



# Royal London Sustainable Strategies

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Quarterly Report 31 March 2022



## Executive summary

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- *Please note: as the **RL Global Sustainable Credit Fund** (launched in February 2021) is not limited to sterling credit as with our other sustainable credit portfolios, it has a separate report and is not covered by this pack.*
- Sustainable funds in general had a challenging start to 2022. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in late February rightly shocked the world and attracted huge amounts of media coverage. Yet the double whammy that hit financial markets in the quarter was already underway, with persistently high inflation leading central banks to reassess the timing of interest rate rises and the withdrawal / unwinding of quantitative easing (QE). The publication by the Federal Reserve (Fed) of the minutes of December's FOMC meeting in the first week of the quarter led to a significant inflation-related equity market rotation out of 'growth' and into 'value'. Given longer-duration growth sectors such as technology can fit well with sustainable mandates this meant the quarter was always going to be tough for sustainable investors.
- A significant factor behind the inflationary pressures was the ongoing strength in oil and commodity prices, which were further impacted by the Russian invasion of Ukraine later in February. These two factors caused significant volatility in global financial markets and the effects were felt disproportionately by sustainable funds. Following the invasion, energy prices soared and defence budgets looked inadequate for many NATO countries. Understandably, our Sustainable funds generally don't invest in energy or arms manufacturing and have very limited (if any) exposure to commodities.
- Our Sustainable funds were not immune to such extreme sectoral performance and our equity-only funds (**Sustainable Leaders** and **Global Sustainable Equity**) underperformed their wider index-based benchmarks. Normally, one would expect equity-market weakness to be mitigated by positive returns from sterling credit, but our mixed-asset funds (**Sustainable World**, **Sustainable Diversified** and **Sustainable Managed Growth**) also underperformed as both asset classes were negatively impacted by the unusual combination of macroeconomic and geopolitical factors. Only **Sustainable Managed Income**, our sterling credit-only fund, outperformed its benchmark. However, we encourage clients to consider our sustainable funds' performance over the longer term. Despite the challenges over the first quarter, our funds are all ranked in the top quartile over the 12-month period to 31 March 2022, with the exception of our more credit-oriented funds, **Sustainable Managed Income** and **Sustainable Managed Growth** – which are ranked in the second quartile relative to their IA sector peers.
- Furthermore, the headline performance figures for the quarter give a somewhat one-dimensional picture. Other than the unavoidable impact of equity sector weightings, our sustainable funds performed reasonably well in a particularly difficult environment and strongly outperformed many of their sustainable peers. As an example that is relevant to all our equity portfolios, consider **Sustainable Leaders**, our long-standing equity-only fund, which is mostly (more than 80%) invested in UK equities. Over the quarter, the UK was the best-performing stockmarket globally boosted by its notably high exposure to the oil & gas, mining and banks sectors – the MSCI UK returned +4.76% (GBP terms, the only positive regional return on a global basis). Within the Investment Association's (IA) UK All Companies sector, Sustainable Leaders was ranked in the 60<sup>th</sup> percentile for the quarter. This may seem fairly pedestrian at first glance, but is remarkably good for a fund with zero oil & gas, mining and arms manufacturing exposure. We also have a low weighting in financials, particularly banks, as they tend not to score well against our environmental, social and governance (ESG) criteria. The change in outlook for interest rates also cost us as higher interest rates tend to be beneficial for banks – and the more socially-responsible stocks that we favour also performed less strongly than their sector peers.
- Our equity-only funds and the equity portfolios of our mixed-asset funds benefitted from our prudent approach to investing in technology and healthcare. These sectors comprise lots of innovative companies that are a good fit for our investment framework. However, within them, we favour more established companies with proven products and significant revenues – we very rarely, if ever, invest more speculatively in IPOs or early-stage tech or biotech companies as the risks are simply too great. We believe that over the medium to long run you can generate attractive above-market returns without taking such risks. Some other investors take a different view of speculative risk – the 'spec tech' rout that started in the fourth quarter of 2021 will have dramatically impacted them in the first quarter. In contrast, our funds are unlikely to have suffered permanent capital impairment: while more-established tech holdings may have been derated in the interest rate-driven rotation, they continue to be viable revenue- and profit-generating investments. Conversely, some investors have made a virtue of running very high cash levels during the quarter. We also don't feel that it's our role to act as asset allocators: clients give us their money to invest in sustainable equities and credit.
- Overall, we remain positive on equities as the global economy continues to recover from the impact of Covid-19 – that, after all, is one reason interest rates are being raised. We therefore maintain our pro-equity stance in the mixed asset strategies. We expect market volatility to continue as investors continue to grapple with the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic (lockdowns, supply chain disruptions, inflation and interest rate rises) as well as the invasion of Ukraine and possibility of further conflict in Eastern Europe. In fact, we cannot remember a time when there have been so many huge and uncertain forces all impacting the global economy simultaneously.



