

Ultimate quality and value for customers

31 October 2023

Strong sales growth, sustained profit margins and abundant free cash flow were key features of UP's FY2023 financial results. Moreover, the company combined significant advances with its brand portfolio with operational efficiency improvements, both in the UK and internationally. Given the company's confidence that it will meet expectations in FY2024 and a visible growth trajectory, we reiterate our 250p fair value for the shares.

Renamed Ultimate Products plc's ('UP') FY2023 results confirmed the Company's 15th August 2023 trading update, as sales advanced 8% and the EBITDA and pretax profit measures were £20.2m (+8%) and £16.8m (+6%) respectively. We commented on this progress in our report [Second half 15% sales growth beats expectations](#). Net bank debt closed the year at £14.8m compared with £24.3m at end FY2022 and was lower earlier in the year. Robust underlying free cash flow is consistent with a proposed 7.4p full year dividend, in line with UP's 50% pay-out policy.

Brand development and geographic expansion remain central to UP's sales growth outlook. Premier brands Salter, Beldray and Russell Hobbs (licensed), which represented 71% of group sales in FY2023, advanced in aggregate by 9% with Salter particularly strong at +39%. The fastest growth distribution channel was online, which grew by 64%. International recovered well in the second half. Overseas was a smaller 30% of group sales but remains an area with clear headroom for expansion.

Profitability benefited from a number of initiatives in FY2023, as well as a focus on continuous improvement. Importantly, last year's sales growth was not driven by price inflation. As a result, UP relied on productivity gains and tight cost control to mitigate any threats of margin contraction. Both gross margins and EBITDA margins were unchanged in the period. Key productivity initiatives included increased use of robotics and were reflected in a further gain in gross profit per employee.

Cash conversion remains central to UP's financial strength. Using the measure operating free cash flow as a percentage of adjusted EBITDA, cash conversion improved to an impressive 121% in FY2023 from 37% a year earlier. While net debt reduction excluding dividends of £6.3m was, at £15.7m, equivalent to 100% of reported net income. Investors might wish to note the financial strategy flexibility which UP enjoys given these rates of conversion.

Significant potential upside to our 250p fair value

We continue to place a fair value of 250p for UPGS's shares. In our view this is a reasonable level given it implies 1.3x sales and 11x EV/EBITDA based on our FY2024 forecasts, which we leave unchanged. Brand-driven underlying sales growth, international expansion headroom, sustained profitability and free cash flow conversion remain central to UP's investment case.

Key Financials					
Year to 31st July	2021A	2022A	2023A	2024E	2025E
Revenue (£m)	136.4	154.2	166.3	176.3	186.9
Revenue growth	17.9%	13.1%	7.9%	6.0%	6.0%
EBITDA adjusted (£m)	13.3	18.8	20.2	21.7	23.0
EPS adjusted (p)	11.1	14.7	15.4	15.4	16.8
DPS (p)	5.0	7.1	7.4	7.7	8.4
EV/EBITDA (x)	11.1	6.3	5.9	5.5	5.1
P/E ratio (x)	12.3	8.1	7.8	7.8	7.2
Yield	4.2%	5.9%	6.2%	6.4%	7.0%

Source: Equity Development estimates, Company historic data

Company Data

EPIC	ULTP
Price (last close)	120p
52 weeks Hi/Lo	174p/112p
Market cap	£104m
ED Fair Value / share	250p

Share Price, p



Description

Ultimate Products plc develops new, innovative concepts and brings professional, sought-after products to the mass market.

Their offices span two continents, with headquarters in the UK, a sourcing office and showroom in China and a further showroom in Continental Europe.

Key owned brands include **Salter, Beldray, Progress, Kleeneze, Petra and Intempo**. The company also markets non-electrical Russell Hobbs products under licence, now on a rolling four-year basis.

The company changed its name to Ultimate Products plc on 31 October 2023 and its stock ticker to ULTP.

