

Monthly Insights Brief

March 2026

On-the-pulse analysis delivered monthly, providing insight into the Christchurch & Canterbury economies.





Key economic highlights from the past month

1. Regional economic momentum is getting stronger, underpinned by higher GDP growth in Christchurch and Canterbury than nationally.
2. Record international visitor arrivals through Christchurch Airport are supporting higher occupancy rates and growth in international visitor in-store card spending.
3. January marked seven months of consecutive year-on-year job growth in Canterbury, with most other regions yet to grow.
4. Weaker in-store card spending in discretionary categories reflects persisting cost-of-living pressures.
5. Easing dairy prices drove a slight decrease in export values through Canterbury ports despite 10% growth in weight.
6. Overall, the outlook remains cautiously optimistic, although rising global uncertainty and geopolitical tensions add further volatility risk.



The recovery has continued, and momentum appears to be building

Provisional GDP figures from Infometrics indicate that the local economic recovery strengthened through 2025. Christchurch recorded annual average GDP growth of 1.0% in the year to December 2025, while Canterbury grew by 1.2%. This marked the second consecutive quarter of annual average growth for Christchurch and Canterbury. Both Christchurch and Canterbury outperformed the national economy, which expanded by 0.4% over the year to December 2025.

Momentum also increased over the course of the year. Both Christchurch and Canterbury recorded growth in three of the past four quarters compared with the corresponding quarters in 2024. In the December 2025 quarter, annual GDP growth reached its fastest pace in more than two years, rising 2.3% in Christchurch and 2.4% in Canterbury. Although annual average growth remained modest as it smooths volatility, the stronger quarterly results indicate that momentum was building toward the end of 2025.

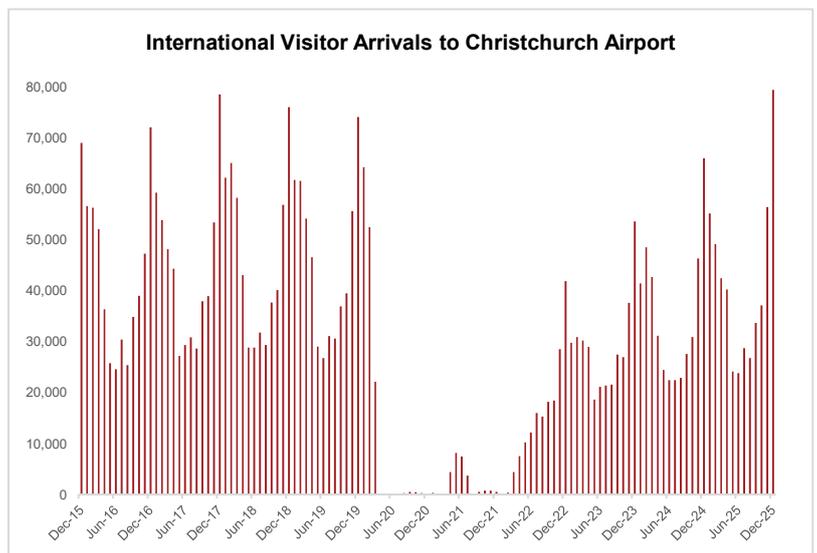
For further detail on Christchurch and Canterbury's previous quarterly economic performance, refer to [ChristchurchNZ's Quarterly Economic Dashboard and Report](#).

International tourism continues to shine

International tourism remained a strong performer over the past year. Statistics NZ data show that international visitor arrivals at Christchurch Airport were 21% higher in the three months to December 2025 than in the same period in 2024. This increase represented nearly 30,000 additional visitors. Nationally, arrivals grew by 8% over the same timeframe.

Momentum in international tourism also strengthened. December 2025 recorded the highest monthly number of international arrivals at Christchurch Airport since records began, and arrivals were 7% above pre-Covid-19 levels. To respond to this growing demand, Christchurch Airport announced a 15% increase in international capacity over the summer season from November 2025 to March 2026.

Australians remain the largest source of international visitors to Christchurch Airport, making up 45% of arrivals in the three months to December 2025 according to Statistics NZ. China was the next largest market at 9.6%, followed by the United Kingdom at 6.6%.



Data Source: Statistics NZ

All major markets recorded growth over the three months to December 2025. The strongest increase came from China, with arrivals up 87% compared with the same period a year earlier. Arrivals from Japan rose 49%, and arrivals from Australia increased 18%.



