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Royal London Sustainable Short Duration Corporate Bond Fund

Quarterly Investment Report

30 September 2024



Quarterly Report

The fund as at 30 September 2024

The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the Royal London Sustainable Short Duration Corporate Bond Fund. The report has been produced by Royal London Asset Management. The report starts with a summary dashboard showing key information about the fund. A glossary is located at the end of the report covering the description of some of the more technical terms used within the report. All data is as at the report date unless otherwise stated.

Contents

The fund	3
Performance and activity	4
Fund breakdown	6
ESG	8
Market commentary	12
Further information	13
Disclaimers	14
Performance net and gross	16
Glossary	17

The fund

Fund performance objective and benchmark

The Fund's investment objective is to achieve a total return over the medium term, which should be considered as a period of 3-5 years, by predominantly investing in sterling-denominated corporate bonds, which will primarily be short-duration (5 years or less). Investments in the Fund will adhere to the Investment Manager's ethical and sustainable investment policy. The Fund's performance target is to outperform the ICE Bank of America Merrill Lynch Sterling Non-Gilt (1-5 Years) Total Return (GBP Unhedged) Index (the "Index"), after the deduction of charges, over rolling 5-year periods. The IA Sterling Corporate Bond sector is considered an appropriate benchmark for performance comparison.

Benchmark: ICE BofA 1-5 Year Sterling Non-Gilt Index

Fund value

	Total £m
30 September 2024	157.36

Asset allocation

	Fund (%)	Benchmark
Conventional credit bonds	93.83%	99.18%
Securitised	6.17%	-
Conventional foreign sovereign	-	0.82%

Fund analytics

	Fund	Benchmark
Fund launch date	23 November 2022	
Base currency	GBP	
Duration (years)	2.84	2.60
Gross redemption yield (%)	5.95	4.75
Number of holdings	230	610
Number of issuers	148	304

Past performance is not a guide to future performance. Please refer to the glossary for a description of the yield used.

Performance and activity

Performance

	Fund (%)	Benchmark (%)	Relative (%)
Quarter	2.52	2.18	0.35
YTD	4.77	3.52	1.25
1 Year	9.82	7.73	2.09
Since inception (p.a.)	7.24	5.37	1.87

Past performance is not a guide to future performance. Please refer to the Glossary for the basis of calculation and impact of fees. Performance and since inception date based on Royal London Sustainable Short Duration Corporate Bond (Z Acc). Source: Royal London Asset Management; Gross performance; Since inception date of the share class is 23 November 2022.

Performance commentary

All issuers within our sustainable holdings offer a net benefit to society through either their products/services or their operations. 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, social & environmental infrastructure, community funding (regulated banks and building societies focused on SME and retail lending), financial inclusion & resilience (such as insurers offering products which protect individuals and businesses from unexpected events) and the energy transition. 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 third quarter was positive for fixed income investors, with strong absolute returns from sterling credit markets. The portfolio outperformed its benchmark index over the period, with the combination of stock and sector positioning positive. Within the banking sector, our exposure to subordinated bonds was again helpful while in insurance, our exposure to selected long-dated bonds was also beneficial. Selected tenders such as Just Group and Aviva, as well as the early redemption of bonds by Stagecoach, contributed to our outperformance, with the companies buying back bonds at above market levels.

Against this, our exposure to structured bonds was a small negative. This was largely due to ongoing volatility in the water sector, with bonds in Thames Water weaker over the quarter. This followed a harsher than expected draft outcome of the regulatory review by Ofwat, and rating agencies downgrading Thames bonds earlier in the quarter. While there are undoubtedly issues in the sector, we do believe that a resolution will be found. We continue to review the holdings we have in the sector and believe that the market more than discounts most negative outcomes for the sector. Nonetheless, patience is likely to be necessary before the final resolution is clear. While this underperformance is disappointing, it does highlight the benefit of diversification in our approach, given that the overall effect of our exposure to the structured sector has been positive this year. Outside of exposure to water, our structured sector holdings again performed well and remain a key element of our sterling credit exposure. Structured bonds play a significant part in our approach, helping with the strategy of creating highly diversified portfolios with a focus on security and above-market yields, whilst preventing individual bonds from derailing overall performance.

