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High Yield and Multi Asset Credit strategies

Quarterly overview

30 September 2023

ROYAL LONDON
ASSET MANAGEMENT

Overview

Market Overview

The third quarter was characterised by mixed data around the world, with central banks coming towards the end of their rate hiking path, but with cuts still seemingly a while away. The global economic picture is rosier now than it was at the start of the year, but global growth is spluttering again amid a disappointing bounce in China activity, slow-to-no growth in Europe and against a backdrop of restrictive monetary policy. The US still looks at risk of recession too, even if activity data to date has been fairly robust.

Inflation has fallen significantly and, although higher energy prices threaten a widespread revival in headline inflation, other factors – including a soggy economic activity backdrop – should pull inflation lower still. With taming inflation still the priority for central banks, there is still a possibility of further rate hikes from the Federal Reserve (Fed), European Central Bank (ECB) and Bank of England (BoE), but peak rates look to be near, with real rates now well into positive territory.

In the US, the real economy has been surprisingly resilient in the face of tighter credit conditions. However, the fourth quarter looks set to see a few growth challenges, monetary policy is restrictive and employment growth has slowed. A number of recession indicators are still flashing. Business survey data paints a mixed picture, with PMIs consistent with flattish growth while ISM surveys look more upbeat. Employment gains have slowed on the non-farm payrolls data and job openings have fallen a long way from their highs consistent with a less tight labour market. Housing-related activity remain subdued.

The Fed continued to hike rates over the quarter against a still resilient labour market backdrop, to help ensure inflation returns sustainably to target. Over the third quarter, the Fed raised the Fed Funds target range by another 25bps to 5.25-5.50%. As of their September meeting, the mean forecast of participants still had one more rate increase in it for the rest of 2023, but removed some of the rate cuts that participants had pencilled in for 2024. Over the quarter, CPI inflation rose to 3.7% year-on-year by August, from 3.0% in June driven by higher energy inflation, but with core continuing to drift lower over the period. The core PCE measure of inflation fell over the quarter and month-on-month was only 0.1% in August. Second quarter GDP recorded a steady-ish 2.1% quarter-on-quarter annualised. More timely economic activity indicators were mixed over the quarter. The government shutdown stand-off was eventually resolved at the last minute, but with a stop-gap measure that will fund the government only through to mid-November 2023.

The euro area economy may already be in mild recession and forecasts continue to pencil one in. Business surveys have deteriorated and look consistent with falling private sector output. Tighter monetary policy will still be feeding through to the real economy. Bank lending conditions have tightened and loan growth has slowed. High domestically driven inflation continues to point to the balance of risks being in the direction of further hikes.

Over the third quarter, the ECB again raised rates 50bps. At the September meeting, they signalled that current levels would potentially mark the peak, while leaving the door open for further rate hikes if necessary. Euro area CPI fell to 4.3% year-on-year in September from 5.5% in June. Core CPI fell over the same period too and showed a clearer downward trend than over the previous quarter. The euro area economy grew (only) 0.1% on a quarterly basis in the second quarter - the same outcome as seen in the first three months of the year. However, business surveys signalled a deterioration in activity into more recessionary territory by the end of the quarter.

UK data released in the third quarter painted a picture of slower economic activity, with high but falling inflation albeit featuring still-strong domestic inflationary pressure. Second quarter GDP grew 0.2% quarter-on-quarter in real terms. Upward back revisions to GDP over the quarter showed Q2 GDP as 1.8% above pre-pandemic levels (0.2% previously), with the bulk of revisions from before 2022. The data showed that the UK economy experienced a less-bad pandemic in GDP terms than first estimated. Meanwhile, inflation fell, and tended to surprise on the downside at headline level: year-on-year CPI inflation fell from 8.7% for the May release to 6.7% for the August release. Core inflation fell from 7.1% to 6.2% over the same period. Consistent with a somewhat looser-looking labour market and lower than expected inflation, the Bank of England raised rates another 25bps in August to 5.25% but chose to keep rates on hold at their September meeting.

The outlook is still lacklustre in the UK. A technical recession is still assumed for the UK in the next 12 months, but a modest one. There are still risks from the housing sector and consumer spending has yet to respond fully to tighter monetary policy. GDP growth has been weak since late 2021 and PMI business surveys point to deterioration, falling into recessionary territory over the summer. Inflation should fall significantly at headline level, but domestically driven inflation continues to look strong, despite higher interest rates. The labour market is starting to look less tight and lead indicators of wage growth suggest some slowing ahead but so far, pay growth remains much too strong to be consistent with hitting a 2% inflation target.

