

European Rates Watch

Overseas buying of Gilts in January: another month, another flip

Overseas sell and domestic non-banks buy Gilts in Jan

The Gilt purchase data for January in today's Bank of England (BoE) Bankstats report reveals that non-residents sold £28.3bn of Gilts in January, having bought £38.3bn in December. Next to Gilt selling, foreign investors bought £1.8bn of T-bills, having sold £0.4bn in December, and deposited £4.6bn cash with UK Monetary Financial Institutions (MFI), having withdrawn £13.9bn in December. Domestic non-bank investors were the main buyers of Gilts in January, acquiring £23.3bn after £9bn selling in December. Domestic banks were flat in January, having bought £3.4bn in December (Exhibit 1).

In line with seasonal direction, but not magnitude

2022 was a volatile year in terms of overseas monthly demand for Gilts, even on a 12-month moving average (MA) basis (Exhibit 2). The flows did not conform to the quarterly pattern either, with Q1 2022 seeing the largest buying of Gilts – the opposite of the usual trend (Exhibit 3). This January's net selling is in line with the seasonal direction, with Q1 typically seeing the weakest demand for Gilts, but the magnitude is unprecedented, both in terms of monthly (maximum selling previously was £9.5bn in 2019) and quarterly (maximum selling previously was £8.5bn in Q1 2019) data.

Uncertainties remain high

Based on historical experience, several factors tend to influence overseas investor demand for Gilts. We have highlighted GBP rebalancing, overseas-domiciled Liability Driven Investing (LDI), oil price changes and GBP SSA issuance as some factors that may have been at play lately (see note: Gilt "reshoring" reverses course in December, 1 February). But none appear fully consistent with the magnitude and variability of the monthly data, particularly in light of recent inconsistencies with the BoE Bankstats data relative to Gilt supply statistics from the Debt Management Office (DMO).

Rates: Many drivers of short-dated swap spreads

If January's "re-shoring" of Gilts was an LDI story, both buyers and sellers of those Gilts were likely focused on the long-end of the Gilt curve, reducing (if not cancelling) the net effect on long-dated Gilt yields and spreads. If, however, some of those flows were overseas investors responding to oil and GBP price action – neither particularly extreme in January – then future developments in both should be added to an already long list of factors relevant for front-end spreads, namely (1) DMO Gilt issuance skew, especially next fiscal year; (2) GBP Investment Grade (IG) issuance; (3) LDI turmoil and its aftermath; (4) mortgage hedging flows; (5) the possibility of banks buying flows once the price is right relative to Sonia; and (6) possible changes to the DMO's Standing Repo Facility (SRF) spread to Bank rate. While January's cheapening of Gilts relative to Sonia can be attributed to other factors outlined above, foreign selling of Gilts could have contributed to the price action (Exhibit 4).

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FX: Here lies the problem

The Bankstats data has been a closely watched proxy for foreign appetite for UK assets. Notwithstanding the volatility in the data and weak seasonal performance in Q1, we detect few signs that demand is returning to UK Plc. This is important for our overall narrative that while the tail risks continue to be priced out on "less bad news", a necessary condition of markets positioning for "positive news" is a return to UK assets. The deal on the Northern Ireland Protocol has been interpreted as a potential inflexion point for GBP fortunes. We are less enthusiastic, as we have previously argued that the lows in GBP have already been reached but until markets are prepared to take a more constructive stance on UK Plc, pricing out tail risks will only support GBP so far.

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Exhibit 1: Monthly net buying of Gilts per investor type, £bn

Huge swings in monthly overseas investor demand for Gilts lately...

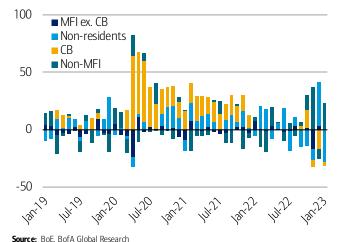
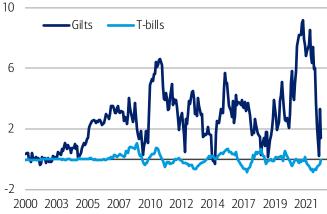


Exhibit 3: Quarterly overseas investor net buying of Gilts, £bn January's selling in line with seasonal direction, but not magnitude



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Exhibit 2: Non-residents' net buying of Gilts and T-bills (12m MA), £bn ... clearly visible even on a 12 month moving average (MA) basis

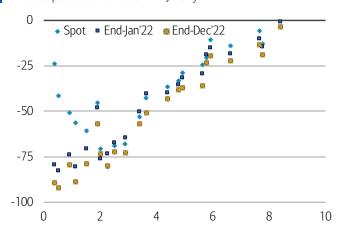


Source: BoE, BofA Global Research

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Exhibit 4: Gilt z-spreads to Sonia versus years to maturity, bp

Gilts cheapened relative to Sonia in January



Source: Bloomberg, BofA Global Research

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Households continue to save

The money and credit data published by the BoE today give us a monthly check on household saving, in the form of households' monthly accumulation of liquid assets. That rose from £5bn in December to £5.4bn in January (Exhibit 5). Households have not saved less in a month than the pre-Covid average since a brief period early last summer. This suggests consumers are not becoming more willing to spend and should continue to show that 'excess savings' have not supported, and are unlikely to support, consumption.

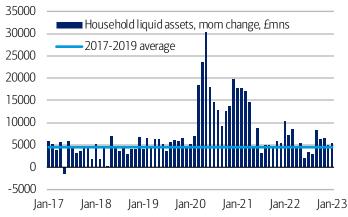


With real incomes continuing to fall, consumer spending volumes should keep declining as well, in our view.

Consumer credit flows were relatively strong in the month, however. Total consumer credit rose £1.6bn, up from £0.5bn in December, and consumer credit growth accelerated again (3^{rd} month running) to 7.5% yoy from 7.2%. Stronger credit growth was driven by credit card borrowing. This is a potential counter-indicator to saving, but we would not place too much weight on one month's volatile credit data. A £1.6bn increase in credit is small relative to consumer spending of around £388bn a quarter. January's jump, meanwhile, follows a weak December.

Exhibit 5: Consumer saving flows into liquid assets, % consumption

Large recession unavoidable absent large government support



Source: BoE, BofA Global Research

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