Performance and activity

Top 10 holdings

	Weighting (%)
LEGAL & GENERAL GROUP 5.375000000 2045-10-27	1.63
IFFIM 2.750000000 2025-06-07	1.58
BAZALGETTE FINANCE PLC 2.375000000 2027-11-29	1.40
LLOYDS BANKING GROUP PLC 6.625000000 2033-06-02	1.38
HSBC HOLDINGS PLC 8.201000000 2034-11-16	1.28
HSBC BNK CAO FND STER 1 5.844000000	1.28
SGSHR 2021-1X A 5.980370000 2051-11-17	1.25
PORTERBROOK RAIL FIN LTD 7.125000000 2026-10-20	1.24
NATWEST GROUP PLC 2.105000000 2031-11-28	1.23
DELAMARE FINANCE PLC 5.545700000 2029-02-19	1.15
Total	13.42

Fund activity

Financials remain the focus of activity across both new issue and secondary markets. In the insurance sector, we added a new issue from US insurer MassMutual. These bonds rank alongside policyholders, offering strong downside protection and were attractively priced. We also added the new issue of subordinated bonds from Just Group, the insurer looking stronger with an improved balance sheet and solvency ratios. Their existing bonds were tendered at just 35bps over gilts with the new issue coming at just over 300bps over gilts.

Within the bank and insurance sectors, so-called 'legacy bonds' are those that no longer meet the current requirements of today's regulatory environment, and as such can become inefficient for issuers to leave outstanding. As a result, we continue to expect to see old bonds called and new ones reissued. We hold a number of positions in these bonds, as the call price is typically above market levels – meaning we receive a higher price than prevailing for the existing bond, and often an attractive price and allocation to the new bond. This has supported performance over the past few years and the most recent example this quarter was Aviva, who called their 2036 bonds at a premium to market pricing. We then added the new 2054 replacements, which came to market with an attractive yield premium. Continuing our exploitation of this market inefficiency, we added a US dollar legacy bond from HSBC.

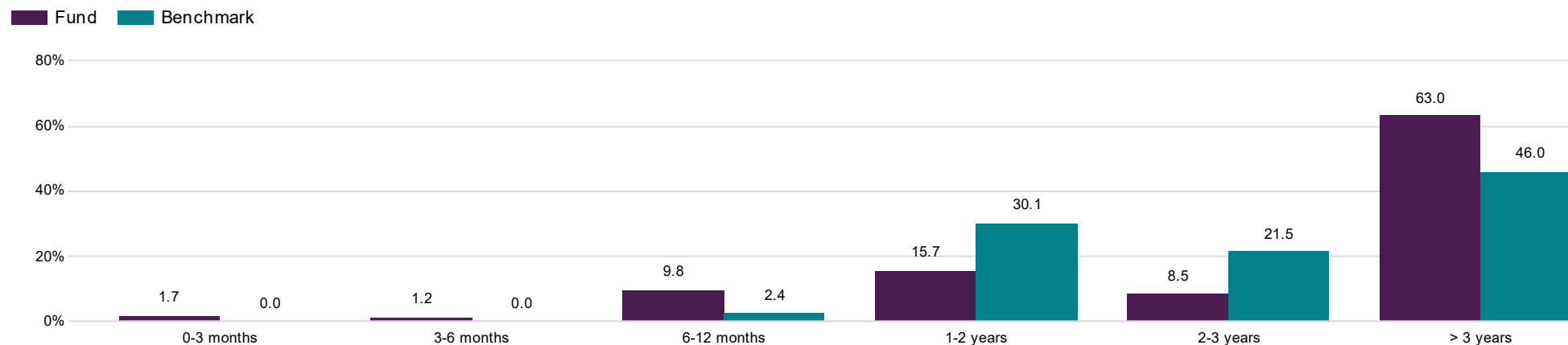
During the quarter, we added bonds from Channel Link Enterprises in the secondary market. These are super senior long-dated, floating rate bonds secured on the company's assets, namely the concession to operate the Channel Tunnel, which represents a key economic link between the UK and Europe. We felt that these bonds were very attractively priced, being less favourably viewed by the market as they are 'off the run' bonds, with more recent, and junior, issues trading at tighter levels.

We continue to see value in regulated utilities, with attractive spreads and supporting key infrastructure assets. During the quarter, we added bonds in Gwynt y Môr OFTO, an offshore transmission operator that connects the windfarm to the National Grid. The bonds were very attractively priced and offer strong sustainability characteristics given the nature of the business as an enabler of the transition to a low carbon economy.

