

Singapore Industry Focus

Singapore REITs

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DBS Group Research . Equity

12 Sep 2024

Hunt for higher yields

- More REITs have shifted to paying fees in cash in 1H24, as sector traded near decade low levels of 0.86x P/B in 1H24
- REITs that pay more fees in cash or in units that is priced above book have highest sustainability, in our view; European REITs rank highest for "true" cash-flow yields, at 7.9%
- S-REITs' "true" yield of 5.6% still stands competitively against regional peers commanding 3.5% to 5.0%
- Mid-small-cap picks that have high "true" yields of >7% are [Elite](#), [Cromwell](#), [Sasseur](#), [DHLT](#), [ESR REIT](#), [SGREIT](#), [MPACT](#)

Next-in-line beneficiaries of inflows back to S-REITs. Large-cap REIT proxies outperformed the benchmark, which rose a collective c.9.6% in Jul-Aug 24, and are now trading back at a tighter FY24F c.5.0%+ levels. While investors are likely to continue allocating capital to those names, we see an opportunity to look at the higher yielding mid-cap alternatives that could benefit from further fund inflows. In this space, a key question often asked has been about the sustainability of yields; and, we look at DPUs that are supported by cashflows. While having management fees paid in mix of units-cash is common and aligns the REIT manager's and unitholders' interests, S-REITs which trade at a larger discount to book values could see erosion due to new unit issuances, though dilution impact is only felt over time. We noted that the S-REITs have dialed down the proportion of fees paid in the form of units in recent years, as the sector was trading at decade-low rates of 0.86x price-to-book (P/B).

Fee structure has 80bps lever in underlying sector yields, European REITs rank highest in "true" yields, with 7.9%. In our view, we see an optimal mix to be 50%-50% unit-cash mix (current mix) in view of more normalised trading conditions (sector trade towards average P/B multiple of 1.0x) in the coming quarters. But, we do see REITs that pay a higher percentage of fees in cash when trading above book having more flexibility to enhance their returns. We estimate that the impact of management fees paid in the form of units could boost yields by up to 80bps at a yield of c.5.6% (all fees in cash) and 6.3% (all fees in units). Assuming fees are paid in the form of cash, we find highest yields in the European REITs at c.10.0%, followed by Retail Overseas (7.8%) and Hotels (5.9%).

S-REITs' true yield of 5.5% still highest against regional REITs markets. As a sector, an assumed shift towards all fees in cash will see an estimated a c.40bps drop in sector yields to 5.6%. While lower, we remain attracted as it is still competitive against regional REIT peers that are commanding yields in the range of 3.5% to 5.0%. This "revised" yield is still a c.2.8% yield premium against MAS 10-year treasury yields of 2.7% (Aug 24), which could fall when interest rates are cut. In the "value space" we keep a close watch at Mid-small-cap names with high yields (>7%) such as [Elite](#) and [Cromwell](#), selected overseas names such as [Sasseur REIT](#) and [DHLT](#). For investors that still prefer Singapore-rooted names, we see value in [ESR REIT](#) and [Starhill Global REIT](#). [MPACT](#) stands out amongst large-cap names at attractive valuations.

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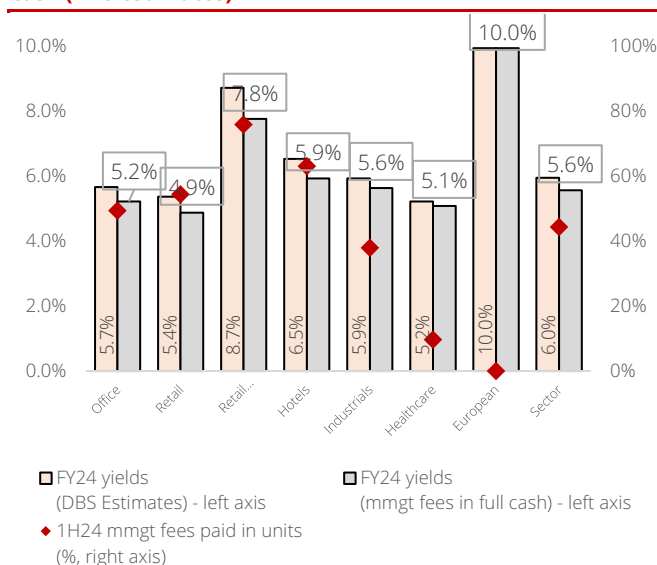
STOCKS

