

MLC Wholesale Inflation Plus – Moderate Portfolio

Rating issued on 26 Sep 2023 | APIR: MLC0920AU | mFund: MLC02

Investment objective

The Fund's investment objective is to exceed the Consumer Price Index (CPI) by 3.5% p.a. (net of fees) over rolling five-year periods and at the same time, limiting the risk of negative returns over this time frame.

Manager	MLC Asset Management
Distributor	MLC Asset Management
Sector	Multi-Asset \ Real Return
Investment Style	Active
RI Classification	Aware
Absolute Risk	High
Relative Risk	Active - AA Unconstrained
Investment Timeframe	5-6 Years
Benchmark	Bloomberg AusBond Bank Bill Index
Min Investment Amount	\$20,000
Redemption Frequency	Daily
Income Distribution	Half Yearly
Fund Size (31 Aug 2023)	\$454.35M
Management Cost	0.85% p.a. Incl. GST
Performance Fee	Performance fees may be charged by underlying investment managers
Buy / Sell Spread	0.10 % / 0.10 %
Inception Date	01 Oct 2013

Fund facts

- A flexible investment strategy targeting a real return above inflation
- Multi-manager approach operating within a differentiated investment futures framework
- Combined MLC and Insignia investment team is amongst the strongest in the peer group

Viewpoint

The Fund, managed by MLC Asset Management (MLC), invests across a range of growth, defensive and alternative-based assets. MLC's Sydney-based Capital Markets Research (CMR) team is responsible for managing the investment strategy, employing a differentiated 'investment futures' framework. Zenith retains a positive view of the Fund, as MLC's integration into Insignia Financial (Insignia) has deepened the investment team, allowed greater access to underlying building blocks, whilst the Fund's inflation-linked, Real Return objective provides investors with a differentiated investment proposition.

MLC is a fully-owned subsidiary of Insignia, following its acquisition in June 2021. The broader integration of the two businesses is largely complete, with clarity in terms of product strategy, team structure and harmonising investment processes. The team is led by Dan Farmer, Chief Investment Officer (CIO) and comprises 48 professionals, split across Sydney and Melbourne. Zenith considers Farmer to be a high quality CIO, with the ability to add value from active asset allocation and generating excess returns at the asset class level. Over the past twelve months, the portfolio management and asset class structure was also confirmed, with senior members of the legacy MLC and Insignia investment teams now reporting to Farmer.

Zenith notes that while there has been a streamlining of roles across the integrated investment platform, resourcing in specialist areas such as Asset Allocation, Alternatives, Private Equity is some of the deepest across the peer group and a point of differentiation.

Leading the CMR team are Co-Heads Choice Diversified Portfolios, Ben McCaw and Grant Mizens, who assumed joint responsibilities for the day-to-day management of the Fund following the resignation of Al Clark, previously Head of Diversified Portfolio Management (Choice) in early 2023. McCaw and Mizens are both long-standing members of the CMR team, and are supported by a further four dedicated resources, the senior members of which are experienced and have skill sets aligned to the differentiated investment process.

In setting the targeted asset mix, the CMR team implements a proprietary investment futures framework that combines assumptions about macroeconomic drivers and behavioural factors. Embedded in this approach is a set of 40 future scenarios, each of which is based on an assumption on the level of growth and inflation in the economy, which forms the basis for the team to forecast a range of asset class expected returns.

Zenith notes that the model is intuitively appealing, albeit the linkage to the underlying portfolio has been difficult to map over time. In our opinion, the approach is intuitively appealing, albeit mapping the output to expected asset class returns and potential investment horizons, is largely a qualitative process. Notwithstanding this, the approach complements a broader suite of top-down signals, and can be effective in synthesising the macro environment and ensuring the asset allocations aligns with the team's views.

To assist with managing risk, the CMR team engages the insights of a specialist Derivatives team which is responsible for identifying and structuring a range of hedging strategies, typically to protect capital in a risk-off environment. Zenith considers this specialist support to be a competitive advantage, particularly with respect to monitoring market pricing, liquidity and implied volatilities.



Fund analysis

Fund characteristics

Constraint	Value
Cash (%)	0% to 40%
Fixed Income (%)	5% to 60%
Australian Equities (%)	0% to 35%
Global Equities (%)	5% to 60%
Listed Property (%)	0% to 20%
Listed Infrastructure (%)	0% to 20%
Alternatives (%)	0% to 40%
Gearing (%)	0% to 25%
Defensive Assets (%)	20% to 80%
Growth Assets (%)	20% to 80%

Investment objective and philosophy

The Fund's investment objective is to exceed the Consumer Price Index (CPI) by 3.5% p.a. (net of fees) over rolling five-year periods and at the same time, limiting the risk of negative returns over this time frame.

To meet the Fund's objectives, the investment team has the flexibility to adjust the portfolio composition in response to changing market conditions. The Fund is not managed to a Strategic Asset Allocation (SAA). Instead, the Fund's asset allocation is an outworking of the portfolio that has the highest probability of achieving the investment objective and preserving capital. In Zenith's opinion, this represents a natural extension of the CMR team's differentiated scenario-based approach.

