NZ Insight: The RBNZ's inflation expectations headache

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Finn Robinson, Sharon Zollner or David Croy for more details.

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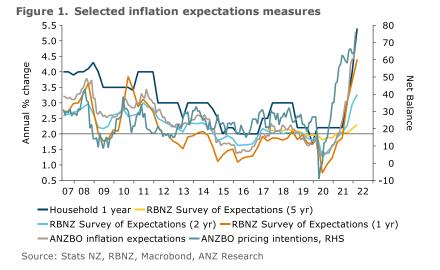
Summary

- Inflation expectations are a key driver of inflation. Having been a nonissue for decades, inflation is now very much in the headlines.
- History shows that inflation expectations can be self-fulfilling if enough people expect higher inflation, then actual inflation will lift. Rising expectations can thus create a dangerous feedback loop by amplifying already too-strong inflation pressures.
- Inflation expectations in New Zealand have risen aggressively over the past year – and there's a real risk that recent price spikes could cause expectations to become unanchored from the RBNZ's 2% target for CPI inflation – especially as Omicron exacerbates already stretched domestic supply chains.
- The RBNZ already saw inflation expectations as the most significant risk in the February MPS, and now that risk of unanchored expectations is even stronger.
- This is a key reason why we think the RBNZ should hike the OCR aggressively by 50bps in both April *and* May. It will hurt, but its considerably better than what they would need to do to the economy if inflation expectations continue to spiral further in the wrong direction.

Introduction

Inflation expectations matter for monetary policy. In fact, it's hard to overstate how important it is for the RBNZ that agents in the economy believe inflation will be low and stable over the medium to long run. In essence, inflation expectations are a form of self-fulfilling prophecy. If people think inflation is going to be strong in the future, then they will likely put up their prices or demand higher wages now, in anticipation. If enough people do this, inflation will rise – and people may then revise up their expectations for inflation. You can see how such a feedback loop can quickly get out of hand, especially when it becomes a dominant theme in the media and in headlines.

Figure 1 highlights one of the more alarming features of the economic data over the past year - the synchronised surge in various measures of inflation expectations. Across businesses and households, expectations for inflation over the next year have risen steeply – and show no signs of slowing. In our latest Business Outlook survey, a net 74% of firms were expecting to put their prices up. Overall, 92% expected higher costs – and that number was 100% for agriculture and construction.



So are inflation expectations are starting to flirt with becoming unanchored from the RBNZ's 2% target midpoint? The horse, if it hasn't already bolted, is at least trotting at a fair clip and already a good way from where it's meant to be (although the RBNZ's longer-term measures are still close-ish to 2%, that reflects a very small, unusually well-informed group of 33 respondents). If expectations have or do become unanchored, the risk is that inflation starts to gain its own internal momentum, requiring much larger interest rate hikes – and a corresponding hole in growth and employment – in order to bring that momentum back down.

It's already looking like achieving a soft landing for the economy will be a challenging prospect for the RBNZ – but if inflation expectations detach from the 2% anchor, it will be nigh-on impossible.

What's driving inflation expectations?

So why have inflation expectations risen so aggressively? The immediate culprit most consumers would point to is petrol prices. A combination of global energy shortages, robust economic recoveries from COVID, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have seen oil prices surge compared with the extreme lows seen in 2020, and this has shown up directly at the pump. Indeed, petrol prices correlate pretty well with the most significant movements in the 1-year inflation expectations measure from the RBNZ's Survey of Expectations (figure 2).





To dig further into the drivers of inflation expectations, we started by seeing how significant key variables were at explaining the five measures of inflation expectations (the measures in figure 1, with the exception of 5year-ahead, as this data series is too short). Not surprisingly, petrol prices were highly significant across all specifications. Food prices, wages, house prices, the output gap, and interest rates were also all significant – although the results were not as strong as for petrol prices.

Throwing variables into a model to see what sticks is one thing, but we also want to know how much of the historical variation in inflation expectations we can actually attribute to things like petrol prices. To do this, we pick on the 1-year-ahead measure from the RBNZ survey of expectations, and estimate a new model, which shows the historical contributions of key variables to changes in inflation expectations.¹ These results are shown in figure 3.