Accommodation figures reflected this strength. ADP data show Christchurch recorded an average commercial accommodation occupancy rate of 76% in the three months to January 2026. This rate exceeded the national average of 63% for the same period and was above Christchurch's 72% average recorded during the same months a year earlier.

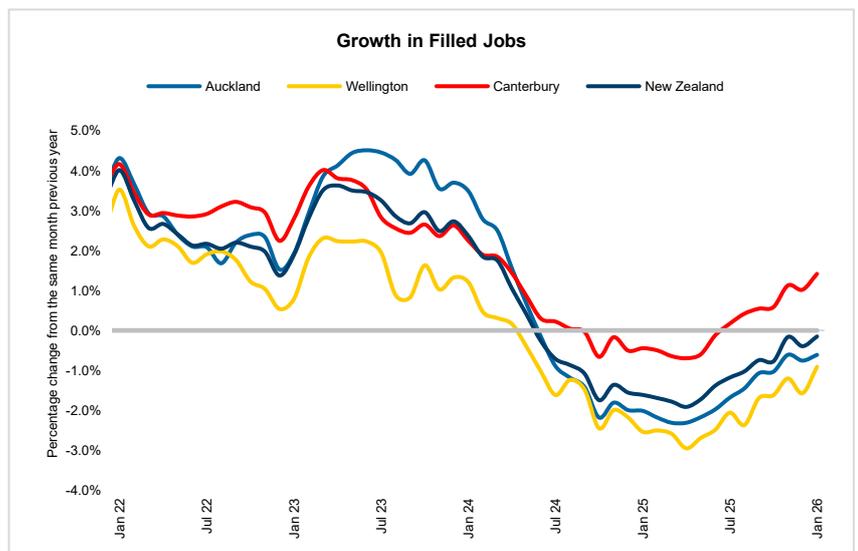
Higher international visitor numbers translated into higher spending. Marketview data show that international visitor in-store card spending rose 6% in the three months to January 2026 compared to the same period last year, adding an additional \$7.6 million to the local economy.

And the labour market across the wider Canterbury region appears to be strengthening

Recent employment indicators point to continued momentum in the local labour market.

Statistics NZ data show that growth in unadjusted filled jobs in Canterbury has risen steadily since mid-2025. January 2026 marked the seventh consecutive month of year-on-year growth in Canterbury.

Although national figures and results for the two other major regions have started to improve, they have not yet returned to year-on-year growth.



Data Source: Statistics NZ

In January 2026, unadjusted filled jobs in Canterbury increased 1.4%, the second strongest rate in the country behind the West Coast. In contrast, filled jobs were 0.6% lower than they were a year earlier in Auckland, 0.9% lower in Wellington, and 0.2% lower nationally.

With online job ads indicating this momentum may continue

Hiring activity continues to rise. MBIE data show that online jobs advertisements in Canterbury were 20% higher in January 2026 than a year earlier. This increase marked the eighth consecutive month of year-on-year growth and was the first time since 2022 that Canterbury has seen such a sustained period of rising online job advertisements.

But Christchurch is starting to fall behind in-store card spending

Marketview data show that total in-store card spending in Christchurch fell 2.0% in the three months to January 2026 compared with the same period a year earlier. In comparison, in-store card spending declined 1.4% across Canterbury and 1.2% nationally.



In the latest cycle, annual growth in in-store card spending peaked in the three months to August 2025 for both Christchurch and Canterbury, rising 1.2% compared with the same period a year earlier. This was stronger than the national peak of 0.5% in the three months to September 2025. Since those peaks, growth has been trending downward in all three markets. Christchurch's decline has been the sharpest, and the 2.0% drop in the three months to January 2026 compared with the same period a year earlier was its weakest result since 2021. Canterbury's decline was less pronounced, and the gap between Christchurch and Canterbury appears to be trending wider. Growth in both areas has now slipped below the national average.



Data Source: Marketview

In Christchurch, the largest decline in in-store card spending in the three months to January 2026 occurred in the Other Consumer category, down 10.8%, followed by Home, Hardware & Electrical (-9.0%) and Cafes, Restaurants, Bars & Takeaways (-4.2%). The only categories to record increases were Groceries & Liquor (+2.0%) and Accommodation (+1.1%). With most declines concentrated in discretionary spending categories, households appear to be spending cautiously as cost-of-living pressures continue.