	Price LCY	Mkt Cap USDmn	12-mth Target Price LCY	Performance (%) 3 mth	12 mth	Rating
Elite UK REIT	0.305	234	0.25	29.8	24.0	HOLD
GBP						
Cromwell	1.56	969	1.90	9.9	9.1	BUY
European REIT	0.67	641	0.95	0.8	-0.7	BUY
Sasseur REIT	0.595	321	0.70	4.3	7.1	BUY
Daiwa House						
Logistics Trust	0.285	1,682	0.34	0.0	-8.1	BUY
ESR-LOGOS	0.515	904	0.68	8.3	6.1	BUY
REIT						
Starhill Global	1.43	5,773	1.75	17.2	-4.0	BUY
REIT						
Mapletree Pan						
Asia						
Commercial						
Trust						

Source: DBS, Bloomberg

Closing price as of 11 Sep 2024

Sector trading yields with management fees paid fully in cash (DBS estimates)



Source: DBS

Our search for sustainable fee structure for S-REITs

Large-cap proxies have outperformed from beginning 3Q24. As we approach FED rate cut cycle in September, the return of investor sentiment to the sector has improved substantially, with the overall REIT benchmark rising c.9.6% since the start of 3Q24. Rotational inflows back into the sector have benefited the large-cap, with subsectors such as large-cap industrials and office subsectors outperforming at +12.9% and +10.2%, respectively.

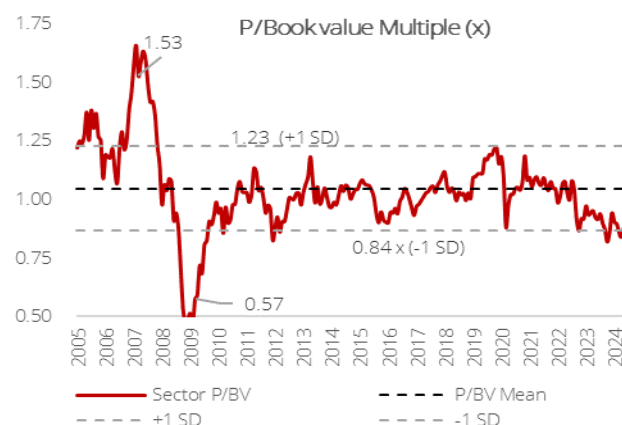
Who are the next-in-line beneficiaries? We have previously written about sector beneficiaries from an interest rate cut perspective ([Inflexion point approaches](#)) from the angle of both in-place interest rate hedges and gearing levels and depending on how the shorter term rates pan out in the coming months, appears to be playing out as initially thought. In this report, we explore the sustainability of distributions per unit (DPUs) from the more subtle angle of management fee structure.

Our view of REIT managers paying fees in the form of units. REIT managers have historically taken a portion of its REIT manager fees in the units and over time, this proportion have gradually changed, depending underlying performance. In certain times, tweaks help to smoothen out DPU trends during periods of income disruptions (i.e. asset enhancements resulting in loss of income or operational seasonality) or to provide investors with a higher “headline” yield. In our view, having fees paid in the form of units ensure the alignment of interest between REIT managers and unitholders as the managers will be incentivised to drive higher returns and growth. However, while the impact is marginal, these units will then have a slight dilution impact if a high proportion of fees paid in units is sustained over a

period of time where growth is tepid or when a REIT trades at a discount to book.

More REITs switched to paying management fees in the form or cash in FY23-24. While there is no one size-fits all formula, we have seen S-REITs pay more fees in the form of cash in the past 2 years. This arises with S-REITs trading below book values through the past one-and-a-half years, resulting in a slight dilution to NAVs or in certain cases, a strategic pivot to match cashflows to distributions (i.e. Cromwell, Elite, amongst others). Over time, in more normalised trading conditions (i.e. with the sector trading back to book values), we believe that a sustainable longer term fee structure will be a 50%:50% split in the form of cash vs units at or above book levels, is accretive to book values and a signal of confidence to unitholders

