

Item 5.

Investments Held as at 31 March 2024

File No: X020701

Summary

This report provides details of the City's investment portfolio and performance to 31 March 2024.

The City's total Investment and Cash position was \$782.4M at 31 March 2024, with investments earning interest of \$3.1M for the month.

Annual CPI inflation was 4.1 per cent in December 2023, down from 4.9 per cent in the 12 months to October 2023. However, the rate of inflation remains above the Reserve Bank of Australia's (RBA) target range of two to three per cent. While global factors explain much of the variation in inflation, domestic factors also continue to play a role. Widespread upward pressures on prices remain in the economy due to strong demand, a tight labour market and capacity constraints in some sectors of the economy.

The Reserve Bank of Australia board (RBA), on 7 November 2023 raised the official cash rate by 25 basis points to 4.35 per cent, a 12-year high, up from the record low 0.10 per cent level in May 2022. The RBA has left rates unchanged since December 2023.

The City's cash and investments portfolio is substantially restricted in both internal (\$239.1M) and external (\$92.5M) cash reserves, to satisfy the City's legislative responsibilities and to set aside specific funds for major initiatives within the Community Strategic Plan Delivering Sustainable Sydney 2030- 2050 Continuing the Vision. Key commitments within the City's Long Term Financial Plan include public domain works in the CBD, infrastructure and community facilities in the Green Square urban renewal area and commercial property and open space acquisitions. The balance of investment funds represents working capital and funding required for the City's operating and capital expenditure commitments.

The City achieved an annualised monthly return of 5.13 per cent for March which remains above the 30-Day Bank Bill Rate (BBR) of 4.30 per cent, the latest AusBond Bank Bill Index of 4.44 per cent and the enhanced benchmark of 4.75 per cent (BBR + 0.45 per cent).

Since 2015, the City has utilised an additional strategic benchmark rate to measure its investment performance by exceeding the 30 day benchmark returns, by at least 45 additional basis points (0.45 per cent p.a.). The 45 basis point increase is based on observed historical average increased credit spreads (or margins) over bank bill rates on offer in relation to 30–90 day investments.

The City's annual rolling return of 5.07 per cent continues to exceed the 12 month average 30 Day Bank Bill Rate of 4.10 per cent, the latest AusBond Bank Bill Index of 4.22 per cent and the enhanced benchmark of 4.55 per cent (BBR + 0.45 per cent). The benchmarks were endorsed in the revised Investment Strategy approved by Council in October 2023.

It is worth noting that Council's investment opportunities are constrained by a combination of legislation, regulation and any directions and guidelines issued by the Minister for the Office of Local Government. These guidelines were developed, in large part, as a response to the Global Financial Crisis and its impact on the local government sector's investments. They effectively limit the City's investment profile to something similar to a cash managed fund, which generally produce lower returns but provide a high level of security. The City's returns from the investment portfolio remain in line with cash managed funds in the market.

This report includes graphs demonstrating that the City's liquidity profile continues to satisfy the requirements of the Policy, and charts that identify the distribution of the City's portfolio across credit ratings, investment product types and financial institutions. Separate charts depicting the City's cumulative portfolio returns over and above both the 90-day Bloomberg AusBond and 30-day Bank Bill Rate benchmarks have also been included to provide further insight into the City's total investment portfolio performance.

The structure of the City's investment portfolio continues to reflect the conservative approach outlined in the Investment Policy and Strategy, which remains appropriate for the current global and domestic economic conditions. The Policy and Strategy also maintain the City's commitment to sustainable investments where returns and risks are equivalent, under the environmentally and socially responsible investment criteria.

Recommendation

It is resolved that the Investment Report as at 31 March 2024 be received and noted.

Attachments

Attachment A. Register of Investments and Cash as at 31 March 2024

Attachment B. Investment Performance as at 31 March 2024

Background

1. In accordance with the principles of sound financial management, cash that is surplus to the City's immediate requirements is invested within acceptable risk parameters to optimise interest income while ensuring the security of these funds.
2. Surplus cash is only invested in authorised investments that comply with governing legislation and the City's Investment Policy and Strategy.
3. The benchmark performance goal of the City's Investment Policy and Strategy is to surpass the 30 Days Bank Bill Rate (BBR) by 45 basis points while performance also continues to be measured against the Bloomberg AusBond Bank Bill Index.
4. The City's total Investment and Cash position as at 31 March 2024 is \$782.4M, a decrease of \$33.7M from 29 February 2024. The monthly movement reflects capital works expenditure, other operational payments for the period in excess of operating income. A schedule detailing all of the City's investments as at the end of March 2024 is provided at Attachment A.
5. A substantial portion of the City's cash and investments portfolio is held as internally restricted (\$239.1M) or externally restricted (\$92.5M) cash reserves, to satisfy the City's legislative responsibilities and to set aside specific funds for major initiatives within the Community Strategic Plan Delivering Sustainable Sydney 2030-2050 Continuing the Vision.
6. Key commitments within the City's Long Term Financial Plan include public domain works in the CBD, infrastructure and community facilities in the Green Square urban renewal area and the acquisition of commercial property and open space. The balance of investment funds represents working capital and funding required for the City's operating and other capital expenditure commitments.
7. The City achieved an annualised monthly return of 5.13 per cent for March which remains above the 30-Day Bank Bill Rate (BBR) of 4.30 per cent, the latest AusBond Bank Bill Index of 4.44 per cent and the enhanced benchmark of 4.75 per cent (BBR + 0.45 per cent).
8. Since 2015, the City has utilised an additional strategic benchmark rate to measure its investment performance by exceeding the 30 day benchmark returns, by at least 45 additional basis points (0.45 per cent p.a.). The 45 basis point increase is based on observed historical average increased credit spreads (or margins) over bank bill rates on offer in relation to 30 to 90 day investments.
9. The City's annual rolling return of 5.07 per cent continues to exceed the 12 month average 30 Day Bank Bill Rate of 4.10 per cent, the latest AusBond Bank Bill Index of 4.22 per cent and the enhanced benchmark of 4.55 per cent (BBR + 0.45 per cent). The benchmarks were endorsed in the revised Investment Strategy approved by Council in October 2023.
10. The City aims to achieve returns equal to or above these benchmark rates for the period. However, this achievement remains secondary to the critical strategies of maintaining a prudent and conservative risk profile and ensuring adequate liquidity for operational purposes.

