

Strategic Report

Principal risks and uncertainties

The Directors have carried out a robust assessment of the principal risks facing the Group, including those that would threaten its business model, future performance, solvency, or liquidity. The Group maintains a low appetite to risk, in line with our strategic objectives of providing a low volatility, high distribution business.

The section below details the principal risks and uncertainties that are considered to have the most material impact on the Group's strategy and objectives. These key risks are monitored on an ongoing basis by the Executive Directors and considered fully by the Board in its annual risk review.

Risk and impact	Mitigation	Change during the year and outlook
<p>Self storage market risk</p> <p>There is a risk to the business that the self storage market does not grow in line with our projections, and that economic growth in the UK is below expectations, which could result in falling demand and a loss of income.</p>	<p>Self storage is a relatively immature market in the UK compared to other self storage markets such as the United States and Australia, and we believe has further opportunity for growth. Awareness of self storage and how it can be used by domestic and business customers is relatively low throughout the UK, although higher in London. The rate of growth of branded self storage on main roads in good locations has historically been limited by the difficulty of acquiring sites at affordable prices and obtaining planning consent. New store openings in London and other large metropolitan cities within the sector have slowed significantly over the past few years.</p> <p>Our performance during the Covid pandemic has been resilient. We believe that the resilience of our performance is due to a combination of factors including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – a prime portfolio of freehold properties; – a focus on London and the South East and other large metropolitan cities, where the drivers in the self storage market are at their strongest and the barriers to competition are at their highest; – the strength of operational and sales management; – continuing innovation to deliver the highest levels of customer service; – delivering on our strong ESG commitments; – the UK's leading self storage brand, with high and growing public awareness and online strength; and – strong cash flow generation and high operating margins, from a secure capital structure. <p>We have a large current storage customer base of approximately 62,000 spread across the portfolio of stores and hundreds of thousands more who have used Big Yellow over the years. In any month, customers move in and out at the margin resulting in changes in occupancy. This is a seasonal business and typically we see growth over the spring and the summer months, with the seasonally weaker period being the winter months.</p>	<p>The Covid-19 pandemic caused a significant contraction in economic growth for the UK for 2020.</p> <p>The roll-out of vaccines has provided some hope of a return to more normal economic conditions, however risks around new variants remain. Governments around the world have taken on significant additional debt to fund the policy responses to the pandemic, and this may result in higher taxation rates in the future.</p> <p>The market risk has reduced since the same time last year given the performance of the business over the past 12 months and the vaccine roll-out.</p> <p>The uncertainty that we faced last year associated with the UK's exit from the EU and whether a trade deal would be agreed, has reduced. The uncertainty in the run up to Brexit had impacted consumer behaviour, which caused lower occupancy growth for the Group in the year ended March 2021.</p>