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Ultimate Products plc (UP) announced full year results today as well as a name change for the group. Results confirmed the key financial figures released in the company's 15th August 2023 trading update as well as a proposed 7.4p full year dividend (vs 7.1p last year). **In addition, UP anticipates that it will meet market current expectations in FY2024.** We leave our FY2024 forecasts broadly unchanged.

UP's name change from Ultimate Products Global Sourcing plc makes sense. In particular, the company's central commitment to delivering "beautiful products for every home" and its heavy focus on three of its premier brands demonstrates its increasing strength as a brand development company rather than one with an emphasis on sourcing; hence a sensible name change.

FY2023 was a strong year of development not only in terms of reported results but also for UP's brands and operational productivity. The investment case remains strong.

FY2023 highlights

Highlights of the FY2023 results are summarised in Figure 1. The company reported 7.9% sales growth helped by a combination of online strength and a second half recovery in continental European international sales. FY2023 second half growth rates were 19.6% in the UK and 12.9% in continental Europe.

Overall H2 sales growth was 15.0%, which was a marked acceleration from 2.2% in the first half. Importantly, UP met expectations for the full year.

Figure 1 - FY2023 Results Highlights

All figures in £m	FY2022	FY2023	Change
Revenue	154.2	166.3	+8%
Gross margin	24.9%	25.7%	+0.8ppts
Adjusted EBITDA	18.8	20.2	+8%
Underlying EBITDA margin (%)	12.2%	12.2%	unch
Adjusted pre-tax profit	15.8	16.8	+6%
Statutory pre-tax profit	15.4	16.0	+4%
Adjusted EPS	14.7	15.4	+4%
Statutory EPS	14.3	14.6	+2%
Net bank debt	24.3	14.8	- £9.5
Net bank debt/EBITDA* (x)	1.3x	0.7x	- 0.6x
Underlying EPS (pence)	14.7	15.4	+4%

Source: Company data

Key profitability measures moved in line with sales in FY2023 as gross margins were broadly stable at 25% after rounding, adjusted EBITDA margins at 12% and pre-tax profit margins remained at 10%. Such margin stability is arguably the more impressive given UP's tactic of not implementing inflationary pricing. The company sustained profitability through enhanced productivity measures while still growing sales by offering value to its end-customers.

Sales growth by brand, strategic pillar, category and geography

Data for sales by brand, strategic pillar, category and geography are summarised in Figure 2. We comment on each individually.

Brands - Salter, Beldray and Russell Hobbs >70% sales

Salter, Beldray and Russell Hobbs (licensed for non-electrical) continue to dominate UP's sales revenue both in terms of premier brands and the portfolio as a whole. Concentration into these 3 brands increased slightly from 70% to 71% in FY2023. Salter, which is yet to benefit from its recent re-brand, increased sales by a sizable 39% in the period. We expect a positive impact from this re-brand initiative in FY2024 and beyond.

Strategic pillars - Online reaches 25% of sales

Online with 28% sales growth was comfortably the fastest growing of UP's strategic pillars (distribution channels) followed by multiple store retailers. These two pillars' growth offset single digit declines in both supermarkets and discounters, both of which appear to have been hampered by distributor overstocking in the aftermath of Covid, notably in continental Europe. The group target for online to be 30% of sales remains in place.

An important theme of our UP research has been the relationship between brand development and product distribution. In our view the overall mutation of UP from being a sourcing company into that of an active brand manager significantly explains the company's ability to perform well in both supermarkets and online, which arguably put competing brands on a more level playing field than the other channels.

Category – Small domestic appliances and housewares dominate at 70%

Not surprisingly given the importance of Salter – the UK's oldest housewares brand – and Beldray, small domestic appliances and housewares remained UP's most important categories in FY2023 with around 70% of total sales. Moreover, these were the most affected by apparent overstocking in some of the distribution channels. Laundry and audio both posted near double-digit sales gains in FY2023.

Within the categories, UP continues actively to innovate. Around 600 new products are launched by the company annually, which represents approximately 20% of the overall SKU count. The ability of UP to marry its brand development with innovation was discussed in our 14th June 2023 report [Innovating for growth](#).