- Thankfully our approach is not one where we have to make predictions on these macroeconomic factors and instead our portfolios are constructed on a bottom-up, company-by-company basis. We have rarely had so much clarity and visibility into the long-term sustainability-aligned drivers of the companies in which we invest. Many of the companies in which we invest have emerged from the pandemic stronger than ever and, despite challenging stock market conditions, reported good quarterly results during the first quarter. High sustainability standards, which are embedded in our funds, will continue to be an important differentiator in delivering investment returns with the greater focus on corporate purpose that we believe have arisen from the pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

## Market overview

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- Equity markets apparently ended 2021 in rude health with strong corporate earnings, a fast-declining threat from Covid-19 as Omicron proved less deadly than earlier variants and a benign monetary policy environment. However, with the ongoing strength in oil and commodity prices, the inflation that had taken hold in the immediate recovery from the global economic shutdown remained persistent. However, in early January it became clear that the Fed was prepared to increase interest rates significantly faster and higher than expected just a few months before; and the market now expects the Fed Funds Rate to reach 2.5% by year end. Following its first base rate increase in three years in December, the Bank of England also continued to signal that it will tighten monetary policy sharply.
- The subsequent invasion of Ukraine by Russia added to the mix. While depressing risk asset prices, the potential for supply chain disruptions and the downstream impact of sanctions on oil and gas supplies pushed energy prices to new all-time highs, adding to the challenges facing central banks. These two factors caused significant volatility in global financial markets and the effects were felt disproportionately by sustainable funds, which generally don't invest in energy and have very limited (if any) exposure to commodities. Equity markets recovered some of their losses from mid-March as companies continued to deliver strong performances despite the increased uncertainty about the global economy.
- As a result, for the first quarter the FTSE-All Share, MSCI World and MSCI All Countries World Index (ACWI – which also includes 26 emerging markets) returned +0.49%, -2.18% and -2.41% to sterling investors, respectively. Regional returns were widely dispersed. According to MSCI regional data, the UK was the best-performing stockmarket globally, boosted by its notably high exposure to the oil & gas, mining and banks sectors – it returned +4.76% (the only positive regional return on a global basis). Otherwise, the US, emerging markets and Japan returned -2.35%, -4.19% and -4.25%, respectively; while the returns from Asia-Pacific (ex-Japan) and Europe (ex-UK) lagged at -6.30% and -7.56%, respectively.
- The FOMC minutes caused investors to reconsider their expectations of interest rate rises, leading to a significant inflation-related equity market rotation out of 'growth' and into 'value'. The MSCI World Value Index returned +2.53% versus -6.87% for the MSCI World Growth Index, outperformance of 9.41%. Energy led the MSCI World sector returns by far (+34.98%), with materials, utilities and financials the only other sectors with positive returns (+6.05%, +4.56% and +1.56%, respectively). Consumer discretionary (-7.92%), communication services (-7.71%) and technology (-7.40%) were the weakest sectors.
- Over the first quarter, the benchmark 10-year gilt yield rose from 0.97% to 1.61%, leading gilts to return -7.17% on an all-maturities basis (FTSE Actuaries). Yields began moving upwards towards the end of December as the BoE ended its QE programme, increased interest rates and prepared markets for further rises. The invasion of Ukraine drove a significant if temporary dip in yields: 10-year gilt yields reached around 1.55% in February, but fell to around 1.20% following the Russian aggression. The flight to safety was temporary, however, as yields again trended higher in March.
- The first quarter of 2022 was the worst performing quarter for sterling credit markets (-6.2%) since the Global Financial Crisis. Although broad sterling credit indices outperformed government bonds this reflected their lower duration, as investment grade spreads widened by 22bps (iBoxx Sterling Non-Gilt index). Defensive sectors such as supranational, covered and asset backed outperformed, whilst financials (banks and insurance) were laggards, particularly subordinated bonds when looking at excess returns (adjusted for the impact of duration). Some energy bonds were weak despite the rise in oil and gas prices, reflecting exposures to Russia. By credit rating, AAA rated debt outperformed other investment grade ratings bands; BBB rated debt outperformed A rated debt; and sub-investment grade debt outperformed investment grade markets, albeit still delivering negative absolute returns.
- Currencies were volatile in the first quarter impacted by geopolitical tensions, interest rates and the rise in commodity prices. The US dollar played its traditional role as a safe haven, strengthening against other major currencies. Sterling was relatively weak, other than against the yen, which marginally enhanced the returns from global equities to sterling investors. Brent crude oil soared 38.7% to nearly \$105 a barrel during the quarter as the invasion of Ukraine raised supply concerns, while spot gold and front-month copper futures gained 6.3% and 6.7%, respectively.