Top-Down Process

In setting the Fund's targeted asset mix, the CMR team implements a proprietary investment futures framework that combines assumptions about macroeconomic drivers and behavioural factors in an attempt to capture real-world complexities. The starting point for each scenario is an assumption on the level of growth and inflation in the economy, which forms the basis for the team to forecast the action of policymakers. These long-term forecasts are then used to estimate cash rates, bond yields, price-to-earnings (PE) multiples, and ultimately asset class returns.

The CMR team has built a set of 40 generic scenarios that cover a range of inflation and growth related states, and pre-defined market events and conditions (e.g. oil price shock, China and Emerging Market risk). Zenith highlights that the scenarios have a degree of overlap and tend to converge through markets undergoing structural change.

The scenarios are assigned probability weightings based on the team's qualitative view of the likelihood of each occurring. This process is undertaken quarterly, with each member of the CMR team submitting independently derived probabilities. These are aggregated to produce a distribution of outcomes which forms the foundation upon which final probabilities are assigned to scenarios. Zenith is supportive of MLC's approach to

independently deriving probability forecasts, which in our opinion, ensures that the final forecasts represent the broader team's views and also minimises the risk of 'groupthink'.

Further, on a monthly basis (or more frequently if required), an Asset Allocation Group (AAG), comprising the CIO and Portfolio Managers, meet to discuss views on the Fund's asset allocation, market valuation, fundamentals and market sentiment. Based on the output of this meeting, Dynamic Asset Allocation (DAA) positions are enacted with the purpose of capturing price adjustments where mispriced markets are expected to mean revert.

The DAA process, which has evolved from the alignment of investment approaches of the heritage MLC and Insignia teams, is implemented via a suite of market aware indicators, which are designed to identify potential mispricings over a one to three year timeframe. Combining a range of valuation, sentiment, technical and macroeconomic / earnings factors, signal output is distilled into a set of asset class scorecards, resulting in an overall conviction score and also creating a level playing field for the AAG to make relative value assessments.

Portfolio applications

The Fund's investment mandate is largely unconstrained in nature, permitting exposure to alternative assets (including illiquid assets) and strategies that include gearing and short selling. For investors subject to the constraints imposed by a traditional SAA framework, the Fund may be suitable as a satellite portfolio exposure. Such an approach takes into consideration the potential for the manager to adjust the Fund's asset allocation on both a frequent and material basis.

For those less sensitive to the composition of investment portfolios, the Fund may be appropriate for blending with other similarly structured strategies to achieve an outcome consistent with an investor's total return requirements. In isolation, the Fund would be considered a moderate to high risk investment proposition and warrant an investment term of at least five years.

The Fund has a Standard Risk Measure (SRM) of five negative annual returns over any 20-year period. This SRM is published in the Fund's current Product Disclosure Statement (PDS) and was last calculated in 2022 by MLC based on the FSC/ASFA recommended methodology.

Fund responsible investment attributes

Key Information	Description
Zenith RI classification*	Aware
Has Responsible Investment Policy	Yes
PRI Status	
PRI Signatory	No

*Zenith RI Classification scale:

- Traditional
- Aware
- Integrated
- Thematic



- Impact



Absolute performance

Performance as at 31 Aug 2023

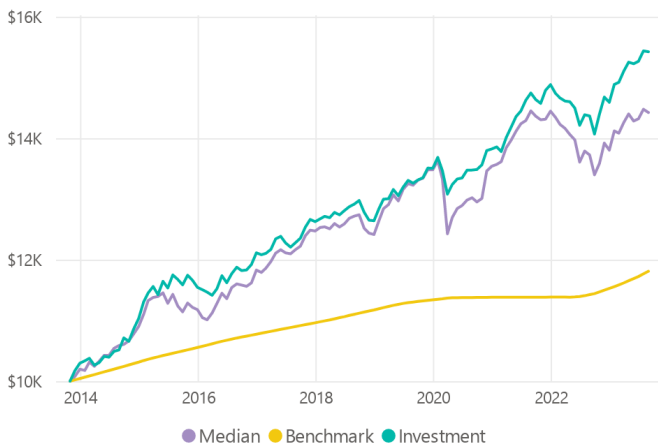
Monthly performance history (% , net of fees)

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	YTD	BM YTD*	BM2 YTD**
2023	2.02%	0.23%	1.25%	0.97%	-0.17%	0.26%	1.13%	-0.09%					5.71%	2.45%	5.60%
2022	-0.97%	-0.51%	-0.35%	-0.07%	-0.72%	-1.96%	1.22%	-0.14%	-2.08%	2.34%	1.94%	-0.59%	-1.95%	1.25%	11.58%
2021	0.24%	-0.55%	1.68%	1.20%	1.25%	0.64%	1.24%	0.80%	-0.73%	-0.43%	1.47%	0.63%	7.66%	0.03%	7.11%
2020	1.32%	-1.61%	-2.86%	1.22%	0.68%	0.13%	0.96%	0.01%	0.07%	0.57%	1.74%	0.19%	2.34%	0.37%	4.39%
2019	1.59%	1.20%	0.05%	1.17%	-0.77%	1.07%	0.84%	-0.34%	0.40%	0.28%	1.18%	-0.01%	6.84%	1.50%	5.40%