Geography – European headroom significant

The UK accounted for a larger portion of sales in FY2023 as it increased from 66% to 70%. The issues mentioned with retailer overstocking above probably hampered progress in continental Europe.

However, it is worth noting that the potential for continental Europe to be a significant growth driver for the business as a whole remains in place. European business should benefit from the new showroom in Paris (as highlighted in our 25th September 2023 report [Beautiful products for every European home](#)) and there is already traction in German retail with the Petra brand, which was acquired on 15th February 2021 and commented on in our note: [Petra acquisition to enhance international business](#).

In particular, the populations of the larger continental European countries in aggregate are significantly larger than in the UK. For example, [Worldometers](#) data currently estimate that the combined populations of France and Germany are currently around 148 million persons: which is more than double their estimate of 67 million for the [UK](#).

Figure 2 - Sales by brand, strategic pillar, category and geography

All figures in £'000s	FY2022	FY2023	Change	% sales	% sales
Sales by brand					
Salter	48,080	66,599	38.5%	31.2%	40.0%
Beldray	39,950	35,031	-12.3%	25.9%	21.1%
Russell Hobbs (licensed)	20,165	16,458	-18.4%	13.1%	9.9%
Progress	8,287	7,425	-10.4%	5.4%	4.5%
Petra		3,194			1.9%
Kleeneze	2,835	3,378	19.2%	1.8%	2.0%
Premier Brands	119,317	132,085	10.7%	77.4%	79.4%
Other proprietary brands	17,032	16,036	-5.8%	11.0%	9.6%
Own label and other	17,842	18,194	2.0%	11.6%	10.9%
Total	154,191	166,315	7.9%	100.0%	100.0%
Sales by strategic pillar					
Supermarkets	51,523	49,116	-4.7%	33.4%	29.5%
Discount retailers	48,126	44,593	-7.3%	31.2%	26.8%
Online channels	25,321	41,449	63.7%	16.4%	24.9%
Multiple-store retailers	17,312	22,178	28.1%	11.2%	13.3%
Other	11,909	8,979	-24.6%	7.7%	5.4%
Total	154,191	166,315	7.9%	100.0%	100.0%
Sales by product category					
Small domestic appliances	57,032	66,813	17.2%	37.0%	40.2%
Housewares	54,539	48,008	-12.0%	35.4%	28.9%
Laundry	14,799	18,163	22.7%	9.6%	10.9%
Audio	12,907	15,545	20.4%	8.4%	9.3%
Heating and cooling	5,870	6,214	5.9%	3.8%	3.7%
Others	9,044	11,572	28.0%	5.9%	7.0%
Total	154,191	166,315	7.9%	100.0%	100.0%
Sales by geography					
UK	101,050	115,580	14.4%	65.5%	69.5%
Europe	48,931	49,645	1.5%	31.7%	29.8%
ROW	4,210	1,090	-74.1%	2.7%	0.7%
Total	154,191	166,315	7.9%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Company data

Positive profit growth despite price restraint

The quality of UP's sales growth in FY2023 is arguably the greater for having been volume generated rather than through price increases. UP continues to commit to offering value for money to its end customers as part of its emphasis on providing "beautiful products for every home" where its brands' product penetration is estimated to be around 80%.

The company's ability to maintain margins reflects continuous improvement in efficiency and productivity and focus on its core three premier brands.

Efficiency and productivity

Improved use of robotics in UP's central functions – notably the Manor Mill offices where the company is headquartered – is a salient example of the company's ongoing commitment to efficiency and productivity improvement.

A significant contributor to the process of continuous improvement at UP has been investment in people. The company cites in its FY2023 annual report that investment in training increased in the financial year from 10 hours annually per employee on average to 15.

As a result, UP appears well placed to increase the portion of higher paid jobs within the business and improve productivity both in terms of sales and gross margin generated per employee. Recent trends in both these measures are summarised in Figure 3 which show that while headcount has increased at an 11.5% compound annual growth rate in the past five years, employee productivity in terms of sales generated and gross profits earned increased at 2.0% and 4.9% respectively.