Risk and impact	Mitigation	Change during the year and outlook
<p>Property risk</p> <p>There is a risk that we will be unable to acquire new development sites which meet management's criteria. This would impact on our ability to grow the overall store platform.</p> <p>Changing climate and resulting likely changes to planning restrictions will narrow choice of available sites further.</p> <p>The Group is also subject to the risk of failing to obtain planning consents on its development sites, and the risk of a rising cost of development.</p> <p>Planning approval increasingly dependent on Social or Environmental enhanced features (e.g. social enterprise at Battersea, BREEAM standards, local planners demands for green spaces) – adding cost and complexity.</p>	<p>Our management has significant experience in the property industry generated over many years and in particular acquiring property on main roads in high profile locations and obtaining planning consents. We do take planning risk where necessary, although the availability of land, and competition for it makes acquiring new sites challenging.</p> <p>Our in-house development team and our professional advisers have significant experience in obtaining planning consents for self storage centres.</p> <p>We manage the construction of our properties very tightly. The building of each site is handled through a design and build contract, with the fit-out project managed in-house using an established professional team of external advisers and sub-contractors who have worked with us for many years to our Big Yellow specification. We carried out an external benchmarking of our construction costs and tendering programme three years ago, which had satisfactory results.</p>	<p>The Group has acquired seven sites over the past couple of years, taking its total pipeline to 14 sites which, when opened, would expand the Group's current MLA by 20%.</p> <p>The planning process remains difficult and to achieve a planning consent can take anything from eighteen months to three years. Local planning policy is favouring residential development over other uses, and we don't expect this to change given the shortage of housing in the UK.</p> <p>The pandemic meant in-person planning committee meetings were suspended, which initially caused a delay in the Group receiving planning consents. Over recent months, the planning process has returned to more normal timescales.</p> <p>We currently have planning consent on 8 of the 14 development sites.</p>
<p>Valuation risk</p> <p>The valuation of the Group's investment properties may fall due to external pressures or the impact of performance.</p> <p>Lack of transactional evidence in the self storage sector leads to more subjective valuations.</p>	<p>The valuations are carried out by independent, qualified external valuers who have significant experience in the UK self storage industry.</p> <p>The portfolio is diverse with approximately 62,000 customers currently using our stores for a wide variety of reasons.</p> <p>There is significant headroom on our loan to value banking covenants.</p>	<p>The revaluation surplus on the Group's open store investment properties was £189.1 million in the year (an uplift of 13%), principally due to an improvement in underlying cash flows used in the valuations, coupled with cap rate improvement.</p> <p>There have been portfolio transactions since the onset of the pandemic, and there is institutional money looking to invest in self storage. At the prior year end, the valuation risk was higher in the early stages of the pandemic, and the valuers drew attention in their prior year report to material valuation uncertainty. There is no such clause in this year's valuations.</p>
<p>Treasury risk</p> <p>The Group may face increased costs from adverse interest rate movements.</p>	<p>Our financing policy is to fund our current needs through a mix of debt, equity and cash flow to allow us to selectively build out the remaining development pipeline and achieve our strategic growth objectives, which we believe improve returns for shareholders. We have made it clear that we believe optimal leverage for a business such as ours should be LTV in the range 20% to 30% and this informs our management of treasury risk.</p> <p>We aim to ensure that there are sufficient medium-term facilities in place to finance our committed development programme, secured against the freehold portfolio, with debt serviced by our strong operational cash flows.</p> <p>We have a fixed rate loan in place from Aviva Commercial Finance Limited, with seven years remaining. This loan was increased by £35 million in March 2020. Our on-site solar generation plans helped us in securing a lower margin on this tranche of debt.</p>	<p>The Bank of England base rate was reduced to 10bps in March 2020, and the long-term forecast is for rates to remain at low levels for the foreseeable future. A significant proportion of the Group's debt is floating, and hence the Group has benefited from this reduction in base rate.</p> <p>Debt providers currently remain supportive to companies with a strong capital structure, as evidenced by the Group completing on the loan from Aviva after the pandemic started. That said, the current environment has put pressure on banks' margins, with a potential future increase in cost to the Group.</p>

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Principal risks and uncertainties (continued)

Risk and impact	Mitigation	Change during the year and outlook
<p>Treasury risk (continued)</p>	<p>The Group has a £70 million loan from M&G Investments, which is 50% fixed and 50% floating, repayable in 2023. For our bank debt, we borrow at floating rates of interest and use swaps to hedge our interest rate exposure. Our policy is to have at least 40% of our total borrowings fixed, with the balance floating. At 31 March 2021 53% of the Group's total borrowings were fixed or subject to interest rate derivatives. The Group reviews its current and forecast projections of cash flow, borrowing and interest cover as part of its monthly management accounts. In addition, an analysis of the impact of significant transactions is carried out regularly, as well as a sensitivity analysis assuming movements in interest rates and store occupancy on gearing and interest cover. This sensitivity testing underpins the viability statement below.</p> <p>The Group regularly monitors its counterparty risk. The Group monitors compliance with its banking covenants closely. During the year it complied with all its covenants and is forecast to do so for the foreseeable future.</p>	<p>The Group's interest cover ratio for the year ended 31 March 2021 was 9.9 times, comfortably ahead of our internal target of 5 times and ahead of our banking covenants, as disclosed in note 19.</p>
<p>Tax and regulatory risk</p> <p>The Group is exposed to changes in the tax regime affecting the cost of corporation tax, property rates, VAT, Stamp Duty and Stamp Duty Land Tax ("SDLT"), for example the imposition of VAT on self storage from 1 October 2012.</p> <p>The Group is exposed to potential tax penalties or loss of its REIT status by failing to comply with the REIT legislation.</p>	<p>We regularly monitor proposed and actual changes in legislation with the help of our professional advisers, through direct liaison with HMRC, and through trade bodies to understand and, if possible, mitigate or benefit from their impact.</p> <p>HMRC have designated the Group as having a low-risk tax status, and we hold regular meetings with them. We carry out detailed planning ahead of any future regulatory and tax changes using our expert advisers.</p> <p>The Group has internal monitoring procedures in place to ensure that the appropriate REIT rules and legislation are complied with. To date all REIT regulations have been complied with, including projected tests.</p>	<p>The Group experienced an increase in cost in 2017 following the Government's review of business rates, and the next rating review due in 2023 may bring additional cost to the Group, given the rise in industrial rents over the past few years.</p> <p>The corporation tax rate was increased in the March 2021 budget, and there is a risk that tax rates will rise further in the medium-term to fund the increased government deficits that have arisen from the policy response to the pandemic.</p>
<p>Human resources risk</p> <p>Our people are key to our success and as such we are exposed to a risk of high staff turnover, and a risk of the loss of key personnel.</p>	<p>We have developed a professional, lively, and enjoyable working environment and believe our success stems from attracting and retaining the right people. We encourage all our staff to build on their skills through appropriate training and regular performance reviews. We believe in an accessible and open culture and everyone at all levels is encouraged to review and challenge accepted norms, to contribute to the performance of the Group.</p>	<p>We were ranked in the Sunday Times 100 Best Companies to Work For survey in February 2019 (the last time the Group participated in the survey), showing strong levels of engagement from our employees.</p> <p>The Group carried out an engagement survey of its employees during the prior year, which showed very pleasing results of the level of engagement of our teams.</p> <p>We have consulted regularly with our employees during the year through a series of pulse surveys to listen to their views. Our staff turnover was at its lowest level for a number of years in 2021.</p>