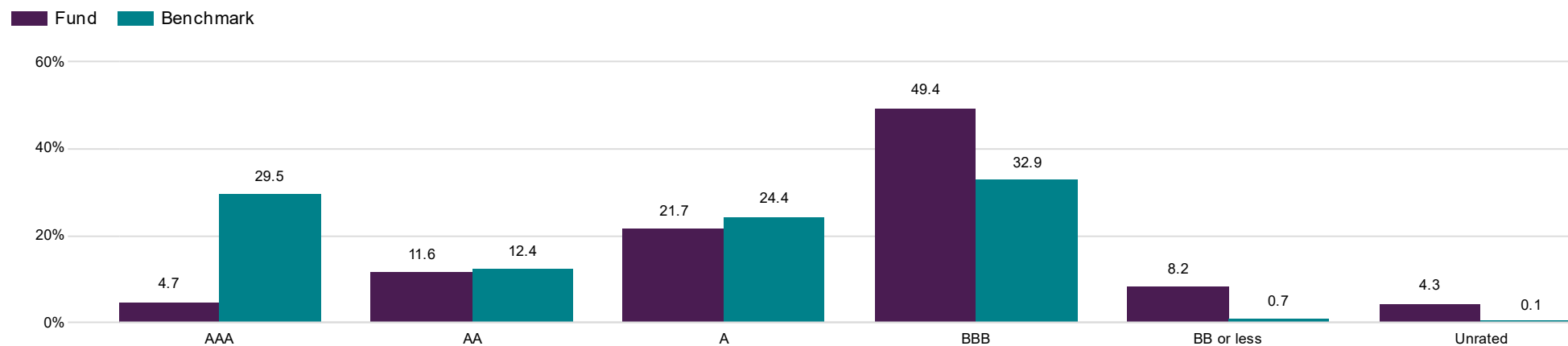
While areas such as financials and structured bonds remain the largest in our portfolios, we look for opportunities in other areas to aid overall portfolio diversification. In the transport sector, we added East Japan Railway, attractive long-dated bonds supporting critical infrastructure. Meanwhile in supranationals, we added to our exposure in a 2025 supranational bond from The International Finance Facility for Immunisation Company (IFFIm), which will finance Gavi vaccination programmes, with bonds trading at a wide spread to other supranational peers despite being backed by aid pledges from countries such as the UK.

Fund breakdown

Maturity profile

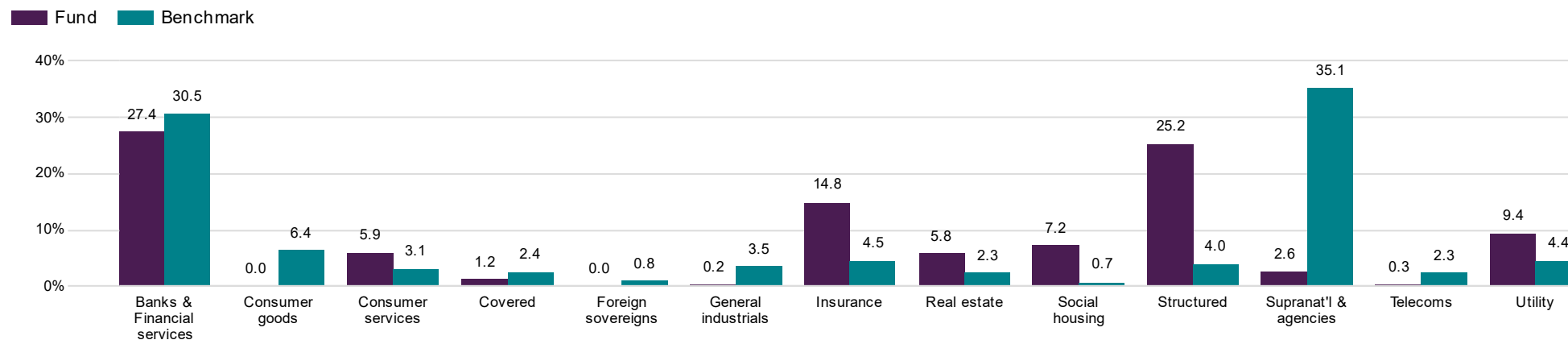


Credit ratings



Fund breakdown

Sector breakdown



Characteristics and climate

ESG characteristics rationale

The Fund focuses on the sustainability of the products and services of the companies it invests in, as well as their standards of environmental, social, governance ("ESG") management, alongside financial analysis. The investment approach is fundamentally based on positive screening; identifying companies that are making a positive contribution towards a cleaner, healthier, safer and more inclusive society, through assessing both what a company does and how it does it, and through active engagement to encourage continual improvement. The fund will not invest in companies that undertake business activities deemed to be detrimental to society. Further details of the Funds Sustainable Investment process can be found in the ethical and sustainable investment policy at www.rlam.com/uk/individual-investors/policies-and-regulatory/