Figure 3 - Staff productivity indicators							
All figures in £'000s	2018A	2019A	2020A	2021A	2022A	2023A	5 yr CAGR
Average employees	232	265	289	296	365	399	11.5%
Sales revenue	87,571	123,257	115,684	136,367	154,191	166,315	13.7%
Gross profit	19,592	27,244	26,600	30,231	38,355	42,747	16.9%
Sales per employee	377.5	465.1	400.3	460.7	422.4	416.8	2.0%
Change		23.2%	-13.9%	15.1%	-8.3%	-1.3%	
Gross profit/employee	84.4	102.8	92.0	102.1	105.1	107.1	4.9%
Change		21.7%	-10.5%	11.0%	2.9%	2.0%	

Source: Company data

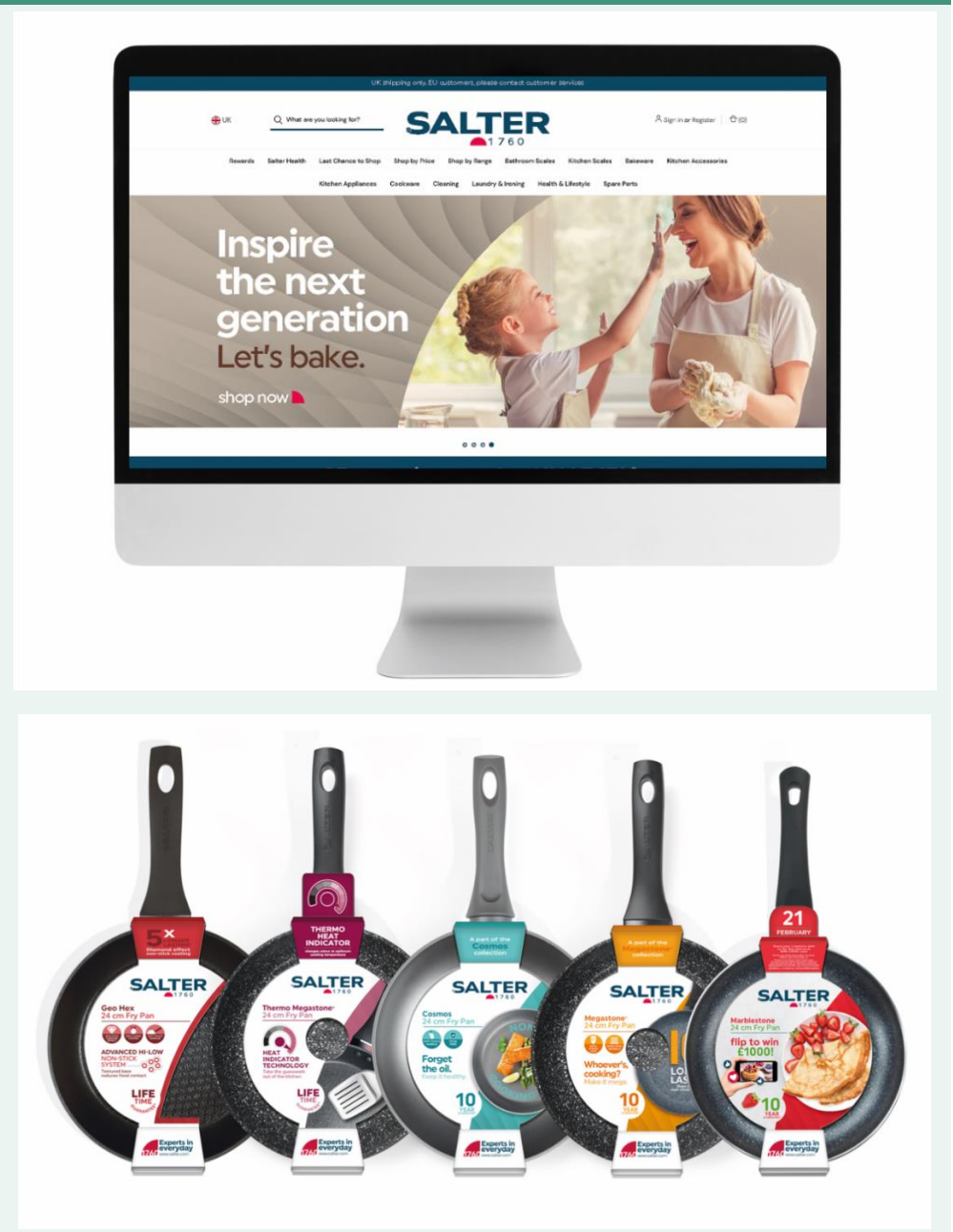
In terms of granularity, the 6 years for which data are shown above witnessed the completion of 451 robotics tasks, an estimated saving of 1,021 total weekly hours worked and annual cost savings of around £0.6m. UP demonstrates an ability to increase headcount while simultaneously raising the individual business generating and financial productivity of its expanding workforce.