*Bloomberg AusBond Bank Bill Index

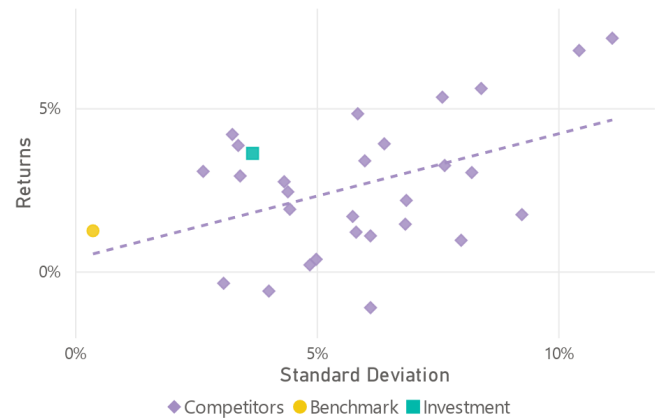
**CPI plus 3.5%

Growth of \$10,000

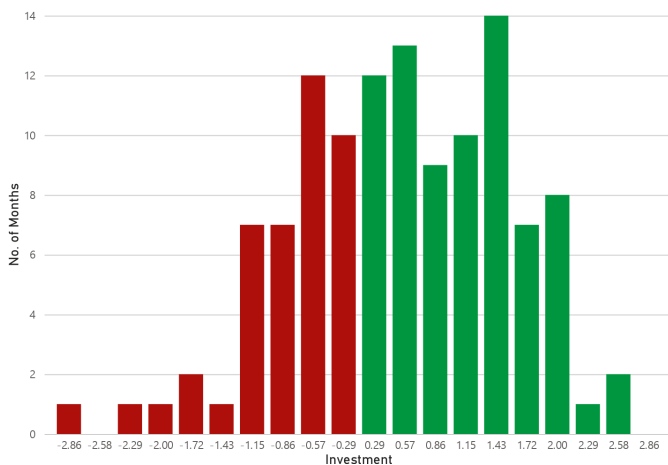


Risk / return

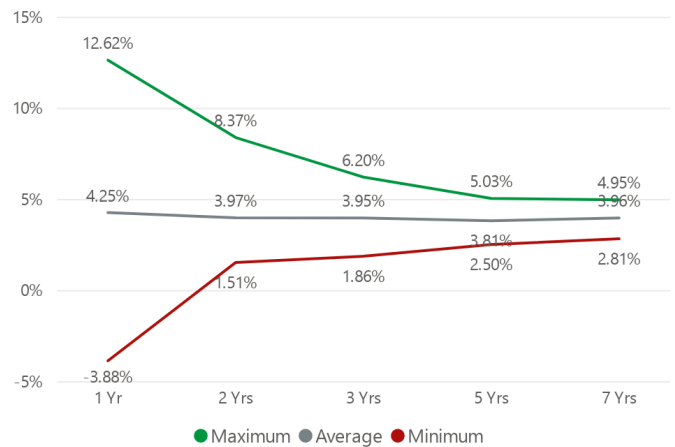
5 Yrs (% p.a.)



Monthly histogram



Minimum and maximum returns (% p.a.)





Absolute performance analysis

Instrument	1 Yr	3 Yrs	5 Yrs	Inception
Investment	7.36%	4.60%	3.61%	4.51%
Income	2.36%	3.61%	3.98%	3.91%
Growth	5.00%	0.99%	-0.37%	0.60%
Benchmark	3.37%	1.25%	1.24%	1.71%
Median	5.09%	3.47%	2.55%	3.79%
Cash	3.37%	1.25%	1.24%	1.71%

Ranking within sector (p.a.)

Ranking within Sector	1 Yr	3 Yrs	5 Yrs	Inception
Fund Ranking	8 / 29	8 / 24	8 / 23	7 / 14
Quartile	1st	2nd	2nd	2nd

Absolute risk

Instrument	1 Yr	3 Yrs	5 Yrs	Inception
Standard Deviation (% p.a.)				
Investment	4.19%	3.62%	3.67%	3.46%
Benchmark	0.20%	0.45%	0.37%	0.31%
Median	4.70%	4.23%	5.07%	4.14%
Downside Deviation (% p.a.)				
Investment	2.17%	1.95%	2.29%	1.90%
Benchmark	0.00%	0.01%	0.01%	0.01%
Median	2.69%	2.41%	3.80%	2.88%

Absolute risk/return ratios

Instrument	1 Yr	3 Yrs	5 Yrs	Inception
Sharpe Ratio (p.a.)				
Investment	0.95	0.93	0.64	0.81
Benchmark	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Median	0.37	0.53	0.26	0.50
Sortino Ratio (p.a.)				
Investment	1.84	1.72	1.04	1.48
Benchmark	NaN	0.00	0.00	0.00
Median	0.64	0.92	0.34	0.72

Zenith benchmarks Funds in the 'Multi-Asset – Real Return' peer group against the Bloomberg AusBond Bank Bill Index. While this benchmark may not be consistent with the one adhered to by all rated participants, it has been adopted to provide investors with a common reference point against which similarly structured strategies may be assessed.

The Fund's investment objective is to exceed the Consumer Price Index (CPI) by 3.5% p.a. (net of fees) over rolling five-year periods and at the same time, limiting the risk of negative returns over this time frame.

All commentary below are as at 31 August 2023.

When assessed over multiple time periods, the Fund has seldom delivered upon its stated objective. Notwithstanding this, the Fund has consistently ranked in the second quartile of performance relative to the peer group.

The Fund's volatility, as measured by Standard Deviation, has been below that of the median manager over all periods of assessment, resulting in the Fund delivering strong risk-adjusted returns.