ESG characteristics

Royal London Asset Management has a controversial weapons exclusion across all investments. Our full policy can be found on our website: www.rlam.com/globalassets/media/literature/policies/controversial-weapons-policy.pdf

	Yes	No
ESG integration	✓	
Promotes environmental or social characteristics		✓
Sustainable fund objective	✓	
Additional exclusions	✓	

Additional exclusions

Exclusion criteria that make sure a fund does not invest into a specific service or product. Royal London Asset Management has a controversial weapons exclusion across all investments.

 Adult entertainment	✓	 High environmental impact	✓
 Alcohol	✓	 Human rights issues	✓
 Animal welfare	✓	 Nuclear power	✓
 Armaments	✓	 Nuclear weapons	✓
 Fossil fuels	✓	 Tobacco	✓
 Gambling	✓		

Climate metrics

	Fund	Benchmark	Difference (%)
Financed emissions (tCO2e)	2,094	n/a	n/a
Financed emissions coverage	35.33%	n/a	n/a
Carbon footprint (tCO2e/\$M invested)	10.02	17.63	(43.15)
Carbon footprint coverage	35.33%	44.87%	(21.24)
Weighted average carbon intensity (tCO2e/\$M sales)	37.88	31.18	21.49
Weighted average carbon intensity coverage	91.26%	94.88%	(3.81)

All climate metrics presented above are for Scope 1-2 emissions. Unless specified in the objective, the data is for information only and should not be taken to mean they are being managed to/controlled.

Implied temperature rise

	Fund (%)	Benchmark (%)	Difference (%)
Implied temperature rise (ITR) coverage	35.33	44.97	(21.42)
% of portfolio below 2°C ITR	33.54	35.47	(5.44)
% of portfolio below 1.5°C ITR	14.87	13.64	9.00

SBTi net - zero

	Fund (%)	Benchmark (%)	Difference (%)
SBTi Net-Zero committed	6.80	7.79	(12.76)
SBTi Near-Term committed	6.36	6.54	(2.69)
SBTi Near-Term targets set	7.77	9.91	(21.65)

Fund Engagement

Engagement definition

Engagement is active dialogue with investee companies (or other entities). There are two types: engagement for information, which is dialogue as part of investment research or ongoing monitoring, without specific objectives for change, and engagement for change, which is purposeful dialogue to influence positive change, with defined objectives and demonstrable outcomes.

Engagements

Engagement activity	Fund 3 months	Fund 12 months
Number of entities engaged	13	26
Number of engagements	16	61

This is an estimate. Some engagements at the issuer level may not have been attributed to the specific bond held in the fund, resulting in a lower number of engagement activities.

Total engagements by theme and topic



Biodiversity	4
Climate	7
Climate - Transition Risk	5
Climate - Physical Risk	2
Governance	2
Corporate Governance	1
Remuneration	1
Health	3
Health - Community	3
Social & Financial Inclusion	7
Just transition	5
Labour & Human Rights	1
Social & Financial inclusion	1
Technology, Innovation & Society	1
Technology & Society	1

Engagement focus

Firm-wide engagement activity is centred around six themes which we have identified in consultation with our clients. These are: climate change; nature and biodiversity; health; governance and corporate culture; social and financial inclusion; innovation, technology and society. Portfolio level engagements are not thematic and are focussed on issues specific to managing the portfolio and meeting the investment objective.

Engagement data represents all engagements undertaken at both firm and portfolio level across Royal London Asset Management, and may not be limited to those undertaken solely for the purpose of managing the fund.

The numbers of engagements and themes/topics discussed may differ where a single engagement covers multiple themes/topics.

Fund Engagement

Engagement outcomes

HSBC Bank Plc - Just transition

Purpose:

Our engagement purpose was to encourage HSBC to disclose its plans for integrating social issues into its decarbonisation strategy, in line with the just transition considerations outlined in the Paris Agreement.