Brand development

Aside from its people, UP's core asset is its brand portfolio which is similarly a focus for continuous improvement. As mentioned above and detailed in the relevant hyperlink, Salter – the company's largest brand and the UK's oldest housewares brand – underwent an important re-brand in calendar 2023 with the application of the tag line "experts in everyday" and the addition of its foundation year (1760) to its logo.

Under the supervision of Brand Director Tracy Carroll (appointed December 2022), the re-brand is aimed at creating a clear message of “authenticity and trust.” Illustrations of the re-brand and its application to home baking and home cooking appear in Figure 4.

Figure 4 – Salter re-brand – applications



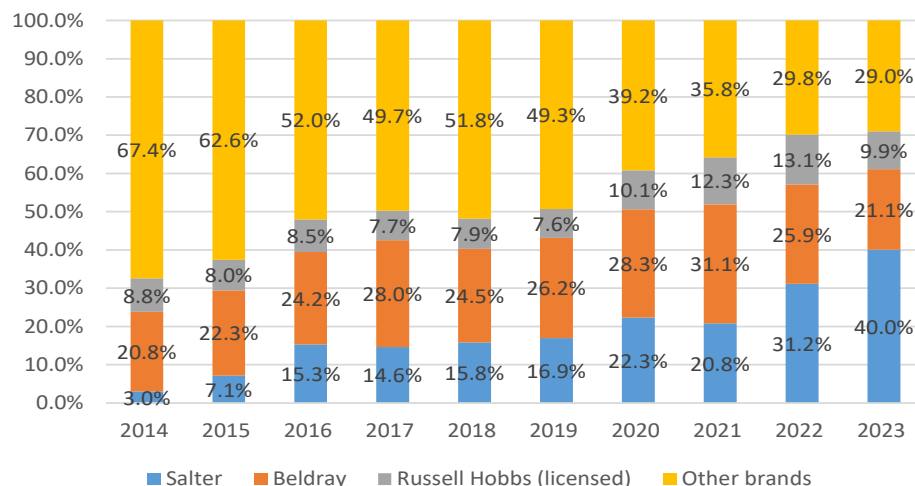
Source: Company presentation data

Russell Hobbs – the licensed brand under which UP markets non-electrical products – also underwent an important change in FY2023 as the company negotiated the ability to in-license on a rolling 4-year basis. The new arrangement enables UP to plan the brand’s development with a significant runway and thus invest in it, and plan around it, more similarly to a wholly owned brand.

Longer term, an important feature of UP’s brand management has been greater concentration within the portfolio.