Relative performance

Excess returns

Statistic	1 Yr	3 Yrs	5 Yrs	Inception
Excess Return	3.99%	3.35%	2.37%	2.80%
Monthly Excess (All Mkts)	50.00%	55.56%	58.33%	61.02%
Monthly Excess (Up Mkts)	50.00%	60.61%	61.40%	62.61%
Monthly Excess (Down Mkts)	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%

Capture ratios (% p.a.)

Statistic	1 Yr	3 Yrs	5 Yrs	Inception
Downside Capture	0.00%	6027.20%	6027.20%	6027.20%
Upside Capture	214.79%	389.66%	303.62%	266.98%

Tracking error (% p.a.)

Instrument	1 Yr	3 Yrs	5 Yrs	Inception
Investment	4.13%	3.57%	3.65%	3.43%
Median	4.64%	4.21%	5.06%	4.12%

Information ratio

Instrument	1 Yr	3 Yrs	5 Yrs	Inception
Investment	0.97	0.94	0.65	0.82
Median	0.37	0.53	0.26	0.51

Beta statistics

Statistic	1 Yr	3 Yrs	5 Yrs	Inception
Beta	6.60	1.44	1.17	1.70
R-Squared	0.10	0.03	0.01	0.02
Correlation	0.32	0.18	0.12	0.15

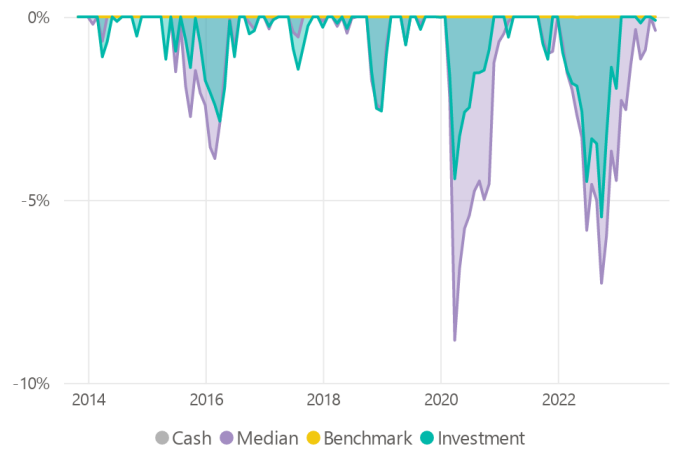
All commentary below are as at 31 August 2023.

Zenith seeks to identify funds which can outperform their index in greater than 50% of months in all market conditions as we believe this represents a persistence of manager skill.

Pleasingly, the Fund has achieved this outperformance ratio over the medium to long-term. Given the Real Return objective and assigned Cash benchmark, an assessment of excess performance in down markets is not applicable.

Drawdown analysis (since inception)

Drawdown analysis assesses the relative riskiness of a Fund versus the benchmark, in reference to capital preservation. The maximum Drawdown is recorded as the percentage decline in the value of a portfolio from peak to trough (before a new peak is achieved). All Drawdown analysis is calculated commencing from the inception date of the Fund in question, and Drawdown analysis for the Fund and benchmark(s) are calculated independently. That is, the largest drawdown for the Fund and benchmark(s) will not always refer to the same time period.



All commentary below are as at 31 August 2023.

The Fund's recent drawdown profile has been constrained when compared to that of the median manager within the peer group, which is supportive of MLC's focus on downside protection.



Fund commentary

Fund risks

Zenith has identified the following key risks of the Fund. Although Zenith believes the risks noted are all significant, we have listed them in order of importance. In addition, we have not intended to highlight all possible risks.

Key person risk: Zenith deems Chief Investment Officer, Dan Farmer to be integral to the operation and refinement of MLC's investment process. His departure would be deemed material and would warrant a reassessment of our rating.

Inflation risk: In an environment where inflation is high and remains elevated for a sustained period, there is a risk that MLC underperforms the Fund's CPI objective, due to the lack of portfolio exposures with underlying inflation linkages.

Derivatives risk: The Fund may be exposed to derivatives both directly and on a look-through basis, which can be employed for multiple purposes. There are numerous risks associated with the use of derivatives; for example, the value of the derivative may not move in line with the underlying asset, counterparties to the derivative may not be able to meet payment obligations (relevant when purchasing an OTC option) or a particular derivative may prove difficult or costly to trade.

Currency hedging risk: Investors should be aware that the underlying Global Equities exposure includes an unhedged allocation and therefore the Fund is exposed to currency fluctuations. However, the Fund has the capacity to invest in hedged exposures and MLC will position the Fund to reduce currency risk when valuations are less compelling.

Factor concentration risk: Zenith believes there is the potential for scenarios to be correlated, which may give rise to factor concentration within the portfolio.

Performance risk: The investment process employed by the CMR team is differentiated in construct and as such, this may lead to the Fund's performance outcomes varying meaningfully from that of peers.

Security/asset selection

Employing a multi-manager approach, security selection involves identifying high-quality managers that have the requisite skills to enhance the Fund's ability to meet its targeted objectives. This is a multi-stage process that involves both qualitative and quantitative analysis of prospective managers.