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In the high yield market, the ICE BofAML (BB-B) Global Non-Financial High Yield Index benchmark returned 0.47% in the quarter as spreads tightened to 376bps. At the end of the period, the index's yield-to-worst stood at 8.29%, rising from 8.20% at the start of the year. In the broader-based high yield index, which includes CCC rated bonds, spreads tightened to 438bps, with a yield-to-worst of 8.90%.

Global corporate bond markets saw similar underlying influences over the third quarter, with differing overall results. All markets faced the headwind of rising government bond yields, but with this mitigated by ongoing additional carry, and tighter credit spreads as corporates continued to perform well in spite of the higher interest rate environment. In the US, the impact of higher government bond yields dominated returns, leading to a negative return over the quarter, the ICE BofAML US Corporate Index returning -2.70%, while in the eurozone and UK, larger spread tightening and smaller government bond yield increases meant positive returns, with the ICE BofAML Euro Corporate & Pfandbrief Index and iBOXX Sterling Non-Gilt indices returning 0.28% and 2.26% respectively.

Global government bond markets continued to see yields move higher – a trend that started in mid-2020, reflecting market views that rising inflation would necessitate higher interest rates and that the central banks and governments would ultimately have to withdraw the support measures put in place during the global financial crisis and then used further to help mitigate the economic impact of Covid. With the end of the rate rising cycle possibly in sight, but issuance expected to remain high, markets have become more volatile. In the US, 10-year treasury yields rose to 4.57% from 3.84%, hitting heights not seen in fifteen years, while in Germany the 10-year bund yield increased to 2.84% from 2.39%.

UK government bonds struggled, being impacted by the higher-than-expected inflation print. Gilts delivered a -0.63% return (FTSE Actuaries) over the third quarter with the benchmark 10-year gilt yield rising to 4.44% from 4.39% but pulled back from a 4.75% high seen in mid-August. There was a marked difference in maturities, with short-dated bonds materially outperforming longer-dated bonds, as expectations that rates may be at a peak helped short-dated bonds start to anticipate cuts in late 2024, while longer-dated bonds remained weak due to concerns about the long-term inflation environment and significant gilt supply.

Portfolio performance and activity

RL Global High Yield

The fund outperformed its benchmark (ICE BofAML (BB-B) Global Non-Financial High Yield index) in the third quarter of 2023 in a difficult environment where we have yet to see the predicted recession and pick up in default rates. In the year-to-date, the fund, gross of fees, is flat against its benchmark.

Spreads tightened in the quarter, hitting their tightest levels year-to-date as government bond yields moved higher. We are seeing spreads come in as contrary to consensus, high yield and leveraged loan markets are doing better than investment grade or government markets and default rates continue to be very benign in public markets running at just 2% in the US high yield market (and 1% and 3% in Europe and Emerging Markets, respectively). In fact, the last 12-month rate actually dropped to 2.0% during the third quarter as last August's lumpy defaults fell out of the calculation but then picked up and was 2.5% in September.

These low default rates are indicative of a high yield market that is more robust than in the past. CCC bonds are now a relatively small portion of the market, with issuers now typically larger and in better financial standing. The higher rated portion of the market has proven to be more resilient than given credit for and corporates are exercising sound judgement by looking to sell assets and refinance while liquidity is available. Liquidity and flexibility mean that defaults are being deferred and the most recent data also shows how issuers in distress are not defaulting.

Private debt markets are also playing an increasingly large role in keeping default rates low and taking away some issuance. Private markets have shown a willingness to pick up lower graded debt.

As a result, this is a nice environment for new issuers. Total issuance in third quarter was $40.0bn, which was behind the $54.1bn seen in the second quarter but considerably ahead of the $18.9bn seen in the same period the year prior. New issuance in 2023 has already exceeded what we saw in 2022 with three months still to go, albeit versus a low base. It is also worth noting that 2023's issuance still remains behind past years.

The resiliency of the economy has led to the narrative that interest rates will now stay 'higher-for-longer'. With monetary policy lags appearing longer than they used to be there is some recognition by central banks that policy tightening needs time to work and that the impacts of policy tightening are still feeding through. This is causing spreads to tighten as investors are now convinced the fallout won't be coming until late 2024 or early 2025.

