External Context

Economic background: The key story remained the conflict in the Middle East and its impact on global energy prices and inflation, while on the UK politics side, Andy Burham became the new Prime Minister. Although energy prices had shown signs of moderating towards the end of (calendar) Q2, the continuing conflict pushed oil and gas up sharply once again in Q3. Around mid-September, Brent oil and UK gas prices were over 30% and 70% higher respectively compared to the period preceding the Bank of England's (BoE) July Monetary Policy Report (MPR).

Given the inflationary impact of the previous energy shock from the Russia/Ukraine war, central bank policymakers remained alert to higher energy prices feeding into wider price and wage-setting behaviour ('second-round effects'). In the UK, higher fuel and energy prices were evident in headline inflation, but there was limited evidence of material second-round effects. At the same time, underlying wage pressures continued to moderate, and the labour market remained relatively loose.

The BoE's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) maintained Bank Rate at 3.75% throughout the period. In April the MPC voted by 8-1 to leave rates unchanged, with one member wanting a 0.25% increase. The voting subsequently became more hawkish, moving to 7-2 in June and 6-3 in both July and September, with all dissenters preferring to increase Bank Rate to 4.00%. The change in voting patterns reflected increasing policymaker concern over the persistence of the energy shock and the risk that higher headline inflation could become embedded in domestic prices and wages.

At the September MPC meeting, the Committee judged the inflation risks were further to the upside compared to its July MPR. Energy prices had risen again and borrowing costs were materially higher than before the US/Iran conflict. Despite expecting inflation would rise further in the near-term, most members believed that a soft labour market, spare capacity and restrictive monetary conditions would reduce inflation over time. Moreover, the data showed there was still little evidence of material second-round effects, although the MPC emphasised that the risk of these effects would increase the longer elevated and volatile energy prices persisted.

UK headline consumer price inflation (CPI) initially declined, suggesting the initial energy shock was not spreading into a wider range of goods and services. However, later in the period inflation picked up again, with CPI rising from 2.6% in June to 3.1% in August due largely to higher transport costs. Core CPI was 2.6% in July and August, suggesting the divergence between that and headline inflation was due to energy rather than a broad increase in underlying inflation.

UK economic activity was somewhat stronger than initially anticipated over the period. GDP expanded by 0.6% in the first quarter of the calendar year and 0.5% in the second quarter, slightly stronger than the initial estimate of 0.4%. Monthly activity was more volatile, with a contraction of -0.1% in April, followed by gains of 0%, 0.3% and 0.4% in May, June and July respectively.

Labour market data continued to show softening employment conditions. The unemployment rate fell to 4.9% in April and remained at that level to July, against expectations it would tick up. Job vacancies also continued to decline, to 702,000 in the three months to July. Earnings growth moderated, with regular earnings at 3.5% in the three months to July and total earnings at 3.9%, suggesting weaker labour demand was continuing to restrain domestic wage pressures.

Arlingclose, the authority's treasury adviser, expects Bank Rate will stay at 3.75%. However, higher energy prices due to the ongoing conflict(s) and uncertainty around the government's upcoming Budget have increased the near-term upside risks. Moreover, stronger inflation projections, which accompanied the September MPC decision, shifted market expectations for Bank Rate higher. In addition, despite little evidence of second-round effects to date, the changing tone of the MPC minutes suggests it may not need something seismic to tip the Committee to increase Bank Rate.

The US Federal Reserve held the Fed Funds target range at 3.50%-3.75% through to July. However, inflation pressures rose during the summer, pushing headline CPI to 3.4% in August, with higher petrol prices accounting for much of the increase. This led the Fed to raise its target range to 3.75%-4.00% in September. The move reflected increased concern over inflation at a time when US economic activity and labour-market conditions were relatively resilient.

Following a 0.25% increase in June, the European Central Bank raised its three key policy rates by a further 0.25% in September, taking the deposit facility rate to 2.50%. Inflation increased from 2.9% in July to 3.2% in August, and an initial estimate suggested a further rise to 3.8% in September, with energy prices the principal driver. The ECB emphasised the uncertainty around the duration of the energy shock and the risk prolonged higher inflation could feed into wider price-setting.

Financial markets: After the sharp deterioration early in the period, financial market sentiment improved somewhat as there were ongoing hopes that the US/Iran war would be resolved. However,

towards the end of the period, signs of any potential resolution appeared premature and oil prices rose alongside inflation and bond yields while equity market volatility increased as investors weighed conflict-related as well as AI-related concerns.

Bond yields in both the US and UK increased markedly over the period, with the gap between gilts and US Treasuries tightening towards the end of the period. While term premia are still embedded in gilt yields given the relatively uncertain fiscal outlook, a more hawkish Fed alongside persistent US inflation and fiscal concerns have pushed the yields on US Treasuries to their highest levels in years.

Some relatively market-friendly announcements were made by Andy Burham in his speech at the Labour Party conference, but it will be the Budget at the end of October that will hopefully provide some clarity on what the UK's fiscal position might look like going forward.

Over the period, the 10-year UK benchmark gilt yield started at 4.86% and ended at a high of 5.43%. The 20-year gilt yield starting at 5.45% and finished at 5.93%, another high for the period. The Sterling Overnight Rate (SONIA) averaged 3.73% over the period to 30th September.

Credit review: Arlingclose maintained its advised recommended maximum unsecured duration limit on the majority of the banks on its counterparty list at 6 months. The other banks remain on 100 days.

During the period, Fitch upgraded numerous banks due to a rating methodology change, as well as the reference obligations used for Issuer Default Ratings and introduced more differentiated notching between deposits, senior preferred, senior unsecured and senior non-preferred debt ratings.

Later in the period, Moody's changed the outlook on HSBC to Positive from Stable, while also affirming its long-term deposit rating. This follows a similar action from S&P on HSBC's outlook a few months prior to this.

After spiking in April following escalation in the Iran war, credit default swap prices on UK banks declined during most of the period but started to pick up again in September. They ended the period well below levels that may give cause for concern but remain under constant monitoring.

European banks' CDS prices followed a similar pattern to the UK, while Canadian bank CDS prices rose early in the period and then remained at similar levels, while Australian and Singaporean banks tended to trend downwards.

Overall, at the end of the period CDS prices for all banks on Arlingclose's counterparty list remained within limits deemed satisfactory for maintaining credit advice at current durations.

Financial market volatility is expected to remain a feature, at least in the near term and, credit default swap levels will continue to be monitored for signs of ongoing credit stress. As ever, the institutions and durations on the Authority's counterparty list recommended by Arlingclose remain under constant review.