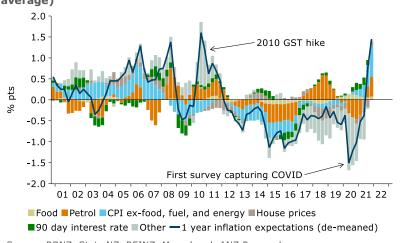


Figure 3. Drivers of 1-year-ahead inflation expectations (deviation from average)

We can immediately see that in historical context, petrol prices (orange bars) have had an impact on inflation expectations that is disproportionate to their weight in the CPI basket (less than 5%). Headline inflation excluding food, energy, and fuel (ie a common measure of 'core' inflation) is also a significant driver – and together these factors explain a large chunk of the historical movements in inflation expectations in New Zealand. The importance of headline inflation makes sense – many agents in the economy will account for what inflation was last quarter when forming their expectations. Nonetheless, this dynamic simply adds to the persistence of higher inflation and inflation expectations.

There are also important observations from what can't be explained by these two variables:

- The lift in GST from 12.5% to 15% in 2010 likely explains the surge in inflation expectations at this point.
- Petrol and headline inflation can't explain below-average inflation expectations over 2017-2019, possibly reflecting just how ingrained low inflation had become in expectations, even when actual inflation outcomes were rising.

Source: RBNZ, Stats NZ, REINZ, Macrobond, ANZ Research

¹ Modelling details: We estimate an SVAR (with coefficients estimated from 2000 to 2019 to avoid COVID volatility), and calculate the historical decomposition of the RBNZ 1 year inflation expectations measure. The VAR is recursively identified, which is easy to implement, but has well-documented limitations. However, the key results were invariant to different orderings of the VAR.

 Petrol and headline inflation also can't explain the sharp drop in inflation expectations at the onset of COVID. With the benefit of hindsight, that likely reflects the fact that forecasters here and overseas seriously overestimated how much inflation would actually drop – more than can be accounted for by the data (which is easier to say with the benefit of hindsight!).

Another way to see how important petrol prices are for inflation expectations is to calculate what inflation expectations would have looked like over history, without the impact of petrol. This is shown in figure 4. The counterfactual (light blue) shows that at times over the past two decades, inflation expectations could have been up to 0.5% pts higher or lower without the influence of petrol prices. The biggest marginal impact is likely to be right now, given the outsized moves in petrol prices recently (although we won't have the Stats NZ data for Q1 2022 for some time yet).

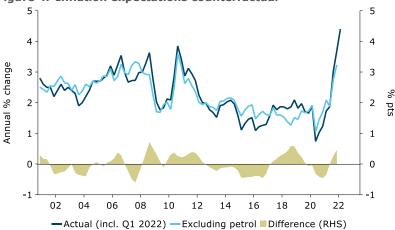


Figure 4. Inflation expectations counterfactual

The point of these exercises is to show that even though the RBNZ may usually have the leeway to look through things like petrol price shocks, it would be very risky to ignore the impacts they have on inflation expectations right now. The impacts are significant, and that matters when expectations are already so elevated. The Monetary Policy Committee will be particularly concerned about whether the national conversation about the rising cost of living will be the catalyst that kicks off the self-fulfilling prophecy of spiralling inflation expectations – making the cost of living that much worse.

We have seen oil and petrol prices retrace some their largest gains over the past few weeks, but uncertainty about where to from here could hardly be higher, making it difficult for the Reserve Bank to assume the best.

Monetary Policy Implications (ie the expectations headache)

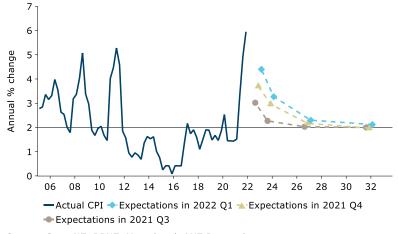
The Monetary Policy Committee was clearly very concerned about inflation expectations at the February MPS, highlighting that for "many members", the choice between a 25 or 50bp OCR hike was "finely balanced". One of the most important sentences in the Record of Meeting was this:

"... the Committee applied their least regrets framework, noting that the most significant risk to be avoided at present was longer-term inflation expectations rising above the target and becoming embedded in future price setting."

Source: RBNZ, Stats NZ, REINZ, Macrobond, ANZ Research

That risk has increased significantly since then. The 5- and 10-year ahead measures are still within cooee of the 2% midpoint of the RBNZ's target range, but they continue to move in the wrong direction, despite a significant increase in the slope and peak of the RBNZ's forecast OCR track over the past six months (figure 5).

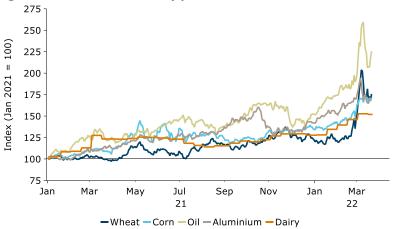




Source: Stats NZ, RBNZ, Macrobond, ANZ Research

And that was before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which triggered a massive spike in commodity prices that dominated the news cycle, and even saw the Government announce a temporary cut to fuel tax, among other measures. Commodity prices have eased back from their highs over the first few weeks of the invasion, but they're still well up and you'd have to say they're still trending higher. Even dairy prices, which have seen one of the smaller increases, are still over 50% higher than at the start of 2021 (figure 6).