11. It is worth noting Council's investment opportunities are constrained by a combination of legislation, regulation and any directions and guidelines issued by the Minister or the Office of Local Government. These guidelines were developed, in large part, as a response to the Global Financial Crisis and its impact on the local government sectors investments. They effectively limit the City's investment profile to something similar to a cash managed fund, which produces lower returns but provides a high level of security.
12. The City's returns from the investment portfolio are in line with cash managed funds in the market. The recent increases to official cash rates have seen improvements in rates of return offered by the market, allowing maturing deposits to be re-invested at higher rates. This trend is anticipated to continue as investments placed during the period of suppressed interest rates reach maturity and are re-invested.
13. The Australian economy is experiencing a sustained period of inflation well in excess of the Reserve Bank of Australia's (RBA) target range of two to three per cent. There are indications that inflationary pressures are reducing. Annual CPI inflation was 4.1 per cent in December 2023, down from 4.9 per cent in the 12 months to October 2023. While global factors explain much of the variation in inflation, domestic factors also play a role. There are widespread upward pressures on prices from strong demand, a continuing tight labour market and capacity constraints in some sectors of the economy.
14. In response to the current period of inflation, the RBA lifted official cash rates 14 consecutive times from the record low 0.1 per cent level in May 2022. The current rate, lifted again by the RBA in November 2023, is 4.35 per cent. Further increases remain a possibility, while the rate of inflation remains above the RBA's target range.
15. Most of the investment portfolio (currently 74.14 per cent) is held in fixed return term deposits. Continuing improvements in returns are anticipated as older investments mature and are reinvested in products offering higher prevailing rates where the funds are not otherwise required for operating purposes. Around 73.59 per cent of the portfolio, including at call account and general fund, is due to mature in the coming year. Accordingly, the City has continued to be able to reinvest at improved returns relative to recent years, though this margin has gradually reduced as official interest rate increases have slowed. It is expected that the rates on offer will reduce toward the end of the calendar year.
16. The report includes graphs depicting the City's cumulative portfolio returns over and above both the 90-day Bloomberg AusBond, and 30-day Bank Bill Rate benchmarks have also been included to provide further insight into the City's total investment portfolio performance.
17. The structure of the City's investment portfolio continues to reflect the conservative approach outlined in the Investment Policy and Strategy which was last revised and approved by Council in October 2023 remains appropriate for the current global and domestic economic conditions.

Key Implications

Strategic Alignment - Sustainable Sydney 2030-2050 Continuing the Vision

18. The City's investments accord with all legislative and policy requirements, as detailed below, and aim to achieve returns above minimum benchmark rates.

Financial Implications

19. The City's investments earned interest of \$3.1M for the month of March 2024, which is well above the monthly budgeted earnings of \$1.7M.
20. The interest income budget for the 2023/24 financial year is \$20.0M. Interest rates offered in the market for the financial year to date have been higher than were anticipated at the time the budget was set, which has favourably impacted investment returns. As noted in the Quarter 3 report to Council, included in the current reporting cycle, interest revenue is forecast to be \$40.0M for 2023/24.

Relevant Legislation

21. Council is authorised to invest its surplus cash under section 625 of the Local Government Act 1993.
22. The Local Government (General) Regulation 2021 (section 212) requires the City to provide a written monthly report of all monies invested, under section 625 of the Act.
23. The Investment Policy and Strategy was last revised in October 2023, maintaining Council's commitment to give preference to sustainable investments where returns and risks are equivalent to other investments.
24. The City's investments accord with the Minister's Investment Order, the Office of Local Government's Investment Policy Guidelines, and the City's own Investment Policy and Strategy as adopted by Council on 23 October 2023.

Critical Dates / Time Frames

25. A monthly investment report must be submitted for Council's information and review within the following month.

Public Consultation

26. Consultation is regularly undertaken with a number of financial institutions and investment advisers to consider options and ensure the City continues to maximise its investment return within appropriate legislative and risk parameters. City staff meet regularly with representatives of the 'Big 4' banks and NSW TCorp. At these meetings City staff actively advocate for Socially Responsible Investment (SRI) opportunities.

27. The banks acknowledge the appetite in the market for these products and they continue to investigate the development of suitable products, however it has been challenging to match the level of funds to available Socially Responsible Investment opportunities that meet the credit risk and maturity profile requirements of the City.
28. As noted in previous Investment Reports, Westpac were able to bring a Green Tailored Deposit product to market, which delivers a comparable return while achieving the City's preferred outcomes. The City currently holds \$55.0M in eleven tranches with this Green Tailored deposit.
29. The City currently holds \$5.0M in a sustainability bond/FRN with Bank Australia due to mature on 24 November 2025 and also invested an additional \$4.5M in February 2023 due to mature on 22 February 2027. This is based on an investment framework that is in line with the 2021 versions of the ICMA Green Bond Principles (GBP), Social Bond Principles (SBP) and Sustainability Bond Guidelines (SBG). This Socially Responsible investment opportunity meets both the credit risk and maturity profile requirements of the City.

BILL CARTER

Chief Financial Officer