Overview

Despite our outperformance, the fund's performance was held back by our defensive positioning – reducing names in sub-investment grade holdings and moved into blue chip names with longer duration. Duration risk was negative in the period as central banks continued to increase interest rates. We still believe the strategy is a strong one as holding duration will be beneficial when central banks begin to start cutting rates.

We feel we are getting rewarded for our current yield and do not feel the need to take on incremental risk with the current carry being offered in the high yield market. Our focus will remain on targeting solid names with good financials that have levers to pull in any potential economic fallout.

Short Duration Global High Yield

The fund underperformed its Sterling Overnight Index Average Rate (SONIA) benchmark in the quarter. In the first nine months of 2023, it has significantly outperformed the benchmark.

We continued on the more cautious approach adopted earlier in the year during the second quarter, in keeping with a defensive strategy, with the fund having no exposure to CCC rated bonds at all. Our focus is on keeping duration short by reinvesting shorter than the final maturity of the fund's assets.

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These low default rates are indicative of a high yield market that is more robust than in the past. The CCC portion of the market is now a relatively small portion of the market, with issuers now typically larger and in better financial standing. The higher rated portion of the market has proven to be more resilient than given credit for and are exercising sound corporate judgement by looking to sell assets and refinance while liquidity is available. Liquidity and flexibility mean that defaults are being deferred and the most recent data also shows how issuers in distress are not defaulting.

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During the period, we added names such as Ford Motors, Perrigo, Vermilion Energy, ACI Worldwide, Ball Corp and Videotron.

We also seen several holdings redeemed during the quarter by companies such as United Group, EG Group, Cirsa and Spectrum Brands. Royal Caribbean Cruises and Univision chose to partially redeem some of their outstanding bonds.

Multi Asset Credit

The fund was slightly behind its Sterling Overnight Index Average Rate (SONIA) benchmark in the quarter with short-dated leverage loans aiding performance. Year-to-date, the fund is considerably ahead of its benchmark.

The benefit of the loan book in the portfolio includes the high carry, the short interest rate duration risk and convexity (as most high-quality loans trade below par) so there is optionality on a refinancing in a defensive instrument.

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Outlook

In our view, the banking turmoil towards the end of the first quarter means a global recession is closer than anticipated at the start of the year. Banks will look to be more cautious with lending, leading to a broad credit contraction that we would expect to push the global economy into recession towards the end of this year or early 2024. Our focus will remain on the Fed. With inflation expected to fall back towards the long-term target, the levels that the Fed is happy with and when it then begins to lower rates will be the key factor for the upcoming year.

In this higher rate environment, we are beginning to see a disconnect between yields and valuations. The longer yields stay higher, there will be a realisation that higher costs of capital are here to stay so valuations will need to be adjusted. This supports our move into investment grade names as some of the longer duration, high quality, low single A, high BBB, and longer duration debt offer good value with 5% plus yields. If the rates environment starts to turn you also get some yield compression which gives you some good convexity.

Current default rates are very low at around 2-3% and while we expect this to track to 3% over the course of this year. These levels would be entirely normal in an historic context, but the nature of the economic backdrop and strong company balance sheets means we expect default rates to grinding higher over this period, instead of sharply spiking.

It is also worth mentioning implied default rates take no account of the much higher quality and more robust nature of the high yield market today, compared to 2008/9; nor of the current financial state of issuers as we head towards the downturn. Most issuers are in a stronger position than normal at this stage of a cycle and our default and recovery expectations remain extremely benign. We are seeing yields at their highest rates in 10 years or more, so we feel comfortable handling the predicted rise in defaults to come as our cushion is more substantive.

In our view, the way through difficult markets is to focus on those risks that you can control and know what you own. We will keep spread duration low and focus on the quality of issuers' financials, rather than relying on third-party ratings: at a sectoral level, cashflows are the key factor, meaning we need to know about on- and off-balance sheet leverage. We prefer not to wait for defaults as the recovery process can take time: however, should they occur, the key is to have an adequate solvency cushion.

Further Information

Please click on the links below for further information:

Stewardship and responsible investment at RLAM

TCFD climate report

Find out more

Articles, videos and webinars explaining our investment thinking can be found in the Our Views section of www.rlam.com, including regular updates from our Fixed Income, Global Equity, Sustainable and Multi Asset teams. Notable publications in the third quarter include our annual Climate Report, as well as our annual Assessment of Value reports, available from the home page of www.rlam.com.

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