Sector trades at close to 10-yr low P/B of 0.86x in 1H24



Source: Company, DBS

Management fee changes (% fees paid in units) across FY23/1H24

	FY23	1H24	Material changes h/h
Office	53%	49%	QUECT shifted management fees from c.35% in units to 0
Retail	40%	54%	LREIT increased fees in units from 65% to 95% Paragon shifted from a full unit structure to full cash
Retail Overseas	84%	76%	Sasseur REIT reduced management fees from c.100% in units to c.80%
Hotels	68%	63%	Largely unchanged
Industrials	38%	38%	Digital Core increased fees in units from 42% to 100%
Healthcare	10%	10%	Unchanged
European	0%	0%	Unchanged
Sector	45%	44%	

Source: Bloomberg, DBS

General decline in fees in units, as sector trading discount widened in 1H24. In 1H24, the percentage of management fees paid in units decreased by 1ppt to 44%, as more companies have transitioned towards paying management fees in cash. We believe this step was taken partly to prevent a further dilution of their unitholder base by issuing fees in units below book values. We have seen a shift in management fee structure to less units and more cash in 1H24, as the trading discounts to book widened to decade-low levels of 0.86x P/B in 1H24, when the potential interest rate (IR) cuts were still called into question by the markets.

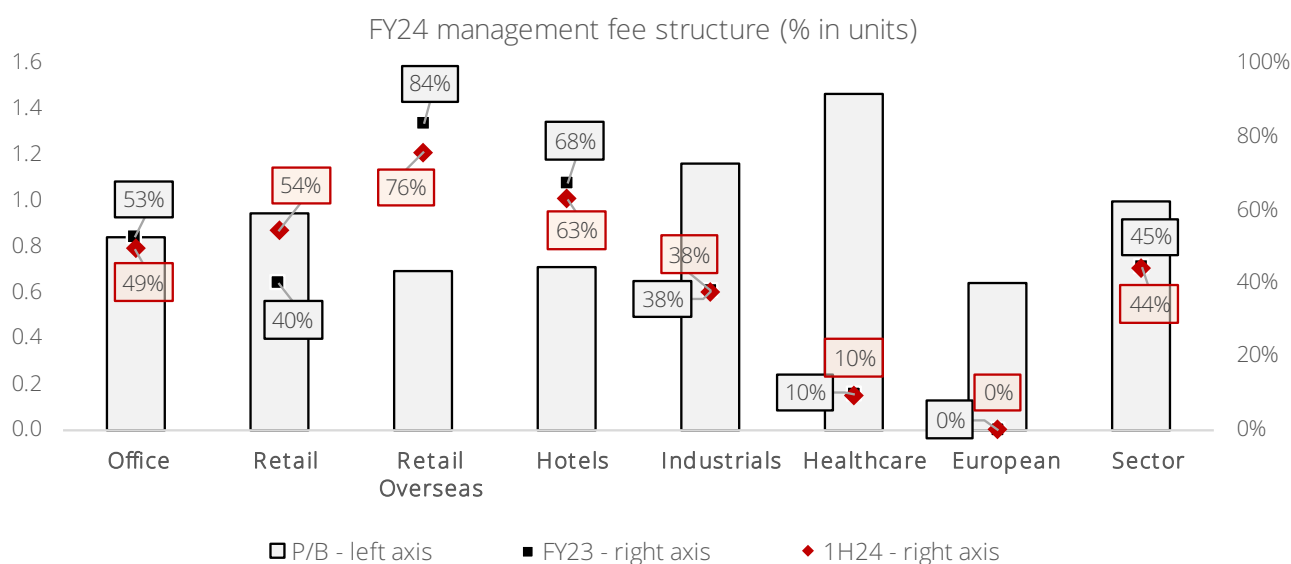
Office sector advocates the most balanced structure.

Amongst the trade sectors we track, the office sector has the most balanced fee structure with close to a 50:50 split between cash and units. Amongst office names, the notable big shift would be OUE Commercial Trust, to a full cash fee structure, given the heightened impact of dilution should they issue fee units at c.0.5x P/B. The hotels sector has generally maintained its status quo of c.63% in units across the period we have tracked.

Selected retail names paid more fees in units to shelter DPUs from interest rate impact. Names within the retail and overseas retail sectors have instead transitioned towards paying more fees in units. The shift was to partially shelter the DPUs from the heightened IR impact in the immediate term, specifically in the likes of Lendlease REIT and ride out the higher unit base in future years. In the near term for LREIT, DPU will see some upside from cash adjustments of management fees, but opting for more fees in units below book levels is akin to borrowing future growth upside.