Other economic indicators were mostly positive, but some sectors appear to be losing momentum

The ANZ Business Outlook survey shows that business confidence in Canterbury eased again in February 2026. Business confidence in the region has been moderating since November 2025, when Canterbury recorded its highest level in decades, with a net 77% of Canterbury businesses expecting better business conditions ahead. Although Canterbury's business confidence fell to 62% in February 2026, it remains strong and is well above the region's 10-year average of a net -10%. Canterbury also moved back above the national average, after the national result declined 5 percentage points in February 2026 to 59%.

Construction activity continued to expand. Statistics NZ data show that the total number of building consents (residential and commercial) issued in Christchurch increased 17% in the three months to January 2026 compared with the same period a year earlier. Across Canterbury, consent numbers increased 26%, while nationally, consents rose 18%.

Canterbury's manufacturing sector remained in expansion. Canterbury recorded a BNZ – BusinessNZ Performance of Manufacturing Index (PMI) unadjusted reading of 50.4 in January 2026. A PMI reading above 50 indicates that the sector is expanding, while a reading below 50 signals contraction. Although January's result was lower than December's reading of 55.3, it still represented the fifth consecutive month of expansion.



In contrast, services activity weakened. The Canterbury / Westland BNZ – BusinessNZ Performance of Services Index (PSI) recorded an unadjusted score of 48.7 in January 2026. This placed the sector in slight contraction for the second month in a row, following five earlier months of expansion. Despite this softening, the region remained in mild expansion over the past three months, with an average PSI of 50.9, slightly below the national quarterly unadjusted average of 51.1.

Statistics NZ data show that the value of goods exported through Canterbury ports fell 0.5% in the three months to January 2026 compared with the same period a year earlier, despite a 10% increase in the gross weight of goods exported. This decline in export value aligns with easing dairy prices, with ANZ data indicating that dairy prices were 11% lower over the same three-month period than they were a year earlier. The quarterly result also masked a sharper monthly fall, with export values down 13% in January 2026 compared with January 2025. January 2026 marked the second consecutive month of year-on-year declines in the value of goods exported from Canterbury ports.

The housing market delivered mixed results. REINZ data show that property sales in Christchurch were 10.0% lower in January 2026 than a year earlier, compared with a national decline of 5.4%. Christchurch's median house price, however, rose 7.5% over the year, compared with a 0.4% national increase.

Global uncertainty is elevated and prolonged geopolitical tensions pose significant risks

Rising geopolitical tensions and the possibility of further tariff changes continue to create risks for global trade, supply chains, oil prices, and business confidence. These pressures may also have ripple effects across the wider economy, influencing consumer demand, inflation, inflation expectations, and the Reserve Bank's policy stance. Although the full effects may take time to become clear, the risks are significant. The longer the current geopolitical situation persists, the greater the likely impact on the New Zealand economy. Even so, resilience built through past global shocks may help cushion some of these pressures.

A sustained recovery is not assured, but on balance, the overall picture appears encouraging

Data released over the past month present a mixed but generally encouraging view of economic conditions. Several indicators suggest that momentum is improving across the region. GDP figures for the year to December 2025 show that both Christchurch and Canterbury recorded growth, with activity strengthening in later quarters. International visitor arrivals through Christchurch Airport reached record levels in December, and international visitor in-store card spending continued to rise. The wider Canterbury labour market is also showing clear signs of recovery.

At the same time, some areas of the economy appear fragile. Business confidence, although still relatively strong, has eased from its recent highs. In addition, both the manufacturing and services sectors softened over the past month, although three-month averages remained in expansion.



Other sectors are facing more pronounced challenges. The recovery is emerging from a low base, and total in-store card spending in Christchurch has fallen to its weakest level in years. Cautious consumer behaviour, softer services activity, and declining export values all point toward slowing momentum. Rising global uncertainty and geopolitical tensions add further volatility risk.

Overall, the balance of indicators appears to be positive. We maintain a cautiously optimistic outlook that the local economy is likely to continue to build momentum toward a more sustained recovery in 2026.

For queries related to ChristchurchNZ's economic insights, please contact:
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This report was based on data available as of 9 March 2026. Any subsequent revisions or updates to the underlying data will not be reflected in this report.