This process is driven by the CMR team who maintains ongoing dialogue with asset class specialists across the Portfolio Construction and Special Capabilities teams. An initial screening process takes into consideration the following factors:

- Attractiveness of the manager's strategy
- Stability of the team
- Performance track record
- Previous favourable experience or knowledge of a manager

Once a shortlist has been established, the team undertakes an extensive due diligence program on those managers. This is a multi-stage process that commences with manager meetings to ascertain whether their processes and philosophy are consistent with the Fund's investment objective. A determination will then be made on the relative merits of each manager and a judgement is formulated. Further in-depth research is conducted on the most attractive managers, with commercial requirements such as fees and capacity also considered.

Managers deemed suitable for the Fund will then be subject to further scrutiny by the Operational Due Diligence team, which is independent to the portfolio management team. At this point in the process, back-up managers will also be selected and monitored with a view of possibly replacing existing managers or an appointment at a later date.

Zenith notes that MLC internally manages a tailored Australian Equities portfolio that seeks to produce a return broadly consistent with that of the S&P/ASX 200 Accumulation Index. Adopting a factor-based approach, the portfolio focuses on quality stocks and incorporates scenario insights derived by the CMR team together with a Barra-based optimisation process.

Overall, Zenith is supportive of the level of specialist resourcing supporting the CMR team, particularly with respect to addressing non-investment risks such as operational and legal due diligence.

Responsible investment approach

MLC has an established Responsible Investment Policy (RIP) that is reviewed quarterly and ratified by the MLC Investment Committee (IC) semi-annually. The RIP was last updated in June 2021; it is publicly available for viewing and comprises three core elements, including:

- Incorporate Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) issues into investment analysis and decision-making processes
- Incorporate ESG issues into ownership policies and practices
- Seek appropriate disclosure on ESG issues by the entities in which MLC invests

MLC has yet to become a United Nations Principles for Responsible Investment (PRI) signatory. MLC is however a member of the Responsible Investment Association Australasia (RIAA) and the Investor Group on Climate Change (IGCC).

MLC created the new position Head of Responsible Investment, with James Tayler appointed to the role in June 2022. Tayler is responsible for guiding the stewardship and engagement strategy, and the broader integration of ESG factors into the investment process.



At a Fund level, MLC does not have any specific ESG exclusions. Rather, given the multi-manager structure, MLC's approach is limited to its manager selection and monitoring process, by ensuring that its underlying managers are considering ESG risks alongside all relevant investment risks. This extends to undertaking an annual review of managers' ESG policies, and evidencing the incorporation of ESG Guiding Principles into their decision making and proxy voting processes. Furthermore, ESG considerations are included within the team's scenario-based framework. Overall, Zenith is comfortable with MLC's ESG approach.

Portfolio construction

The portfolio construction process is supported by the MLC IC and overseen by the CMR team on a daily basis. The MLC IC performs a broad fiduciary role and is responsible for ratifying changes to asset allocation and manager selection. The MLC IC is represented by a range of key stakeholders from across the business including investments, risk, sector research and governance. Zenith is supportive of the role of the MLC IC, noting the additional 'sounding board' that is available to the CMR team.

On a day-to-day basis, the CMR team is responsible for managing the portfolio, with Farmer retaining the final veto on all portfolio decisions. Zenith notes that Farmer promotes a collaborative and consensus-based approach, which in our opinion, further strengthens the investment process.

As detailed earlier, the CMR team utilises a proprietary investment futures framework based on a scenario-based model that combines assumptions regarding macroeconomic drivers and the behavioural environment, in an attempt to capture real-world complexities. The starting point of each scenario is an assumption on the level of growth and inflation in the economy, which forms the basis for the team to forecast the action of policymakers. These forecasts form the foundation for estimating cash rates, bond yields, PEs, and ultimately asset class returns.

The Fund's asset allocation is derived through trial allocations and optimisation analysis. In addition, Barra-based scenario testing is conducted to provide an independent assessment of MLC's scenario-based analysis. Outcomes that exhibit conflicting results will be investigated and clearly understood, with a test for market liquidity and transaction costs also taken into consideration (across both normal and extreme markets). The CMR team also reference competitor offerings to gauge market relativity for broader allocation ranges.

The final asset mix is set following a detailed and formal review by the MLC IC, with ongoing monitoring of inputs such as valuations and economic data for the scenario-based model updated at least quarterly by McCaw and the team, with cross-checking done via the risk team's Barra analysis.

To assist with managing risk, the CMR team engages the insights of a dedicated Derivatives team which is led by Head of Derivatives, Clifford Bayne and has a remit to structure tailored solutions. The team seeks to identify derivative strategies that preserve capital in a highly negative scenario. A key feature of the process is the ability to incorporate holdings-based analysis, including asymmetric derivative pay-offs, through the risk management framework.

Should the CMR team choose to hire or terminate a manager, an implementation team is engaged to trade the portfolio to the new target. Manager allocations are also monitored closely by the Exposure Management and Trading (EM&T) team, led by David Djukanovic, who provide notifications should exposures deviate from targeted levels by +/- 2%. Where these levels are reached, rebalancing is triggered, with asset allocations restored halfway back to target weights (through the use of cash flows, derivatives and/or transacting physicals). This rebalancing methodology has been determined to be the most efficient, based on proprietary research. The CMR team has the authority to override rebalancing triggers should it believe this to be warranted. As such, the EM&T and CMR teams work closely together to ensure the most effective and efficient outcomes.