Risk and impact	Mitigation	Change during the year and outlook
<p>Brand and reputation risk</p> <p>The Group is exposed to the risk of a single serious incident materially affecting our customers, people, financial performance and hence our brand and reputation, including the risk of a data breach.</p>	<p>We have always aimed to run this business in a professional way, which has involved strict adherence with all regulations that affect our business, such as health and safety legislation, building regulations in relation to the construction of our buildings, anti-slavery, anti-bribery and data regulations.</p> <p>We also invest in cyber security (discussed below), and make an ongoing investment in staff training, facilities management, and the maintenance of our stores.</p> <p>To ensure consistency of service and to understand the needs of our customers, we send surveys to every customer who moves in and moves out of the business. The results of the surveys and mystery shops are reviewed to continuously improve and deliver consistent performance throughout the business.</p> <p>We maintain regular communication with our key stakeholders, customers, employees, shareholders, and debt providers.</p>	<p>During 2018, we developed a crisis response plan with external consultants to ensure the Group is well placed to deal with a major incident more effectively.</p> <p>During the prior year, we carried out an exercise to stress-test the crisis response plan with a scenario based on a disaster at one of the Group's stores.</p> <p>We have explained in the Operational and Marketing Review how we have reacted operationally to the Covid-19 pandemic and ensured our staff and customers remain safe.</p>
<p>Security risk</p> <p>The Group is exposed to the risk of the damage or loss of a store due to vandalism, fire, or natural incidents such as flooding. This may also cause reputational damage.</p>	<p>The safety and security of our customers, their belongings, stores, and our staff remains a key priority. To achieve this we invest in state-of-the-art access control systems, individual room alarms, digital CCTV systems, intruder and fire alarm systems and the remote monitoring of all our stores outside of our trading hours. We are the only major operator in the UK self storage industry that has every room in every store individually alarmed.</p> <p>We have implemented customer security procedures in line with advice from the Police and continue to work with the regulatory authorities on issues of security, reviewing our operational procedures regularly. The importance of security and the need for vigilance is communicated to all store staff and reinforced through training and routine operational procedures.</p>	<p>We have continued to run courses for all our staff to enhance the awareness and effectiveness of our procedures in relation to security.</p> <p>We regularly review and implement improvements to our security processes and procedures.</p>
<p>Cyber risk</p> <p>High profile cyber-attacks and data breaches are a regular staple in today's news. The results of any breach may result in reputational damage, fines, or customer compensation, causing a loss of market share and income.</p>	<p>The Group receives specialist advice and consultancy in respect of cyber security, and we have dedicated in-house monitoring and regular review of our security systems, we also limit the retention of customer data to the minimum requirement.</p> <p>Policies and procedures are under regular review and benchmarked against industry best practice by our consultants. These policies also include defend, detect and response policies.</p>	<p>We don't consider the risk to have increased more for the Group than any other business; however, we consider that the threats in the entire digital landscape do continue to increase and evolve. As such we have continued to invest in cyber security upgrading or replacing components as required.</p>
<p>Climate change related risk</p> <p>The Group is exposed to climate-change related transition and physical risks. Physical risks may affect the Group's stores and may result in higher maintenance and repair costs. Failing to transition to a low carbon economy may cause an increase in taxation, decrease in access to loan facilities and reputational damage.</p>	<p>The good working order of our stores is of critical importance to our business model.</p> <p>We visually inspect each of our stores at least once per annum and planned and unplanned work is discussed immediately.</p> <p>Maintenance requirements are discussed at budget reviews; proposals are made to raise climate change related issues to the Board, who may request more holistic adaptation work to be carried out.</p> <p>The key mitigation strategy to address transitional risks is the delivery of the newly launched Net Renewable Energy Positive Strategy and the Net Zero Scope 1 and Scope 2 Emissions Strategy. Our investment to decarbonise our business over the next nine years is expected to mitigate fully against taxation (carbon tax) risk and reputational risks (both investors and customers).</p>	<p>Our newly established Sustainability Committee, chaired by a Non-Executive Director, has delivered an ambitious strategic plan to 2030.</p> <p>We appreciate that both physical and transition risks are expected to materialise to lesser or greater extents over the coming years and costs may go up gradually, hidden within what may be perceived as 'natural variations'. Our focus and strong governance established during the year will allow us to continue to mitigate the effects.</p>

