remain elevated compared with the recent past. That's been felt by Kiwi consumers, with petrol prices briefly rising above

NZD3/litre, even with the Government temporarily reducing the fuel excise tax (figure 10). It's worth noting that without the reduction in the fuel excise tax, headline inflation would likely have peaked closer to 8% in Q2.

Figure 10. Petrol prices



Source: MBIE, Stats NZ, Macrobond, ANZ Research

Ukraine is also a key food-producing nation, which contributed to food commodity prices surging in the initial months of the invasion. Combine war-related price surges and disruption with the destructive heatwaves and flooding seen across large areas of the globe, and food security has become another pressing issue. New Zealand's food prices have also been rising steeply, reflecting a combination of strong global prices, domestic cost pressures, and weather-related disruption. In the year to July 2022, domestic food prices were up 7.6%. Global food price indexes are now starting to retreat, but the rise has been very painful for low-income households. And given wage pressure across the food producing, distribution and retailing chain, it's not clear when any meaningful relief may come.

Adding to imported cost pressures, the New Zealand dollar has also weakened significantly in recent months against key trading partner currencies, including the USD and AUD. This makes the high global prices even dearer in New Zealand dollar terms, further increasing the inflation that we're importing from overseas.

To try to summarise all these moving parts, the economy has been hit by a sequence of extraordinary supply shocks (COVID, war, and ongoing intensification of climate change impacts), while demand has been overstimulated by a policy response to COVID that (with 20/20 hindsight), was too powerful. That's an incredibly inflationary mix of factors.

In our next Insight, we will outline our inflation forecasts and where we see the balance of risks from here.



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