Zenith considers MLC's portfolio construction approach to be sound, effectively combining its scenario-based model with market-based insights. In our opinion, the qualitative views of the team are more instructive to the positioning of the Fund, as opposed to the output of the scenario-based model.

Risk management

Risk management is engrained in MLC's investment process and further augmented by a specialist risk function. It is implicit via the application of the scenario-based investment process, which generates forward-looking risk estimates, and are used to build the Fund's asset allocation and derivative overlay.

The CMR team employs option overlay strategies as a mechanism for providing downside protection against specific tail-risk events. Generally, these option positions will be self-funding and have a long volatility profile (i.e. profit during 'risk-off' events). Zenith is supportive of MLC's segregated approach to derivatives implementation, noting the level of specialisation required to efficiently execute these strategies.

Supporting MLC's risk management framework are BarraOne and FactSet, third party systems that we believe collectively enable the Investment and Portfolio Analysis teams to produce timely and detailed analytics.

BarraOne provides analysis of Equity-based strategies and has been employed to provide analysis and stress testing on Multi-Asset strategies. These systems are also complemented by MLC's long-standing data warehouse, DPAT. This allows for the utilisation of an extended data set relative to what would normally be available with a direct feed from a custodian.

MLC's Portfolio Enablement team comprises well-credentialed risk management professionals with the ability to synthesise the portfolio into a range of risk metrics and factor exposures. In Zenith's opinion, MLC's risk management approach is consistent with best practice.



Investment fees

	Fund	Sector Average
Total Fees and Costs (RG 97)	1.09 % p.a.	0.90 % p.a.
Management Fees and Costs	0.94 % p.a.	0.79 % p.a.
Transaction Costs	0.08 % p.a.	0.08 % p.a.
Performance fees as at 30 Jun 2022	0.07 %	0.04 %
Performance fees description	Performance fees may be charged by underlying investment managers	
Management Cost	0.85 % p.a.	0.76 % p.a.
Buy / Sell spread	0.10 % / 0.10 %	0.13 % / 0.12 %

All fees and costs are inclusive of GST unless indicated otherwise. The Performance Fee shown is the performance fee disclosed in the PDS. It is calculated by taking the average performance fees charged over the last five financial years (or less if the investment or performance fee mechanism has not been in place for five financial years).

The sector average (in the table above) is based on the average management cost of all flagship 'Multi-Asset - Real Return' funds surveyed by Zenith.

Zenith notes that the Fund's management cost structure is higher than the broader peer group. Also, there exists an underlying investment cost for alternative investments which can vary and includes the possibility of a performance fee levied at the underlying manager level.

(The fees mentioned above are reflective of the flagship version only, fees may differ when the product is accessed through an alternate investment vehicle such as a platform).

About the fund manager

Organisation

Insignia Limited (Insignia) is a diversified financial services business, listed on the Australian Securities Exchange (ASX: IFL) and comprises the following divisions: Financial Advice and Distribution; Platform Management and Administration; and Investment Management. Each division includes a range of separately-branded businesses that operate as autonomous entities.

Insignia's Multi-Manager capability includes the combined IOOF and MLC businesses, with the latter acquired from National Australia Bank in June 2021. Insignia encompasses a range of investment capabilities including Multi-Asset and single-sector managers, across multiple asset classes and strategies. Across the firm's multiple product sets, it manages \$A 85.9 billion as at June 2023.

The broader integration of the IOOF and MLC businesses is largely complete, with clarity in terms of product strategy, team structure, harmonising investment processes and governance approaches.

In our opinion, the process has been seamless with Insignia effectively augmenting the strengths of its own platform (i.e. asset allocation and manager selection), with the strongest

elements of the MLC offering, most notably in managing Private Equity (PE), Alternatives and downside protection strategies.

As at 31 July 2023, MLC managed approximately \$A 717 million at the strategy level and \$A 456 million at the Fund level.

Investment personnel

Name	Title	Industry Experience (yrs)	Tenure (yrs)	Location
Dan Farmer	Chief Investment Officer	25	12	Melbourne, Australia
Ben McCaw	Co-Head Choice Diversified Portfolios	20	15	Sydney, Australia
Grant Mizens	Co-Head Choice Diversified Portfolios	17	17	Sydney, Australia
Kerry Gill	Fund Strategist	21	18	Sydney, Australia
Stanley Yeo	Head of Strategy & Equities	22	13	Melbourne, Australia

The team is led by Dan Farmer, Chief Investment Officer (CIO) and comprises 48 professionals, split across Melbourne and Sydney. Farmer has been the CIO of the heritage Insignia/IOOF business since 2017 and was formally appointed CIO of the combined MLC and Insignia team in July 2022.

Farmer joined in 2010, originally to manage an Australian Equities portfolio. Prior to Insignia, he was a Portfolio Manager at Telstra Super, responsible for overseeing a portfolio of domestic Equities. Zenith considers Farmer to be a high quality CIO, with the ability to add value from active asset allocation and bottom-up, manager selection (via each Sector team).

Responsibility for the Fund rests with the Capital Markets Research (CMR) team which is led by Co-Heads Choice Diversified Portfolios, Ben McCaw and Grant Mizens, who assumed the role in early 2023, following the departure of Al Clark, previously Head of Diversified Portfolio Management (Choice).