## Performance and activity – sustainable equity strategies and mixed-asset equity portfolios

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- Our sustainable strategies are orientated to those companies that have a net benefit to society and create value for investors through access to long-term growth markets and innovation. Areas such as healthcare and technology remain at the core of the equity portfolios, complemented by engineering, utilities, selected financial services, and companies that lead their industries in ESG performance. This means that we do not invest in some sectors, such as oil & gas, extractive industries or tobacco. We believe that the exposure to those sectors which offer a net benefit and/or ESG leadership is consistent with outperformance over the medium term. While the sustainable funds have different mandates, risk profiles, asset mixes and geographical exposures, equity exposure is driven by the same underlying team, philosophy and process. Many of our key stocks will be held across several portfolios.
- Sustainable funds in general had a challenging start to 2022 with persistent inflation leading to a change in the outlook for monetary policy, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in late February causing energy and commodity prices to rise further and add to the uncertainty about the outlook for the global economy. Although they recovered some of their losses from mid-March, stockmarkets generally delivered negative returns – other than the UK, which was boosted by its notably high exposure to the oil & gas, mining and banks sectors.
- Headline returns only tell some of the story of the quarter, however: sectors such as energy and materials were boosted by the mix of inflation and geopolitical developments, and the change in the outlook for interest rates led to a significant inflation-related equity market rotation out of ‘growth’ and into ‘value’. Energy dominated the MSCI World sector returns (+34.98%), with materials, utilities and financials the only other sectors with positive returns (+6.05%, +4.56% and +1.56%, respectively). Consumer discretionary (-7.92%), communication services (-7.71%) and technology (-7.40%) were the weakest sectors.
- Our sustainable funds range wasn’t immune to such extreme sectoral performance and our equity-only funds (**Sustainable Leaders** and **Global Sustainable Equity**) underperformed their wider index-based benchmarks. Understandably, our Sustainable funds generally don’t invest in energy and have very limited (if any) exposure to commodities. In addition, we also have a low weighting in financials, particular banks, as they tend not to score well against our sustainability criteria. The change in outlook for interest rates also cost us as higher interest rates tend to be beneficial for banks – and the more socially-responsible stocks that we favour also performed less strongly than their sector peers. Normally, one would expect equity-market weakness to be mitigated by positive returns from sterling credit, but our mixed-asset funds (**Sustainable World**, **Sustainable Diversified** and **Sustainable Managed Growth**) also underperformed as both asset classes were negatively impacted by the unusual combination of macroeconomic and geopolitical factors. Nonetheless, despite the challenges over the first quarter, these funds all ranked in the top-quartile for the rolling 12-month period.
