

Surprise UK growth rebound means technical recession could be avoided

The UK economy grew faster than expected in January, though underlying volatility in the data means that GDP is effectively flatlining. Lower gas prices mean that any recession is likely to be very modest now – and may technically be avoided altogether



Source: Shutterstock

The economy grew by 0.3% in January

UK growth was stronger than expected in January, according to the latest monthly GDP numbers, though frankly these numbers are all over the place right now. Having fallen by 0.5% in December, economic output only partly recovered by 0.3% in January. And the vast majority of this volatility can be explained by a blip in education output, entertainment (the number of football matches in December fell due to the World Cup) and various strikes.

None of this tells us much about the underlying trend of the economy, and that means it's probably safer to look at the three-month moving averages, which show that output is essentially flatlining right now. That said there are a couple of notable weak points. Construction fell by 1.7%, and while one month doesn't make a trend, this is an obvious area of weakness this year as the housing market stalls. Manufacturing was weak too.

Overall though, today's figures raise the chances that UK growth could come in flat or only slightly negative in the first quarter overall. That means there's a growing possibility that the UK avoids a technical recession altogether – although it's a fairly moot point, given that even if it does happen, the depth of a recession would probably only be in the order of a few tenths of a percentage point.

Prospect of lower energy bills to minimise growth hit

That is helped by the fact that energy prices are so much lower. Reports suggest Chancellor Jeremy Hunt will, as has been widely anticipated for some time, scrap the planned increase in household bills previously announced for April. That still entails the removal of a fixed £67/month discount per household, though we assume the Chancellor will maintain plans to give new fixed payments to lower-income/vulnerable households. By the summer, the average annualised household energy bill is likely to have fallen to roughly £2,100 from £2,500 now, owing to lower wholesale prices.

What do today's figures mean for the Bank of England? In practice not much, with the Committee instead squarely focused on measures of “inflation persistence”. The next big test will be whether the wage growth data due on Tuesday next week show any clear signs of having peaked. We expect a 25bp hike at the forthcoming March meeting.

Author

James Smith

Developed Markets Economist, UK

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 www.ing.com.