McCaw is a long-standing member of the CMR team and contributor to MLC's investment futures framework, including the derivation of strategy and the tailoring of sector exposures. Zenith highlights McCaw's strong macroeconomic input and ability to link the output of the investment futures framework into portfolio themes and positions.

Similar to McCaw, Mizens is a long-tenured member of the CMR team, leading the research agenda and producing quantitative insights that further strengthen the investment process.

Remaining members of the CMR team are Fund Strategist Kerry Gill, Lead Portfolio Manager Anthony Golowenko, Senior Investment Analyst Alex Leung, and Investment Analyst Doreen Goh.

Zenith highlights the diversity of experience across the CMR team, which extends across sell side research, academia and traditional investment consulting.

The key investment decision-making body for MLC's Multi-Asset product suite is the MLC Investment Committee (IC). Chaired by Farmer, the MLC IC consists of five voting members, including



Simon Elimelakh (External Consultant), Bayne, Steven Gameraov (Head of Diversified Portfolio Management, Default), Gareth Abley (Head of Alternatives), McCaw and Mizens (who share one vote), and one non-voting member, Michele Streight, Head of Investment Governance. The MLC IC is responsible for ratifying changes to asset allocation and manager selection, ensuring all relevant stakeholders have input into the process.

MLC's remuneration policy is structured to align staff interests with that of investors. With an emphasis on longer-term performance, staff are assessed based on a combination of individual and team performance measures. The variable element is entirely performance based, taking into consideration the contribution over rolling one, three and five-year periods.

Furthermore, performance is measured against peers and an appropriate hurdle rate. The variable component is a major contributor to overall remuneration (but varies as a percentage from employee to employee), with a component subject to a medium-term vesting period. Zenith believes the remuneration policy is competitively structured.

Zenith highlights that over the past few years, the combined MLC and IOOF investment platform has evolved into one of the strongest in the peer group, particularly across asset allocation and managing niche asset classes such as Alternatives and Private Equity. In our opinion, the CMR team is of high quality, displaying a balance between academic thinking and broader market awareness.

About the sector

Sector characteristics

The Multi-Asset sector includes those funds that are permitted to invest across asset classes and investment strategies. Traditionally, asset class exposures have included Equities, Fixed Interest, Property, Infrastructure and Cash. However, in more recent times there has been an increased willingness by sector participants to incorporate Alternative strategies in an effort to enhance portfolio outcomes. With further innovation also sighted in the area of active asset allocation, this has led to a more continuous flow of products that seek to cater to the needs of a growing and more diverse range of investors.

Zenith believes that Multi-Asset funds can no longer simply be deemed the domain of those seeking a low cost and diversified investment solution. Rather, these strategies are also likely to appeal amongst more sophisticated investors who are once again being drawn to the concept of active asset allocation as a core driver of portfolio outcomes. Furthermore, it is feasible that the sector will continue to gain in popularity amidst an environment of increased regulation and statutory oversight.

Zenith categorises the Fund within the 'Multi-Asset – Real Return' peer group. Members of this category target an absolute return outcome and unlike their traditional Diversified counterparts are not subject to a conventional Strategic Asset Allocation (SAA) framework. Instead, portfolio positions are determined through a continuous assessment of investment markets, with portfolio managers provided with ample flexibility in setting asset class exposures.

Given the wide range of funds offered in this peer group and the variable nature in which they are managed, Zenith does not measure their performance against benchmarks that have an

implicit SAA setting. Instead, we measure their success against a range of absolute return benchmarks including Cash (as measured by the Bloomberg AusBond Bank Bill Index) and one of Zenith's tailored Consumer Price Index (CPI) benchmarks. Further detail on this Fund's assigned CPI+ benchmark is provided in the 'Absolute performance' section.

Sector risks

There exist a number of risks that are generally common amongst all Multi-Asset funds. These include:

Market risk: In periods of heightened risk aversion, it is feasible that asset class correlations merge. Should this occur, the diversification benefits brought through the construction of a portfolio comprising multiple lowly correlated asset classes may be lost, potentially exposing investors to a broader deterioration in market conditions.

Currency risk: Sector participants may be permitted to gain international exposures on an unhedged basis. The decision whether or not to hedge is often deemed active in nature and can expose investors to fluctuations in cross currency rates. This may be either to the benefit or cost of Fund volatility and performance.

Emerging Market risk: Many sector participants gain exposure to Emerging and Frontier Markets which bring with them additional risks. These may include reduced liquidity, a more opaque pricing mechanism, increased sovereign risk and political tensions.

Alternatives risk: A growing number of Funds have investment mandates that permit a meaningful exposure to Alternative assets and strategies. Investors should be aware that the use of Alternatives can bring with them additional risks.

Illiquidity risk: While most sector participants will seek to retain high levels of liquidity, it is feasible that a Fund may retain exposures in assets that are deemed illiquid or subject to irregular pricing policies. It may be difficult for an investment manager to subsequently liquidate such portfolio positions without incurring meaningful transaction or other performance related costs.

Administration and operations

Responsible Entity	MLC Investments Limited
--------------------	-------------------------

Zenith rating

Report certification

Date of issue: 26 Sep 2023

Role	Analyst	Title
Analyst	Darryl Ding	Investment Analyst
Sector Lead	Andrew Yap	Head of Multi Asset & Austrn. Fixed Income
Authoriser	Bronwen Moncrieff	Head of Research



Association & relationship

ASIC Regulatory Guide RG79.164 requires Research Houses to disclose certain associations or relationships that they may have with a product issuer. As at the date this report was issued, an associated entity of the Investment Manager relevant to this report is; or has been, a subscriber to Zenith's investment research services within the past 12 months. Conflict management arrangements are in place where Zenith provides research services to financial advisory businesses who provide financial planning services to investors and are also associated entities of product issuers. This is in accordance with Zenith's Conflict of Interests Policy.