Figure 6. Selected commodity prices



Source: GlobalDairyTrade, Bloomberg, Macrobond, ANZ Research

In many respects, the damage to inflation expectations may already be done. We'll have to wait for the next couple of months of survey data to find out. But the news has been saturated with coverage of the cost of living and rising fuel prices, and Google searches for inflation in New Zealand have gone vertical.

We can also calculate market-based measures of inflation expectations from the spread between nominal and inflation-indexed New Zealand government bonds. While these have some limitations due to the illiquidity of the market, they are very timely – and of note, have risen rapidly of late. At the moment, they imply that markets expect inflation to:

- average about 3% over the next 3 years (based on 2025 bond);
- average over 21/2% over the next 8 years (based on 2030 bond); and
- average about 21/2% over the next 13 years (based on 2035 bond).

Our sense is that while illiquidity might affect the level of observed expectations in the market, it shouldn't unduly affect the direction of travel, given that illiquidity has always been a factor. And that direction of movement is not consistent with inflation getting back to target at a pace that would be acceptable for the RBNZ (figure 7).



Figure 7. New Zealand market implied inflation expectations

So for the RBNZ, the evolution of price pressures and inflation expectations since the February MPS means that they need to move aggressively to defend the inflation target from rising expectations. And that won't be good for growth. It's increasingly looking like the first half of 2022 will be pretty soggy in terms of 'real' economic growth, given surging cost pressures and ongoing COVID disruption. In fact, we've recently downgraded our outlook for GDP growth. But the RBNZ needs to bring surging inflation under control, so they need to keep on hiking interest rates even as economic activity struggles.

That might sound callous if you're a struggling businesses owner or mortgage holder. It won't be easy, and the pain won't be felt equally - just as the benefits of falling interest rates were not evenly shared. But at the end of the day, we know that letting inflation get out of control would be more harmful, requiring even more aggressive OCR hikes than the two 50bp hikes we're calling for. Inflation isn't just going to go away by itself - and the global forces which held inflation down in the post-GFC decade are taking a hiatus (whether that's permanent or temporary remains to be seen, but is a moot point for the RBNZ as regards its near-term decisions).

If there's one thing that economic history has taught us, it's that spiralling inflation is devastating for economies, and the people within. The labour market is the tightest it's been on the official record - and the best way for the RBNZ to support ongoing strength in employment is to restore price stability. As Fed Chair Powell put it last week when justifying the Fed's rate hike: "Without price stability, you really can't have a sustained period of maximum employment," Powell said. "The plan is to restore price stability while also sustaining a strong labor market. That is our intention and we believe we can do that. But we have to restore price stability."

In short: the focus has shifted firmly from the near-term growth outlook to the long game. And that's where anchoring inflation expectations is key.

Source: Bloomberg, Macrobond, ANZ Research





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Sharon Zollner Chief Economist

Follow Sharon on Twitter @sharon_zollner

Telephone: +64 27 664 3554 Email: sharon.zollner@anz.com



David Croy Senior Strategist

Market developments, interest rates, FX, unconventional monetary policy, liaison with market participants.

Telephone: +64 4 576 1022 Email: david.croy@anz.com



Miles Workman Senior Economist

Macroeconomic forecast coordinator, fiscal policy, economic risk assessment and credit developments.

Telephone: +64 21 661 792 Email: miles.workman@anz.com



Kyle Uerata Economic Statistician

Economic statistics, ANZ proprietary data (including ANZ Business Outlook), data capability and infrastructure.

Telephone: +64 21 633 894 Email: kyle.uerata@anz.com General enquiries: research@anz.com

Follow ANZ Research @ANZ_Research (global)



Susan Kilsby Agricultural Economist

Primary industry developments and outlook, structural change and regulation, liaison with industry.

Telephone: +64 21 633 469 Email: susan.kilsby@anz.com



Finn Robinson Economist

Macroeconomic forecasting, economic developments, labour market dynamics, inflation and monetary policy.

Telephone: +64 21 629 553 Email: finn.robinson@anz.com

Natalie Denne PA / Desktop Publisher

Business management, general enquiries, mailing lists, publications, chief economist's diary.

Telephone: +64 21 253 6808 Email: natalie.denne@anz.com

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