Selected sectors heighten sustainability of DPUs by paying most fees in cash. Industrials, healthcare, and European sectors have generally kept their management fee structures unchanged, while opting for a higher payout in cash as opposed to units, which makes for a more cash-flow-supported dividend yield, in our view. Healthcare stocks in the likes of Parkway Life REIT had long been trading at a premium to the general sector, or at a yield gap of 1.4ppt, but given its high percentage of fees paid in cash, its 4.1% dividend yield, backed by cash flow, is sustainable, in our view.

Management fees in units (%) across subsectors (FY23 vs. 1H24) vs. sector P/B (x)



Source: DBS

Right choice of fee structure can put REITs into virtuous DPU growth cycles

We scour our S-REIT universe to look at the management fees structures of individual REIT names alongside their current trading P/B. On one end of the spectrum are three REITs paying full management fees in units – Frasers Logistics Trust, Keppel REIT, and Digital Core REIT, while on the other end, eight REITs pay fees fully in cash (including three new additions in 1H24 – OUECT, PGNREIT).

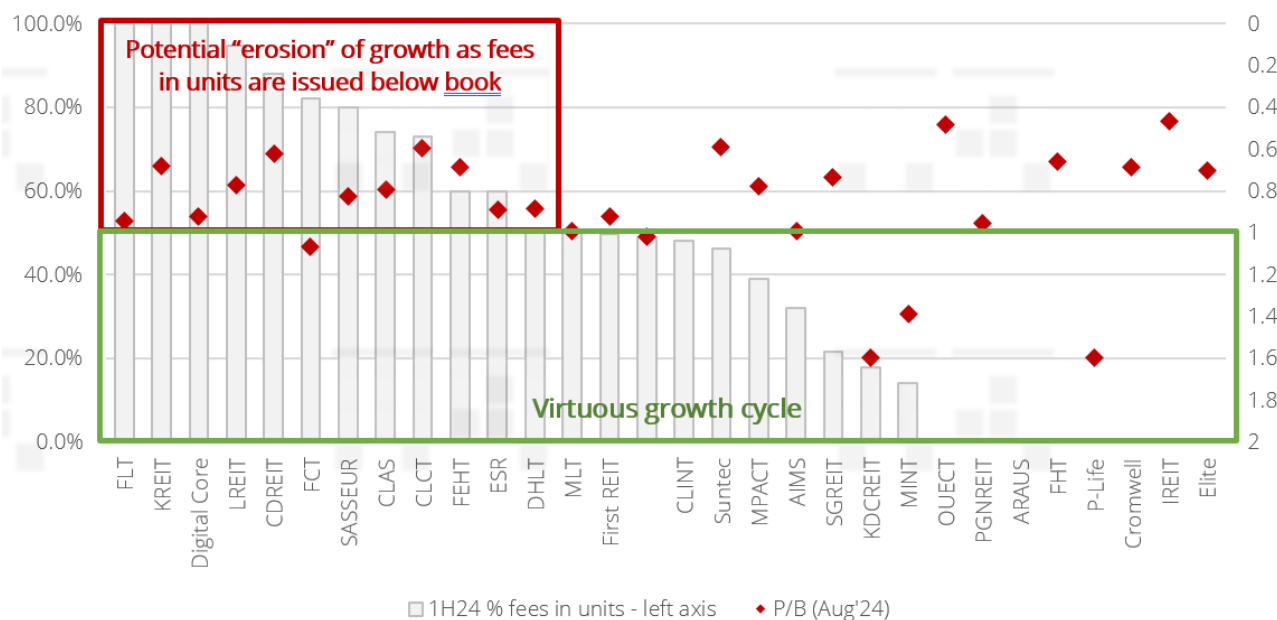
In our analysis, we adopt two trains of thought:

(i) REITs that pay a high percentage of fees in units, while trading significantly below book, may experience an accumulation of units issued to the managers over time. In periods where net profits are static or declining like in FY23-24F where interest rates were a headwind, having a larger unit base (though a small increase) could result in a further drag in distribution per unit (“DPU”) growth, as compared to growth in earnings per unit (“EPU”). This potentially mean that the REIT managers may have to work harder to sweat the portfolio in order to achieve a similar level of DPU

growth that mirrors underlying growth in operational performance.