As at the date this report was issued, a related party of MLC Asset Management which provides financial planning services is, or has been, a subscriber to Zenith's research services within the last 12 months.

Rating history

As At	Rating
26 Sep 2023	Recommended
11 Apr 2023	Recommended
20 Sep 2022	Recommended
17 Jun 2022	Recommended
29 Sep 2021	Recommended
28 Sep 2020	Recommended
02 Dec 2019	Recommended
19 Sep 2019	Recommended
09 Oct 2018	Recommended

Last 5 years only displayed. Longer histories available on request.

In March 2021, Zenith implemented a new ratings methodology for products classified as Traditional Index. Any rating issued from this date forward for Traditional Index products only reflect this change in methodology, with the relevant Traditional Index ratings being Index Approved, Index Recommended and Index Highly Recommended. Ratings issued for Traditional Index products prior to March 2021 are retained for historical purposes in line with our regulatory requirements and were issued in line with Zenith's Fund Research Methodology. Further information in relation to Zenith's Traditional Index Research Methodology and Traditional Index Ratings can be found on the Zenith website.



Disclaimer and disclosure

Zenith Investment Partners (ABN 27 103 132 672) is the holder of Australian Financial Services Licence 226872 and is authorised to provide general financial product advice. This Product Assessment Report (report) has been prepared by Zenith exclusively for Zenith clients and should not be relied on by any other person. Any advice or rating contained in this report is limited to General Advice for Wholesale clients only, based solely on the assessment of the investment merits of the financial product. This report is current as at the date of issue until it is updated, replaced or withdrawn and is subject to change at any time without notice in line with Zenith's regulatory guidelines. Zenith clients are advised to check the currency of reports and ratings via Zenith's website for updates and should also verify information in relation to the fund with the relevant Fund Manager. Any advice contained in this report has been prepared without taking into account the objectives, financial situation or needs of any specific person who may read it, including target markets of financial products, where applicable. It is not a specific recommendation to purchase, sell or hold the relevant product(s). Investors should seek their own independent financial or tax advice, obtain a copy of, and consider any relevant PDS or offer document and consider the appropriateness of this advice in light of their own objectives prior to making any investment decision. Zenith charges an upfront flat fee to the Product Issuer, Fund Manager or other related party to produce research on funds that conform to Zenith's Research Methodology. Zenith's fee and Analyst remuneration are not linked to the rating outcome in any way. Views expressed in Zenith reports accurately reflect the personal, professional, reasonable opinion of the Analyst who has prepared the report. Zenith may also receive a fee for other non-research related services such as subscription fees for Zenith's research services and/or for the provision of investment consultancy services. Conflicts management arrangements are in place where Zenith provides research services to financial advisory businesses who provide financial planning services to investors and are also associated entities of the product issuers, with any such conflicts of interest disclosed within reports as appropriate. Full details regarding such arrangements are outlined in [Zenith's Conflicts of Interest Policy](#).

Zenith's research process seeks to identify investment managers considered to be the 'best of breed' through a comprehensive, multi-dimensional selection process. Zenith utilises both quantitative and qualitative factors in its ratings models. Models maximise commonality across different asset classes while retaining flexibility for specialist asset classes and strategies. The selection process is rigorous in both its qualitative and quantitative analysis and each component is equally weighted. Zenith does not manage any proprietary assets and as such Zenith is able to choose investment managers with absolute independence and objectivity. More detailed information regarding Zenith's fund research methodology and Zenith's traditional index research methodology, coverage and ratings is available on Zenith's website at [Fund Research Methodology](#) and [Traditional Index Research Methodology](#).

This report is subject to copyright and may not be reproduced, modified or distributed without the consent of the copyright owner. The information contained in this report has been prepared in good faith and is believed to be reliable at the time it was prepared, however, no representation, warranty or undertaking is given or made in relation to the accuracy or completeness of the information presented in this report. Except for any liability which cannot be excluded, Zenith does not accept any liability, whether direct or indirect arising from the use of information contained in this report. Past performance is not an indication of future performance.

Third Party data may be sourced from Financial Express, Refinitiv, Bloomberg and/or MSCI. Third party data and content used in this document has not been independently verified by Zenith and Zenith provides no warranty, representation or responsibility to update this document. Third Party data is the intellectual property of that third party and must not be reproduced, stored or transmitted without their consent.

Full details regarding the methodology, ratings definitions and regulatory compliance are available at [Fund Research Regulatory Guidelines](#).

Zenith is not required to be licensed under New Zealand law or be registered on the FSPR. Zenith has not engaged or authorised any party to provide financial advice on its behalf to New Zealand investors.

Zenith ratings and research are prepared by Zenith and are not connected in any way to research and ratings prepared by any of our related entities.

This report refers to the Australian unit trust for the fund, and the fund and benchmark returns are all in AUD.

© 2023 Zenith Investment Partners. All rights reserved.

Zenith has charged MLC Asset Management a fee to produce this report.