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Principal risks and uncertainties (continued)

Internal audit

The Group employs a Head of Store Compliance responsible for reviewing store operational and financial controls. He reports to the Chief Financial Officer, and also meets with the Audit Committee at least once a year. This role is supported by three other team members, enabling additional work and support to be carried out across the Group's store portfolio. The Store Compliance team will visit each operational store twice per year to carry out a detailed store audit. These audits are unannounced, and the Store Compliance team carry out detailed tests on financial management, administrative standards, and operational standards within the stores. Part of the store staff's bonus is based on the scores they achieve in these audits. The results of each audit are reviewed by the Chief Financial Officer, the Financial Controller, and the Head of Store Operations. This is the equivalent of an internal audit function for the Group's store operations.

For the key business cycles conducted at the Group's head office, external consultants are used to review the Group's controls on a rotational basis. The consultants produce a report with recommendations which is discussed with management and reviewed by the Audit Committee. The cycles covered by this activity include construction expenditure, treasury, taxation, and facilities management.

With the combination of the store internal audit process and the external assessment of the key business cycles, the Audit Committee considers that this provides a robust internal audit assessment for the Group.

Going concern

A review of the Group's business activities, together with the factors likely to affect its future development, performance and position are set out in the Strategic Report. The financial position of the Group, its cash flows, liquidity position and borrowing facilities are shown in the balance sheet, cash flow statement and accompanying notes to the financial statements. Further information concerning the Group's objectives, policies and processes for managing its capital; its financial risk management objectives; details of its financial instruments and hedging activities; and its exposures to credit risk and liquidity risk can be found in this Report and in the notes to the financial statements.

At 31 March 2021 the Group had available liquidity of approximately £100 million, from a combination of cash and undrawn bank debt facilities. The Group is cash generative and for the year ended 31 March 2021, had operational cash flow of £76.7 million, with capital commitments at the balance sheet date of £17.3 million.

The Directors have prepared cash flow forecasts for a period of 18 months from the date of approval of these financial statements, taking into account the Group's operating plan and budget for the year ending 31 March 2022 and projections contained in the longer-term business plan which cover the period to March 2025. After reviewing these projected cash flows together with the Group's and Company's cash balances, borrowing facilities and covenant requirements, and potential property valuation movements over that period, the Directors believe that, taking account of severe but plausible downsides, the Group and Company will have sufficient funds to meet their liabilities as they fall due for that period.

In making their assessment, the Directors have carefully considered the outlook for the Group's trading performance and cash flows as a result of the economic shock brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic, taking into account the trading performance of the Group from the onset of the pandemic to the date of these financial statements. The Directors have also taken into account the performance of the business during the Global Financial Crisis. The Directors modelled a number of different scenarios, including material reductions in the Group's occupancy rates and property valuations, and assessed the impact of these scenarios against the Group's liquidity and the Group's banking covenants. The scenarios considered did not lead to breaching any of the banking covenants, and the Group retained sufficient liquidity to meet its financial obligations as they fall due.

Consequently, the Directors continue to adopt the going concern basis in preparing the financial statements.

Viability statement

The Directors have assessed the Group's viability over a four-year period to March 2025. This period is selected based on the Group's long-term strategic plan to give greater certainty over the forecasting assumptions used. As in the assessment of going concern, the Directors have modelled a number of different scenarios on the Group's future prospects.

In making their assessment, the Directors took account of the Group's current financial position, including committed capital expenditure. The Directors carried out a robust assessment of the principal risks and uncertainties facing the business, their potential financial impact on the Group's cash flows, REIT compliance and financial covenants and the likely effectiveness of the mitigating options detailed. The Directors have assumed that funding for the business in the form of equity, bank and insurance company debt will be available in all reasonably plausible market conditions. Whilst the eventual impact of Covid-19 on the Group is uncertain, and may not be known for some time, the Group has a highly cash generative business, good liquidity and has proved resilient in its trading since the onset of the pandemic.

Based on this assessment the Directors have a reasonable expectation that the Company and the Group will be able to continue operating and meeting all their liabilities as they fall due to March 2025.

John Trotman
Chief Financial Officer

24 May 2021