- Other than the unavoidable impact of equity sector weightings, our Sustainable funds performed reasonably well in a particularly difficult environment and strongly outperformed many of their sustainable peers. As an example that is relevant to all our equity portfolios, consider **Sustainable Leaders**, our long-standing equity-only fund, which is mostly (at least 80%) invested in UK equities. Within the IA UK All Companies sector, Sustainable Leaders was ranked in the 60<sup>th</sup> percentile for the quarter. This is good for a fund with zero oil & gas, mining and arms manufacturing exposure, and a significant underweight in financials. Against these zero or low weightings, our funds are overweight technology and healthcare (as both sectors comprise lots of innovative companies that are a good fit for our investment framework), so we were impacted by the rotation from longer duration, higher-growth sectors in favour of less interest rate-sensitive sectors. In overview, around 80% of the fund’s underperformance against its all-sectors benchmark was attributable to the energy, basic materials, technology and healthcare sectors. The exposure to overseas equities was also detrimental, given the outperformance of UK equities.
- Within the technology and healthcare sectors, however, we favour more established companies with proven products and significant revenues – we very rarely, if ever, invest more speculatively in IPOs or early-stage tech or biotech companies as the risks are simply too great. This may seem unduly cautious (“What about missing out on the next Google or Amazon?”), but there are so many risks with early-stage companies – its key product might fail; the company might run out of cash; its product might be a winner, but the company could fail to market or distribute it well; or another company might gain first-mover advantage and secure the market with a similar or even inferior product. The winners are far fewer in number than the many failures and we believe that over the medium to long run you can generate attractive above-market returns without taking such binary risks. Besides, there were plenty of opportunities to buy Google (Alphabet) or Amazon at levels much lower than they are today, but after they were more established and viable (and we did!). Some investors have taken a different view and invested more speculatively in earlier-stage tech and/or biotech companies – they may have done well in the good times (although the risk-adjusted returns wouldn’t be so appealing), but the ‘spec tech’ rout that started in the fourth quarter of 2021 dramatically impacted some of them in the first quarter. In contrast, we believe that our funds are unlikely to have seen any permanent capital impairment: while more-established tech holdings may have been derated in the interest rate-driven rotation, they continue to be strong revenue- and profit-generating investments.
- Conversely, some investors have made a virtue of running very high cash levels during the quarter. This is a more nuanced and philosophical issue than speculating in earlier-stage companies. With hindsight it could seem wise to stay in cash and not invest in falling markets, but it’s



not our role to act as asset allocators. Clients give us their money to invest sustainably and there are many studies that show that better long-term returns are achieved by being fully invested in the market, rather than trying to beat it through timing. These studies show that investors tend to miss the inflection points, so they are 'out of the market' when the big upward moves occur. Furthermore, we believe that sitting in cash is poor from a sustainable perspective as it isn't being invested in companies that are offering sustainable solutions to the world's problems.