The three largest brands – Salter, Beldray and Russell Hobbs – now comprise 71% of sales revenue compared with 48% five years ago (and 33% in FY2014). The development of this concentration process in the past ten years is illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5 – Breakdown of sales by brand (%) – FY 2024 to FY2023



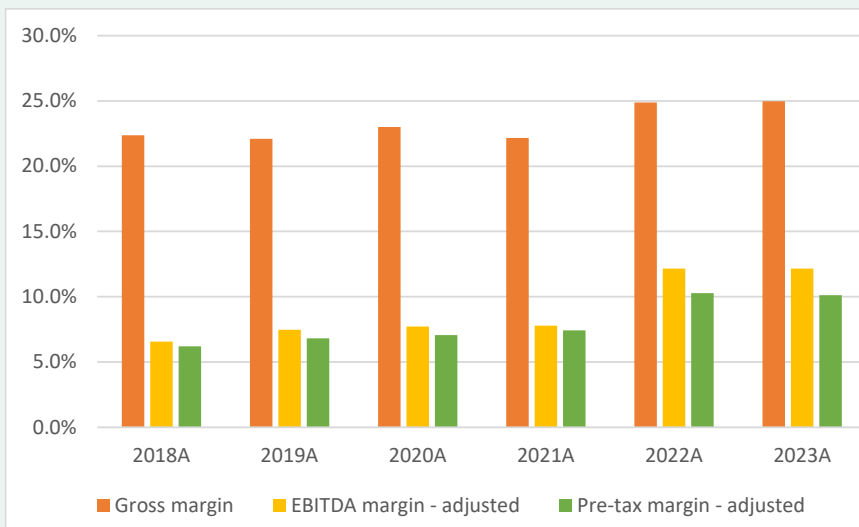
Source: Company data

Margin track record

A combination of efficiency improvements and brand concentration should be rewarded with increased gross and operating margins. In the past five years UP has consistently increased margins at all of gross profit, EBITDA and pre-tax level. The company has been able to achieve this without raising prices above the rate of inflation, largely because it has reduced complexity in both operational and brand management.

UP's five-year margin expansion track record is summarised in Figure 6. Between FY2018 and FY2023 gross margins increased from 22.4% to 25.0%. Adjusted EBITDA margins increased from 6.6% to 12.2% and adjusted pre-tax margins from 6.2% to 10.1%. All three of these measures represent significant progress, as well as auguring positively for the future given UP's continuous improvement strategy and increasingly focused approach to brand management.

Figure 6 – Margin expansion FY2018 to FY2023



Source: Company data

Cash conversion

Calculations

Cash conversion refers to the relationship between reported profits and cash flow generated. This can be struck at two levels – operating profit and net profit. The operating profit measure refers to operating free cash flow as a percentage of adjusted EBITDA.

The net profit measure refers to free cash flow generation before the dividend pay-out as a portion of net income. For the exercise we use reported change in net debt and add back the dividends to proxy free cash flow before dividends. In both cases the cash conversion rates are in excess of 100% - i.e. in FY2023 UP converted its operating and net profits fully into free cash flow.

Figure 7 - Cash conversion measures in FY2023

All figures in £'000s

EBITDA – adjusted	20,213
Operating free cash flow *	24,355
Conversion rate	120.5%
Net income – reported	15,683
Net debt reduction excluding dividends **	15,716
Conversion rate	100.2%

* net cash from operations before taxes

** change in net debt + dividend pay-out

Source: Company data

Financial strategy implications

High rates of cash conversion imply that UP should have adequate resources to fund further expansion – notably to invest in those projects which deliver continuous improvement in operating efficiency such as the use of robotics. Moreover, the company will clearly be able to make further opportunistic brand acquisitions which may arise, in addition to investing in such projects as the new showroom in Paris.

Alternatively, UP may wish to return more cash to shareholders. This could be done either in the form of an enlarged dividend pay-out or share buy-backs. While increased dividends are an attractive option, we note that the pay-out ratio policy is already generous at around 50% of earnings per share on an underlying basis. As a result, the potential for UP simply to engage in a share buy-back programme should not be ruled out as a strategic objective, in our view.

Valuation and financials

Relative valuation

Our 250p fair value assessment for UP is significantly above the current share price. But it should be noted that relative to the peer group of companies which we use in our relative valuation, UP trades on significantly lower EV/sales and P/E multiples than this group as well as offering a much higher dividend yield. Indeed, one of the highlighted companies currently pays no dividend at all. Even the discount on EV/EBITDA, while smaller, is significant.