(ii) REITs that are paying a higher percentage of management fees in cash enhance the sustainability of underlying DPU without the effect of unit base expansion in coming years. While investors tend to not accord any form of “value” for these REITs, we do acknowledge this strategy to offer investors a “cleaner” yield, one that is supported by underlying cashflows. That said, on the contrary, fees paid in units at above book will be incremental to DPU growth or reflect a *virtuous growth cycle* for future DPUs. REIT managers within this category will also enjoy enhanced *flexibility* to shift their management fee structure to pay a higher percentage of fees in units in a manner that is accretive to DPU.

Management fees in units (%) in 1H24 vs. trading P/B (x)



Source: DBS

Overseas REITs and hotels give the highest “true dividend yields”

Management fee structure has a c.80bps impact on sector yields. Strategically, there is no cookie-cutter solution for REIT managers when choosing the management fees structure but we feel that a right mix is one that offers stability over time. Through market cycles, we have seen some S-REIT managers tweaking their unit-cash structure to “protect” book values, or some managers may choose to adopt a flat and fixed policy. To put all REITs on a level playing field, notwithstanding their choice of management fee structure, in a theoretical exercise, if all S-REITs pay fees

in the form of cash, we see a close to 80bps cut to the sector headline yield.

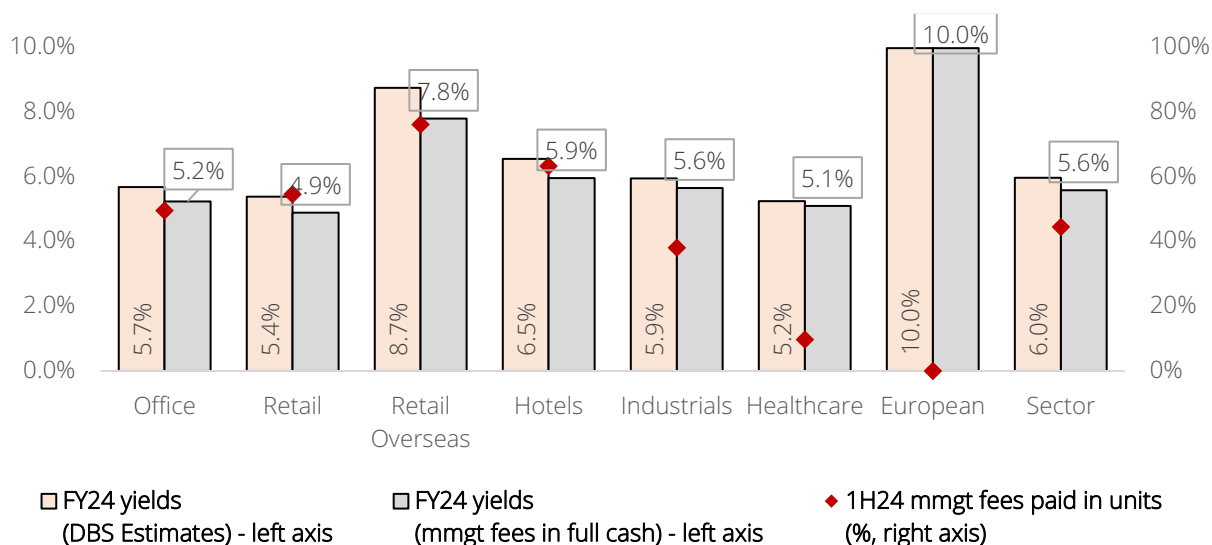
European stocks give the highest true yields. We find that the lever from the management fee structure can cause an overall 80bps disparity against overall sector trading yields, which are in the range of 5.6% (all fees in cash) and 6.3% (all fees in units). Based on the current unit-cash mix for fees in the theoretical example where fees are fully paid in cash, **European (10.0%) > Retail Overseas (7.8%) > Hotels (5.9%)** offers the highest yields.