- At a stock level, while there was significant dispersion of returns, there was nothing that worried us, while some of our holdings performed particularly well on stock-specific news. **London Stock Exchange** (*long-standing core holding in Sustainable Leaders; also held in all mixed-asset funds*) performed well after updating the market 15 months into the integration of its acquisition of Refinitiv, the data business of Thomson-Reuters. Having been punished earlier in the process for disclosing that the costs of the integration would exceed LSE's initial forecasts, the company's strategy, financials and communication are now paying off. We feel that the shares still offer significant upside potential. UK utility **SSE** (*held in Sustainable Leaders and our mixed asset funds*) had a strong quarter with Elliott Management Corporation, the activist fund, seeking to force the company to break up into its constituent businesses of renewable power generation and networks (for the record, we oppose this initiative, believing that SSE is more compelling as a vertically integrated company). Otherwise, the invasion of Ukraine emphasised the need for energy transition with a shift to renewables. Student accommodation provider **Unite** (*held in Sustainable Leaders*) performed well as it recovered from its challenging period during the Covid-19 pandemic with students recognising the great benefits of face-to-face learning and living with their peer group.
- Detractors from performance included three of the previous quarter's strongest performers: Croda International, Greggs and Ferguson. UK speciality chemicals business **Croda International** (*long-standing core holding in Sustainable Leaders; also held in all mixed-asset funds*) reported results in line with expectations, yet was penalised for the strong performance of its business that supplies lipids for Covid vaccines (which it acquired in July 2020). With vaccines seeming less necessary, its contract with Pfizer is now seen as delivering one-off supernormal profits – yet we feel that mRNA vaccines will remain a valuable source of revenue for the company. **Greggs** (*Sustainable Leaders, Diversified and Managed Growth*) traded well last year and was rightly seen as a key 'reopening trade'. However, it was seen as vulnerable to high inflation in food ingredients, energy and wages, and the company's decision to keep prices lower to invest in growth rather than raising prices was penalised (wrongly, in our view). Otherwise, **Ferguson** (*Sustainable Leaders, Diversified and Managed Growth*), the North American plumbing and heating distributor with a significant US presence, was impacted by fears that higher US interest rates will affect new housing starts (which are around half of its exposure).
- For the **Global Sustainable Equity Fund**, performance was similarly affected by sectoral weightings resulting from its sustainable mandate. For its MSCI ACWI benchmark, energy was less of a stand-out performer than for the MSCI World (+25.13% vs. 34.98%), but it was more impacted by the market rotation and the derating of technology as around one third of the fund is invested in the sector. Key contributors to performance included London Stock Exchange (LSE), Novo Nordisk and Visa. **LSE** performed well after updating the market 15 months into the integration of its acquisition of Refinitiv, the data business of Thomson-Reuters. Having been punished earlier in the process for disclosing that the costs of the integration would exceed LSE's initial forecasts, the company's strategy, financials and communication are now paying off. We feel that the shares still offer significant upside potential. **Novo Nordisk**, the Danish pharmaceutical company with a world-leading diabetes franchise, bounced back as the market positively reassessed the potential for its Wegovy obesity drug following a delay in approval. Global credit card operator **Visa** was boosted by the decreased impact of Covid-19 in many countries and the easing of travel restrictions as cross-border transactions are very profitable. It also benefitted from the resolution of its dispute with Amazon over credit card payment charges. Detractors from performance included **Intuit** as the online tax forms business was hit by the technology sector derating; heating, ventilation and air-conditioning (HVAC) specialist **Trane** was affected by its sensitivity to higher interest rates and the potential slowdown of the new build housing market; and UK credit rating and data specialist **Experian** was similarly hit by the potential impact of higher rates on US mortgage applications. None of these performance issues concern us unduly as they were largely the result of changes in investment sentiment rather than the companies' fundamentals.
- Notable trades this quarter included:
  - TSMC**: sold position (*Sustainable Leaders only*) and switched into Microsoft following its underperformance.
  - Segro**: added to position (*Sustainable Leaders and Diversified*) on impressive sustainability performance. The UK real estate company runs data centres and 'last-mile delivery' hubs and is showing leadership around embedded carbon in construction processes and on 'green leases'.
  - Schneider Electric**: added to holdings (*across all funds*) as the company is a global leader in electrification and factory automation.
  - IMCD**: bought (*Sustainable Diversified and Managed Growth*) as this Dutch specialty chemicals distributor favours natural products (similar to Croda on the manufacturing side) and is promoting sustainability with manufacturers.





**IQVIA:** this US contact research outsource leader formed by the merger of Quintiles and IMS Health helps pharmaceuticals companies to set up and run clinical trials using its massive patient data sets (*bought for Sustainable Diversified*).