UP's ability consistently to grow sales, its mutation from being a sourcing company to one which has around 70% of its sales generated by two well established owned brands and a household name licensed brand, and its excellent cash conversion are not captured in the current share price, in our view.

At a 250p share price, UP would trade on a 1.3x EV/sales ratio, 11x EV/EBITDA and a 16.2x P/E ratio.

Thus, at this higher price point the shares would trade at a premium to its peers using these valuation measures. However, such a premium valuation would be justifiable in our view given not only the brand management and cash generation qualities of UP referred to in this report, but also the considerable positive underlying momentum already demonstrated by the business.

Figure 8 - Relative valuation

	Share price (p)	Mkt cap (£m)	Net debt (£m)	EV (£m)	Sales 2024 (£m)	EV/ sales (x)	EBITDA 2024 (£m)	EV/ EBITDA (x)	EPS 2024 (p)	P/E (x)	DPS 2024 (p)	YLD %
Accrol (ACRL)	30	96	64	159	207	0.8	21.1	7.5	3.0	10.1	0.3	0.8
Gear4Music (G4M)	118	23	23	48	162	0.3	9.9	4.8	3.6	32.4		
Luceco (LUCE) *	113	174	43	220	208	1.1	29.9	7.4	10.3	11.0	4.4	3.8
Portmeirion (PMP) *	238	34	21	55	101	0.5	9.1	6.0	16.7	14.3	15.5	6.5
Procook (PROC)	21	22	32	54	63	0.9	8.1	6.7	3.2	6.4	1.0	4.9
Ultimate Products (UPGS)	120	98	15	118	176	0.7	19.2	6.2	15.4	7.8	7.7	6.4
Warpaint (W7L) *	298	225	-7	222	82	2.7	16.7	13.3	14.4	20.7	9.2	3.1
Average						1.0		7.4		14.7		4.3

* Refers to FY2023 data

Source: ADVFN (prices), MarketScreener (EBITDA), Stockopedia (Debt, EPS, dividends) and Equity Development estimates (UPGS forecasts)

Financial forecasts

Following FY2023 results in line with expectations we leave our estimates for 2024 broadly unchanged. This report includes our forecasts for FY2025 for the first time. The central view on sales growth is a sustainable 6% organic growth rate – i.e. a slower pace than achieved in FY2023.

Gross margins are expected to be in the region of 25% to 26% for the near term, with little projected change in EBITDA margins. Both are arguably conservative forecasts given the past positive trends discussed in this report.

EPS growth might be expected to slow in FY2024 and FY2025 due to higher UK rates of corporation tax and a greater portion of business being generated in continental Europe. In particular, as Germany increases in importance, UP's marginal rate of corporation tax might be expected to increase.

The salient features of our balance sheet and cash flow forecasts are tight working capital management and the associated benefits of positive free cash generation. The relevant forecasts are shown in Figures 8, 9 and 10.

Figure 8 - Income statement

All figures in £'000s	2022A	2023A	2024E	2025E
31st July year end				
Revenue	154,191	166,315	176,294	186,872
% increase in revenue	13.1%	7.9%	6.0%	6.0%
Cost of sales	-115,836	-123,568	-131,339	-139,219
Gross profit	38,355	42,747	44,955	47,652
Gross margin (%)	24.9%	25.0%	25.5%	25.5%
Administrative expenses	-19,605	-22,534	-23,255	-24,637
EBITDA - adjusted	18,750	20,213	21,700	23,015
EBITDA margin - adjusted (%)	12.2%	12.2%	12.3%	12.3%
Depreciation & amortisation - total	-2,066	-2,260	-2,496	-2,732
EBIT - adjusted	16,684	17,953	19,204	20,283
EBIT margin - adjusted	10.8%	10.8%	10.9%	10.9%
Net financial expense	-842	-1,132	-1,098	-610
Pre-tax profit - adjusted	15,842	16,821	18,106	19,673
Taxation	-3,120	-3,560	-4,798	-5,213
Tax rate (%) - adjusted	19.7%	21.2%	26.5%	26.5%
After tax income - adjusted	12,722	13,261	13,308	14,460
Share based payment charges	-403	-837	-837	-837
Statutory profit after tax (attributable)	12,370	12,586	12,471	13,623
EPS - basic adjusted (p)	14.73	15.36	15.42	16.75
Dividend per share (pence)	7.12	7.38	7.71	8.38