Outcome:

Since publishing its net zero report, the company has been strategically embedding just transition principles. It prioritised innovation in sustainability-related lending, aiming to extend services to a broader customer base, including smaller businesses. The company is exploring the development of sustainability-linked bonds and loans and assessing the necessity of just transition-linked products. In emerging markets, it continues to work on the Just Energy Transition Partnership project. The company is also increasing integration across its retail bank and asset management divisions. While it faces challenges in applying universal principles to both emerging and developed markets, it is committed to supporting just transition while meeting climate targets. The company is enhancing relationship managers' understanding of just transition and incorporating specific questions into climate transition plans for high-emitting sectors. Although further details on its plans are pending, the company has an ambitious work plan for the next five months and plans to include initial disclosures in existing reports, with potential for a standalone plan in the future.

NatWest - Just transition

Purpose:

We engaged with NatWest as part of a collaborative engagement with banks to integrate just transition principles into their climate transition plans. The aim was to address any questions regarding our recently published investor expectations on just transition and the banking sector. We aimed to encourage the bank to align its strategies accordingly.

Outcome:

NatWest initially expressed concerns about being evaluated solely on financial returns, which it felt constrained its incentives for ESG activities. However, the bank recognised the value of aligning with our just transition investor expectations for the sector. It found these guidelines beneficial in setting ambitious goals and taking subsequent actions. NatWest discussed the establishment of a new energy transition fund with a different risk appetite and committed to a social housing fund. The company acknowledged the importance of integrating just transition principles into its plans to enhance credibility and was receptive to our feedback on improving its communication around the issue.

Fund Engagement

Engagement outcomes

SSE Plc - Multi-thematic

Purpose:

We communicated with SSE through a stewardship letter to outline key sustainability issues identified in our recent analysis. The letter aimed to prioritise areas for progress and arrange a meeting for further discussion.

Outcome:

In the area of health and safety, we highlighted that contractor safety had fallen below expected standards and urged SSE to improve performance. On climate issues, we expressed support for SSE's climate approach and voted for its net zero transition report at the latest AGM, while recommending a more detailed Scope 3 emission reduction plan and alignment of thermal generation assets with a net zero pathway. Regarding nature, we suggested focusing on reducing environmental incidents and incorporating biodiversity considerations in construction project locations. Lastly, we raised concerns about potential share dilution from issuing shares without pre-emptive rights, as reflected in our voting record. SSE has been invited to discuss these issues further in an upcoming meeting.

Vodafone – Ethical AI

Purpose:

A meeting was organised to discuss Vodafone's approach to ethical AI, focusing on the history, current practices, and future strategies for AI deployment within the company as part of the World Benchmarking Alliance's (WBA) collaborative engagement.

Outcome:

Vodafone has established a comprehensive AI governance structure, ensuring AI is a recognised role within the organisation. A dedicated team manages AI compliance and ethics, embedding new EU data regulations. The governance board oversees AI projects from ideation to implementation, incorporating risk assessments. Vodafone aims to avoid 'shadow AI' (the use of generative AI without the control or knowledge of the business) by embedding AI into its technology architecture which adheres to GDPR and the EU Privacy Directive. The company focuses on responsible AI, complying with the EU AI Act, and participates in forums to stay ahead in AI governance. Ethical principles such as transparency, fairness, and DEI guide its AI development, supported by an AI assessment platform and role-based training for reskilling. We will evaluate the company's performance in comparison to its peers as part of the broader WBA collaborative engagement and identify potential areas for improvement.

Market commentary

Market overview

Markets continued to focus on central bank actions during the quarter, as both the Federal Reserve (Fed) and Bank of England (BoE) followed the European Central Bank in making the first rate cuts this cycle. This follows the significant rises through 2022 and 2023 as part of efforts to reduce inflation. Along with a significant stimulus package in China, this policy shift generally helped fixed income markets to perform positively over the quarter as yields fell to reflect lower central bank interest rates. After initial weakness, equity markets started to rise once more, reflecting the hope that the policy easing would result in a soft landing for the economy with the US S&P 500 index hitting an all-time high. Despite guidance from central banks that further cuts will be measured, markets are still pricing in material rate cuts over the next year or so.