### Performance and activity – Managed Income strategy and mixed-asset sustainable credit portfolios

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- *Please note: as the **RL Global Sustainable Credit Fund** (launched in February 2021) is not limited to sterling credit as with our other sustainable credit portfolios, it has a separate report and is not covered by this pack.*
- Sterling credit markets provided negative absolute returns in what was the worse quarter since the Global Financial Crisis. Markets were driven by the significant rise in yields of the underlying gilt market, with nominal gilt yields rising by around 60 to 70bps across all maturities in the first quarter. While our sustainable credit portfolios delivered negative returns, they outperformed their respective market benchmark.
- The main contributor to performance was security selection. Specifically, the funds benefitted from having no direct exposure to Russian companies **Gazprom** and **Russian Railways**, which both fell out of the benchmark in the period following the invasion of Ukraine and subsequent Western sanctions – these credits represented a small, yet material portion of the benchmark. Royal London’s indirect exposure to Russian companies through sterling credit was also very limited in general, as companies in the highest risk sector, financials, had already curtailed exposure to Russia due to requirements around money laundering. However, specific sustainability and ESG criteria mean that we have even less exposure in our sustainable funds.
- At a sector level, the biggest drag on performance was the large underweight in supranationals, which outperformed the broader market. This strength pushed the performance of the sector above that of the broader market on a rolling 12-month basis, although the sector has underperformed over the medium term to the benefit of our portfolios. Conversely, our allocation to asset-backed securities and secured bonds helped relative performance.
- Security selection was positive, including contributions from ‘off benchmark’ positions (such as floating rate bonds, sub-investment grade bonds, and unrated bonds). This reinforces our long-standing investment philosophy that good value bonds can be found outside benchmark constituents. Specifically, we saw positive contributions from some legacy subordinated bank debt, which bucked the general financial trend (e.g., **Santander, Lloyds Bank**). In the general industrials sector, the biomass and low carbon heat specialist **Aggregated Micropower** had a particularly strong quarter, while real estate company **Eskmuir** was also a notable performer, maintaining its value while the broader real estate sector delivered below market returns. The structured student loans bond **ICSL** was also a standout performer, demonstrating the value of secured lending in uncertain markets.
- In the first two weeks of the quarter sterling credit issuance was extremely strong, helping the market to meet forecast expectations for January even though the latter half of the month proved to be extremely quiet. February was similarly quiet, with the £3.1 billion of issuance in primary sterling markets nearly 50% below estimates. Issuance picked up again in March, as £6.6bn of new debt was brought to market, only a touch below forecasts. Issuance was, however, skewed heavily in favour of financials, particularly non-domestic banks.
- We participated in a number of new issues across sectors in the first quarter of the year. In utilities we bought an issue from **Bazalgette**, a green bond where the proceeds are used to build-out London’s ‘super sewer’, delivering extensive environmental benefits. Also in the utility sector, we bought new issues from **Severn Trent** and **Northern Powergrid**, the latter continuing our preference for regulated electricity providers. In social housing, we bought another ‘use-of proceeds’ sustainable bond (not to be confused with sustainability-linked bonds) from **Peabody Group**, a housing association based in London – the proceeds will finance the retrofitting of existing homes to improve energy performance certificate (EPC) ratings and energy efficiency, and to boost the number of electric vehicle charging points throughout its developments. We also participated in the issue of a sustainability-linked bond from **L&Q**, as well as taps of existing issues from **Housing & Care 21, Flagship Finance** and **Blend Funding**. We also bought a new issue by **Motability**. Otherwise, we participated in a new sterling issue from **Prologis** (*Sustainable Managed Income only*), the US-based real estate investment trust who acquire, develop and maintain warehouses across the globe, adding diversification through exposure to non-UK revenues. Finally, we were particularly active in the senior banks sector in the quarter, picking up a number of new issues at good value. We added new issues from **Santander, Lloyds Bank, BNP Paribas, BFCM** (*Sustainable Managed Income only*), **Yorkshire Building Society** (*Sustainable Managed Income only*), **Toronto Dominion**, and Norwegian bank **DNB**. We also added senior insurance issues from **New York Life** and **MetLife**.
- While the quarter saw further issuance of labelled bonds, such as ‘green’ and ‘sustainable’ bonds, some of which we participated in, we remain cautious about labelled bonds, which do not automatically offer value, and sometimes lack clarity of objective. We will continue to assess each individual credit on its particular merits, remaining focused on adding value in underserved or inefficient areas of the market.
- Holdings are focused on sectors that benefit from strong covenants (legal restrictions on what an issuer can do) and often offer enhanced security (offering assets as collateral). It is not just at times of economic distress that security is beneficial. When financing costs are low and