Sector yield sensitivity to shifts in management fee structure (existing 1H24 fee structure in box)

<- Highest Yield (full units)	Sector yield sensitivity			Lowest Yield (full cash)->	
% fees in cash	0%	25%	50%	75%	100%
Office	6.0%	5.8%	5.6%	5.4%	5.2%
Retail	5.8%	5.6%	5.3%	5.1%	4.9%
Retail Overseas	9.0%	8.7%	8.4%	8.1%	7.8%
Hotels	6.8%	6.6%	6.4%	6.2%	5.9%
Industrials	6.3%	6.1%	6.0%	5.8%	5.6%
Healthcare	5.9%	5.7%	5.5%	5.3%	5.1%
European	10.4%	10.3%	10.2%	10.1%	10.0%
Sector	6.3%	6.1%	6.0%	5.8%	5.6%

Source: DBS

Sector DPU yields will see a c.50bps decline to 5.4% on a full cash mmgt fee basis

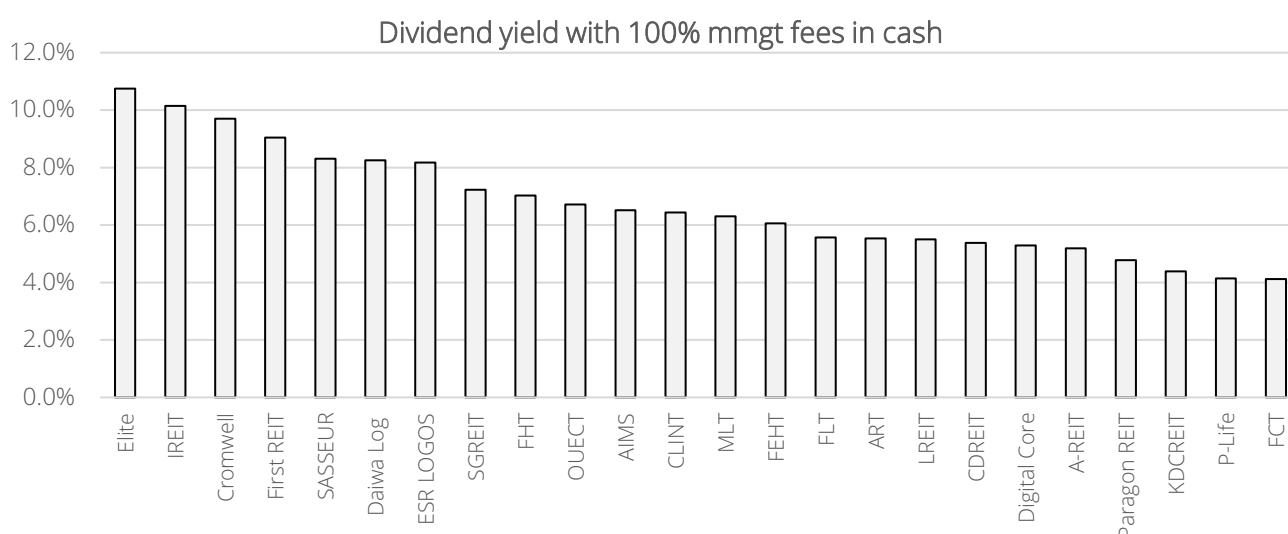


Source: DBS

Sector valuations still compare favourably against regional peers, IR cut to catalyse further cap rate compression. As a sector, even if at the assumed 5.6 “true-yield” (on DBS FY24 estimates) continue to be supported by valuations, and still stand competitively against regional REIT peers that are commanding yields in the range of 3.5% to 5.0%. At this moment, our forecasts have not accounted for interest rate cuts. This could be a catalyst to headline DPU yields, with an estimated 3% higher DPUs for every 1ppt cut in interest rates. The sector now trades at a 2.8% yield premium (true yield basis) against MAS 10-year treasury yields of 2.7% (Aug 24), where we expect headline sector yields to compress in tandem with treasury benchmarks.