After elections in the UK and France grabbed headlines in the second quarter, attention moved firmly to the forthcoming US elections. Markets believe that a Trump presidency would see looser fiscal policy and higher tariffs and protectionism. Sentiment has swung on the fortunes of the early days of the race, first following the Trump assassination attempt and debate against President Biden, which appeared to favour Trump, but then swung back as Kamela Harris emerged as a credible candidate and performed strongly in her debate with the former president. Somewhat remarkably, markets have remained sanguine about rising geopolitical tensions in the Middle East.

As mentioned above, the Fed cut 50bps to 4.75%-5%. This was in contrast to most economist expectations, but in line with what the market had been increasingly pricing. Their forecasts and language indicated that they anticipate the change as the beginning of a series of cuts. In the euro area, the ECB cut the deposit rate 25bps to 3.50% on the back of inflation data coming in “broadly as expected” and “still subdued” economic activity. UK data released in Q3 were consistent with the UK economy growing modestly, while headline inflation has been running close to the 2% target. The BoE cut rates 25bps, though with (only) a 5-4 vote, warning that they need to be careful not to cut too quickly – duly leaving rates unchanged in September.

Government yields generally fell over the quarter, reflecting the start of the rate cutting cycle. In the US, 10-year treasury yields fell from 4.40% to 3.79%, while German 10-year bunds similarly saw yields fall from 2.50% to 2.13%. Benchmark 10-year gilt yields dipped from 4.18% to 4.01%. These gilt yields had been as low as 3.75% in mid-September, many attributed the increase at the end of the quarter to concerns that the Budget might see a further increase in gilt issuance.

The sterling investment grade credit market (iBoxx non-gilt index) returned 2.28% over the quarter, with the average sterling investment grade credit spread (the average extra yield

available from non-gilt bonds compared with government debt of equal maturity) ending the period unchanged at 1.07% (iBoxx).

Outlook

As we enter the final months of 2024, market focus has moved from when central banks will first cut interest rates, to the scale and timetable of those cuts. As we saw at the start of 2024, markets have generally been overly aggressive in their expectations – at one point in September two-year and five-year treasury yields had dropped further below the Fed Funds rate than any point in many decades. While this has at times been supported by commentary from central bank members, we have generally been more cautious. Our caution reflects that while headline inflation may have come down, service and wage inflation are still generally at levels that are not normally consistent with significant rate cuts. After a decade that includes a world-wide pandemic, a European land war, and the election of a TV reality star as US president, perhaps there is no ‘normal’ to fall back on, but we are certainly more cautious about the rate outlook. In terms of bond yields, we have a general preference to be long duration, and are more cautious about the short end of the market if rate cut expectations are not met, but see the environment as one that requires considerable tactical agility rather than taking a strong strategic view on yields.

Geopolitics has played a greater role in markets over the past few years after a lengthy period where it was often seen as mere background noise. The forthcoming US Presidential election is too close to call as we head into October, but with meaningful differences between the two candidates, this will weigh on markets in the run-up to November 5. Meanwhile, events in the Middle East that have the potential to materially impact oil supply and pricing further increase uncertainty.

We believe that sterling investment grade all-in yields (using iBoxx) at over 5% remain attractive, both in absolute terms but also relative to government bonds. Credit spreads continue to compensate investors for the risk of default and, despite the uncertainties highlighted above, the outlook for the corporate sector remains relatively benign.

We target – and achieve – a material yield premium over the market level in our sustainable sterling credit strategies. As ever, the risks inherent in our credit portfolios are mitigated by maintaining highly diversified portfolios, with a bias towards bonds that offer greater security and downside protection. Our view remains that over the medium term our focus on delivering greater income than the benchmark, achieved with superior downside protections, will generate outperformance.

Further Information

Please click on the links below for further information:



Find out more

In an uncertain geopolitical and economic environment, we recognise the importance of keeping our clients updated on our current investment thinking.

Articles, videos, podcasts and webinars giving the latest views of our investment experts 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.

Disclaimers

Important information

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The Fund is a sub-fund of Royal London Bond Funds II ICVC, an open-ended investment company with variable capital with segregated liability between sub-funds, incorporated in England and Wales under registered number IC001128.

The Authorised Corporate Director (ACD) is Royal London Unit Trust Managers Limited, authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority, with firm reference number 144037.

For more information on the fund or the risks of investing, please refer to the Prospectus or Key Investor Information Document (KIID), available via the relevant Fund Information page on www.rlam.com.