private equity businesses are awash with cash, we can expect to see balance sheets being utilised to increase leverage. This will eventually lead to higher default risk in those more leveraged business models. Secured bonds also offer potential upside when issuers want to access assets that are encumbered by secured bonds.

- All issuers within our sustainable holdings offer a net benefit to society or show ESG leadership. As well as reducing risk, we seek out opportunities that are under-researched e.g., bonds that do not fall into mainstream indices or benchmarks and/or are unrated by ratings agencies. Importantly, the sustainable credit proposition provides access to critical sectors that most investors can't access via equity markets. Key themes in the funds include social housing, the decarbonised economy, infrastructure, financial resilience (such as insurance products to support individuals through shocks) and community funding (regulated banks and building societies focused on SME and retail lending).
- On sustainability grounds, we have no exposure to bonds of oil & gas companies or extractive industries. We are also underweight in the general industrial and consumer goods sectors, and to a lesser extent in consumer services. The portfolios' overweight in BBB is targeted to community funding, financial resilience, decarbonisation and infrastructure debt, which have exhibited stable cashflows relative to the wider consumer, retail and industrial BBB areas and lower rating transition risk to sub-investment grade, which is a key risk in the current environment.

## Outlook

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- We expect market volatility to continue as investors continue to grapple with the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic (lockdowns, supply chain disruptions, inflation and interest rate rises) as well as the invasion of Ukraine and possibility of further conflict in Eastern Europe. In fact, we cannot remember a time when there have been so many huge and uncertain forces all impacting the global economy simultaneously.
- The deflation of the Chinese property bubble will impact economic growth there. Growth will also be affected by the government's zero-tolerance approach to Covid-19, with cities with millions of inhabitants being locked down fully following a handful of positive cases. This will impact economic growth in China, but also the wider Asia-Pacific region and indeed the world. At the same time, economic sanctions on Russia and higher energy prices will hit growth. We have no direct exposure to Russia or China, and are underweight in the wider Asia-Pacific region because of the emphasis on high standards of corporate governance from our sustainable investment process.
- Thankfully our approach is not one where we have to make predictions on these macroeconomic factors and instead our portfolios are constructed on a bottom-up, company-by-company basis. We have rarely had so much clarity and visibility into the long-term sustainability-aligned drivers of the companies in which we invest. Many of the companies in which we invest have emerged from the pandemic stronger than ever and, despite challenging stock market conditions, reported good quarterly results during the first quarter. High sustainability standards, which are embedded in our funds, will continue to be an important differentiator in delivering investment returns with the greater focus on corporate purpose that we believe have arisen from the pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.
- While the macro environment is very uncertain, micro factors have never been clearer. This brings us back to sustainable investing and the core of fund management – identifying good companies, valuing them and (to a lesser extent) trying to time our investment to maximise the returns to clients. The pandemic and its aftermath have accelerated the sustainability agenda across governments, businesses and consumers. This is already proving positive for the types of company in which we seek to invest: we saw this in the fourth quarter results season, where many companies that we hold exceeded our expectations. The benefits of sustainability are influencing them in the following ways:
  1. **Cultural** – companies with purpose and strong environmental and social performance are more successful in attracting talent to work for them.
  2. **Operational** – strong environmental and social practices are now seen as making businesses more efficient and effective. Far from being a burden, net zero commitments make businesses more resource-efficient and save money.
  3. **Financial** – sustainability is bringing new business opportunities to many of the companies we invest in, as they themselves help other businesses and consumers to enact their own sustainability goals.