Source: ED estimates, Company historic data

Figure 9 - Balance sheet

All figures in £'000s	2022A	2023A	2024E	2025E
At 31st July year end				
Assets				
Intangible assets	37,025	37,003	37,003	37,003
Property, plant and equipment	6,369	8,443	7,008	5,378
Total non-current assets	43,394	45,446	44,011	42,381
Inventories	29,162	28,071	30,455	32,283
Trade and other receivables	32,194	29,890	30,183	30,494
Cash and cash equivalents	6,202	5,086	5,086	5,086
Total current assets	71,700	64,280	65,725	67,863
Total assets	115,094	109,726	109,736	110,244
Liabilities				
Trade and other payables	29,644	30,005	29,905	29,800
Derivative financial instruments		1,806		
Current tax	170			
Borrowings	22,314	15,891	11,123	4,856
Lease liabilities	817	836	836	836
Deferred consideration	987			
Total current liabilities	53,932	48,538	41,864	35,491
Borrowings (negative => cash)	8,144	3,990	3,990	3,990
Deferred tax	7,585	6,797	6,000	6,000
Lease liabilities	1,940	4,262	3,512	2,762
Total non-current liabilities	17,669	15,049	13,502	12,752
Share capital	223	223	223	223
Share premium account	14,334	14,334	14,334	14,334
Employee benefit trust reserve	-1,571	-1,571	-1,571	-1,571
Share-based payment reserve	1,166	2,003	2,840	3,677
Hedging reserve and other reserves	3,239	-4,265	-6,022	-9,189
Retained earnings	26,102	35,415	44,574	54,557
Total equity	43,493	46,139	54,369	62,001
Total equity and liabilities	115,094	109,726	109,736	110,244

Source: ED estimates, Company historic data

Figure 10 - Free cash flow

All figures in £'000s	2022A	2023A	2024E	2025E
31st July year-end				
Profit for the period	12,370	12,586	12,471	13,623
Adjustments for:				
Finance costs (net)	842	1,132	1,098	610
Income tax expense	3,069	3,399	4,798	5,213
Depreciation and impairment	2,044	2,238	2,474	2,710
Amortisation	22	22	16	16
Loss on disposal of a current asset				
Derivative financial instruments				
Share based payments	403	837	837	837
Income taxes paid	-2,345	-3,957	-4,798	-5,213
Working capital adjustments				
(Increase)/decrease in inventories	-7,721	1,090	-2,384	-1,827
Decrease/(increase) in receivables	-5,649	2,691	-293	-311
(Decrease)/increase in payables	1,221	559	-100	-106
Cash generated from operations	4,530	20,399	14,119	15,552
Cash flows used in investing activities				
Acquisition of a business	-1,960	-987		
Purchase of intangible assets				
PP&E	-1,843	-999	-1,039	-1,081
Proceeds from P, P & E disposals				
Finance income				
Repayment of lease liabilities		2,322	-750	-750
Total	-3,803	336	-1,789	-1,831
Free cash flow before financing	727	20,735	12,330	13,721
Interest paid	-850	-1,147	-1,098	-610
Free cash flow before dividends etc	250	19,056	11,232	13,111
Dividends paid	-4,830	-6,255	-6,463	-6,844
Sale of own shares	0	0		
Principal paid on lease obligations	-936	-840		
Debt issue costs paid		-94		
Free cash flow after dividends etc	-5,516	11,867	4,768	6,267

Source: ED estimates, company historic data



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