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Risks and Warnings

Investment risk

The value of investments and any income from them may go down as well as up and is not guaranteed. Investors may not get back the amount invested.

Credit risk

Should the issuer of a fixed income security become unable to make income or capital payments, or their rating is downgraded, the value of that investment will fall. Fixed income securities that have a lower credit rating can pay a higher level of income and have an increased risk of default.

EPM techniques risk

The Fund may engage in EPM techniques including holdings of derivative instruments. Whilst intended to reduce risk, the use of these instruments may expose the Fund to increased price volatility.

Interest rate risk

Fixed interest securities are particularly affected by trends in interest rates and inflation. If interest rates go up, the value of capital may fall, and vice versa. Inflation will also decrease the real value of capital. Unlike the income from a single fixed interest security, the level of income (yield) from a fund is not fixed and may go up and down. Bond yields (and as a consequence bond prices) are determined by market perception as to the appropriate level of yields given the economic background.

Liquidity risk

In difficult market conditions the value of certain fund investments may be difficult to value and harder to sell, or sell at a fair price, resulting in unpredictable falls in the value of your holding.

Counterparty risk

The insolvency of any institutions providing services such as safekeeping of assets or acting as counterparty to derivatives or other instruments, may expose the Fund to financial loss.

Charges from capital risk

Charges are taken from the capital of the Fund. Whilst this increases the yield, it also has the effect of reducing the potential for capital growth.

Responsible investment risk

The Fund can only invest in holdings that demonstrate compliance with certain sustainable indicators or ESG characteristics. This reduces the number securities in which the Fund can invest and there may as a result be occasions where it forgoes more strongly performing investment opportunities, potentially underperforming non-sustainable funds.

Performance to 30 September 2024

Cumulative (%)

Annualised (%)

	3 Month	6 Month	1 Year	3 Years	Since Inception	3 Years (p.a.)	Since Inception (p.a.)
Fund (gross)	2.52	3.44	9.82	-	13.85	-	7.24
Fund (net)	2.44	3.28	9.48	-	13.20	-	6.91

Year on year performance (%)

	30/09/2023 - 30/09/2024	30/09/2022 - 30/09/2023	30/09/2021 - 30/09/2022	30/09/2020 - 30/09/2021	30/09/2019 - 30/09/2020
Fund (gross)	9.82	-	-	-	-
Fund (net)	9.48	-	-	-	-

Past performance is not a guide to future performance. The impact of fees or other charges including tax, where applicable, can be material on the performance of your investment.

Source: RLAM as at 30 September 2024. All figures are mid-price to mid-price in GBP for the Royal London Sustainable Short Duration Corporate Bond (Z Acc); Since inception date 23 November 2022.

Glossary

Asset allocation

Breakdown of the assets by asset classes. Based on RLAM asset classification scheme.

Credit ratings

Credit ratings are based on RLAM composite ratings which uses a hierarchy of S&P, Moody's and then the Fitch rating.

Distribution yield

The distribution yield reflects the amounts that may be expected to be distributed over the next 12 months. It is calculated net of standard management charges. It reflects RLAM's current perception of market conventions around timing of bond cash flows.

Duration

Measure of sensitivity of a Fixed Income instrument to changes in interest rates, indicating the potential impact of interest rate fluctuations on the value of the investment.

Fund analytics

All figures exclude cash. Credit bonds include non-sterling bonds and CDs where held within the fund or benchmark.

This is applicable to the following sections: fund Asset Allocation, Duration, Yield curve, Sector breakdown, Financial holdings, Credit ratings.

Fund value

Total value of the fund as of the last business day of the calendar month. The fund value is as at close of business and on a mid-price basis.

Gross redemption yield

Gross redemption yield is the rate of discount at which a bond's future obligations of interest and capital payments equates to its current price. The gross redemption yield shown for the fund is the average for its individual holdings, weighted by their current value, net of relevant fund management costs and gross of tax.

Number of holdings

Total number of unique holdings of the Fund excluding cash, currency and derivatives.

Number of issuers

Number of unique issuers of all assets held by the Fund, excluding cash, currency and derivatives.

Performance

Performance is calculated using the daily end of day NAV per share produced by HSBC based on the mid price.

Sector breakdown

Breakdown of the fixed income assets, excluding derivatives and cash by RLAM's internal industry sector classification scheme. Figures are subject to rounding.

Top 10 holdings

Top 10 assets held by market value, excluding derivatives and cash.