This combination of hiring the best talent, being operationally efficient and having a greater breadth of opportunity at lower risk is a powerful one. It is also why any periods of underperformance are likely to be temporary. Companies with these characteristics are likely, over time, to be productive investments whatever the overall investment environment, and we own many of them.

- Overall, we remain positive on equities as the global economy continues to recover from the impact of Covid-19 – that, after all, is one reason interest rates are being raised. We therefore maintain our pro-equity stance in the mixed asset strategies. While there may be periods of volatility, uncertainty is the friend, not foe, of investors: long-term returns are improved by buying at times of uncertainty. However, should higher interest rates tip economies into recession (particularly in the UK and Europe), our equity portfolios should be relatively resilient as we



favour high return on equity, unlevered larger-cap companies with good pricing power and strong earnings growth. In contrast, as the quarter demonstrated, we tend to eschew (for sustainable and/or financial reasons) stocks with more cyclical exposure to the global economy, such as energy, commodities and non-core cyclical manufacturing.

- Should the global economy begin to slow, as result of higher interest rates or the war in Ukraine, it is likely that some companies will miss their earnings targets (or fail to be sufficiently upbeat in their guidance) and face periods in ‘investment purgatory’ as a result. That said, we have developed our sustainable investment process over many years, and it has been effective in various economic and market conditions. While we are always learning and will evolve it where necessary, we have confidence that it will continue to serve our clients well. An example of this process working is our decision to stick with **LSE** when its share price fell because of the market’s impatience around its acquisition of Refinitiv – while others sold the shares, we kept faith in the management’s strategy and execution, and were rewarded by the stock’s strong performance in the first quarter.
- As with equities, there is considerable uncertainty about the year ahead for sterling credit – again centred on inflation and central bank interest rate rises. In the UK, investors are pricing in a move to a 2.5% base rate over 12 months and in the eurozone there has been a significant shift, with tightening now expected in the second half of the year. The US yield curve (between 2- and 10-year maturity bonds) inverted during March, which many view as recession signal. However, we would highlight the uncertainty of any market signals at present, given the unpredictability of war in Ukraine.
- The widening in credit spreads has taken valuations to attractive levels, relative to government bonds. However, if tensions in Ukraine intensify, we would expect further modest widening in investment grade and high yield credit spreads. Nevertheless, at current levels, investment grade spreads overcompensate for default risk, and we expect that credit will outperform government debt over the medium term. Our portfolios have a material exposure to BBB bonds, but we believe that compensation for default risk remains most attractive for the bonds that we hold in this rating band.
- The BoE announced in the first quarter that it will sell its holdings of corporate bonds. While its buy programme had a significant (if only temporary) impact on sterling credit markets, we do not expect the same for the sale. Although the holding is material in size, it is not a structurally significant portion of the market, and with the proposed sales timescale of more than three years, it is unlikely that markets will see enough concentrated activity to generate large swings in pricing.

#### Additional information

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- RLAM recognises that the Ukraine invasion is a human tragedy, and one that we hope is resolved swiftly. As stewards of our investors’ assets, we are monitoring the situation closely, and of course are complying with all restrictions and sanctions issued by relevant authorities. RLAM has no exposure to Russian companies in our active funds. We had limited exposure (less than 0.1% of total assets) in our tilt and Emerging Market Tracker funds at the time of the invasion, but subsequently sold every holding we were permitted to. In our Emerging Market Tracker fund, we removed this in line with the MSCI index changes in early March. Our sustainable funds have no direct investments in Russia, either equity or credit.
- There are regular updates on our investment thinking in the *Our views* section of [www.rlam.co.uk](http://www.rlam.co.uk), including a regular blog from Head of Sustainable Investments on key issues in equity markets and sustainable investing. We also deliver regular webinars – there have been several sustainable investing-related webinars in late March and early April, and there is a sustainable quarterly update on 26 April 2022 with Sebastien Beguelin (equities) and Matthew Franklin (sterling credit). Please visit the [RLAM Digital Insight Hub](#).





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