

Bank of England surprises again with a pre-Christmas rate hike

Upside surprises to inflation have convinced the UK central bank of the need to tighten pre-emptively. We expect two, or at most three, rate rises next year. However, we think policymakers will wait until after February's meeting before moving again when more data on Omicron's impact will have arrived



Bank of England governor, Andrew Bailey

The Bank of England has increased interest rates for the first time since the Covid-19 crisis began, despite the mounting uncertainty surrounding Omicron.

Inflation has twice come in above expectations since the Bank's November forecasts, and that's what seems to have swung it for policymakers. There's also been no discernible turbulence in the jobs market since the furlough scheme ended in September, which was a key test that policymakers had put forward last month. Policymakers are calculating that in a year-or-so time, when rate decisions today will realistically filter through to the economy, the outlook will be little changed by Omicron.

Perhaps the biggest surprise is how many committee members

voted for the hike

In practice, the decision to hike rates soon was not in question anyway – but we had assumed that policymakers would wait until February. So perhaps the biggest surprise today is how many committee members voted for the hike. The decision to delay increasing rates last month suggested there were several policymakers yet to be fully convinced of the merits of tightening right now – and if anything uncertainty has risen since last month. However, the move was voted through 8-1.

All of this poses two key questions:

1 Will today's move be followed by a full 25bp rate hike at the February meeting?

It's possible but for now we suspect not. We agree with the Bank of England that (as things stand) Omicron probably won't change the medium-term picture decisively. But in the short term, it still means turbulence for the UK economy.

Much depends on hospitalisations and the extent of any further restrictions. But raw case numbers still matter for the economy, and widespread staff shortages in late December/early January are very likely given how quickly Omicron is spreading. Meanwhile, social spending is likely to fall rapidly as households limit contacts in the run-up to Christmas, and we're already seeing signs of that in the latest restaurant booking data. We also don't yet know how generous government support for businesses is likely to be this time around.

We're inclined to say that policymakers will wait until later into 2022 before hiking again.

2 How many rate rises are we looking at next year?

Markets think that rates will need to rise quickly next year and that the Bank rate will hit 1% by late next year. We still suspect that's an overestimate.

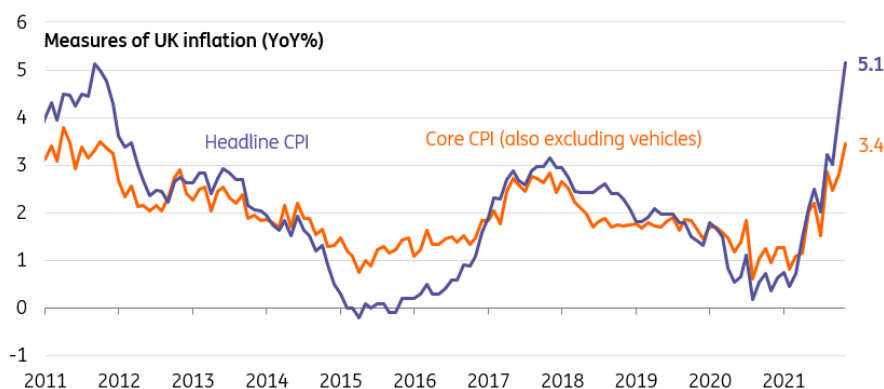
True, inflation rates are only currently going in one direction, and headline CPI will likely peak well above 5% in April.

But most of the recent upside surprises are coming from the same set of components – principally energy and used cars. Once you filter that out, core inflation is at 3.4%. That's still elevated, but probably not enough to justify the rapid succession of rate rises markets expect. Bear in mind too that recent data suggests wage growth is currently more modest than recent labour shortages imply.

Remember as well that the Bank of England has said it plans to begin shrinking its pool of bonds amassed under quantitative easing. That will start after the next rate hike, and will do some of the heavy lifting for the BoE.

In short, we expect two (or at most three) rate rises next year. We're penciling in May and November at this stage.

Filtering out cars, energy and food, inflation looks less exciting



Source: Macrobond, ING calculations

'Core CPI' used here excludes energy, food, alcohol, tobacco and vehicle prices

Author

James Smith

Developed Markets Economist

james.smith@ing.com

Disclaimer

This publication has been prepared by the Economic and Financial Analysis Division of ING Bank N.V. ("ING") solely for information purposes without regard to any particular user's investment objectives, financial situation, or means. *ING forms part of ING Group (being for this purpose ING Group N.V. and its subsidiary and affiliated companies).* The information in the publication is not an investment recommendation and it is not investment, legal or tax advice or an offer or solicitation to purchase or sell any financial instrument. Reasonable care has been taken to ensure that this publication is not untrue or misleading when published, but ING does not represent that it is accurate or complete. ING does not accept any liability for any direct, indirect or consequential loss arising from any use of this publication. Unless otherwise stated, any views, forecasts, or estimates are solely those of the author(s), as of the date of the publication and are subject to change without notice.

The distribution of this publication may be restricted by law or regulation in different jurisdictions and persons into whose possession this publication comes should inform themselves about, and observe, such restrictions.

Copyright and database rights protection exists in this report and it may not be reproduced, distributed or published by any person for any purpose without the prior express consent of ING. All rights are reserved. ING Bank N.V. is authorised by the Dutch Central Bank and supervised by the European Central Bank (ECB), the Dutch Central Bank (DNB) and the Dutch Authority for the Financial Markets (AFM). ING Bank N.V. is incorporated in the Netherlands (Trade Register no. 33031431 Amsterdam). In the United Kingdom this information is approved and/or communicated by ING Bank N.V., London Branch. ING Bank N.V., London Branch is authorised by the Prudential Regulation Authority and is subject to regulation by the Financial Conduct Authority and limited regulation by the Prudential Regulation Authority. ING Bank N.V., London branch is registered in England (Registration number BR000341) at 8-10 Moorgate, London EC2 6DA. For US Investors: Any person wishing to discuss this report or effect transactions in any security discussed herein should contact ING Financial Markets LLC, which is a member of the NYSE, FINRA and SIPC and part of ING, and which has accepted responsibility for the distribution of this report in the United States under applicable requirements.

Additional information is available on request. For more information about ING Group, please visit <http://www.ing.com>.