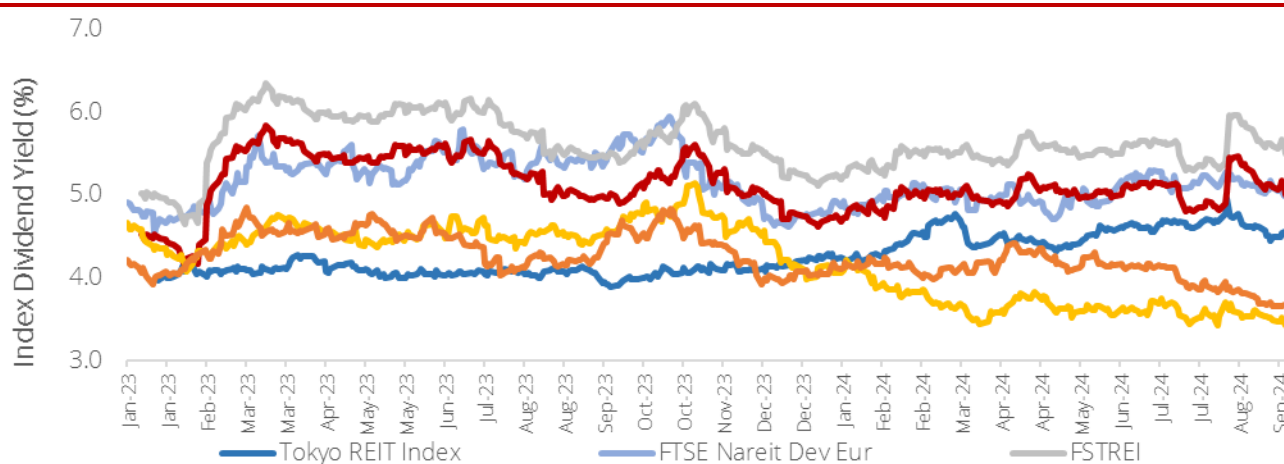
What the names that investors can invest in. Apart from the large cap S-REITs that attract most flows, we believe that the next leg of flows could go into the higher yielding S-REIT names amongst the mid caps and we adjust headline yields to “true-basis” in the search for names that could offer a sustainable return backed by cashflows. In this space, we like those that can offer high yields (>7%) on an adjusted basis and we see beneficiaries such as **Elite** and **First REIT** though interest could be niche due to their smaller market cap. We do see notable high yields in selected China retail names such as **Sasseur REIT**, and for investors that still prefer Singapore-rooted REITs, we see interest in **ESR REIT** and **Starhill Global REIT**.

S-REITs dividend yield on true cash flow basis with full mmgt fees paid in cash



Source: DBS

Trading yields of regional REIT indices vs. S-REITs (true yields)



Source: Bloomberg, DBS

DBS estimates and sensitivity of FY24F yields to management fee structure

% REIT mmgt fees in units			FY24 DBS estimates		FY24F DPU Sensitivity (% cash)					P/B (x)
	FY23	1H24	DPU (SGD)	Div yield (%)	0%	25%	50%	75%	100%	Aug'24
Office										
KREIT	98%	100%	5.8	6.9%	6.8%	6.4%	6.0%	5.6%	5.2%	0.7
MPACT	44%	39%	8.9	6.6%	6.7%	6.7%	6.6%	6.5%	6.4%	0.8
Suntec	46%	46%	6.2	5.1%	6.0%	5.6%	5.2%	4.8%	4.3%	0.6
OUEREIT	35%	0%	1.9	6.7%	7.7%	7.4%	7.2%	7.0%	6.7%	0.5
Retail										
FCT	33%	82%	11.7	4.8%	4.9%	4.7%	4.5%	4.3%	4.1%	1.1
LREIT	65%	95%	3.9	6.7%	6.7%	6.4%	6.1%	5.8%	5.5%	0.8
Paragon REIT	48%	0%	4.3	4.8%	5.6%	5.4%	5.2%	5.0%	4.8%	1.0
SGREIT	22%	22%	3.6	7.5%	8.4%	8.1%	7.8%	7.5%	7.2%	0.7
Overseas										
Retail										
CLCT	72%	73%	6.0	8.6%	8.9%	8.5%	8.2%	7.8%	7.4%	0.6
SASSEUR	100%	80%	6.0	9.1%	9.2%	9.0%	8.8%	8.5%	8.3%	0.8
Hotels										
CLAS	72%	74%	5.7	6.3%	6.5%	6.3%	6.0%	5.8%	5.5%	0.8
CDREIT	80%	88%	5.3	6.4%	6.4%	6.2%	5.9%	5.6%	5.4%	0.6
FEHT	90%	60%	4.1	6.6%	6.8%	6.6%	6.4%	6.3%	6.1%	0.7
FHT	0%	0%	2.7	7.0%	7.7%	7.5%	7.4%	7.2%	7.0%	0.7
Industrials										
CLINT	50%	48%	7.3	7.2%	7.9%	7.5%	7.2%	6.8%	6.4%	1.0
CLAR	20%	20%	15.2	5.3%	5.8%	5.7%	5.5%	5.4%	5.2%	1.3
ESR LOGOS	74%	60%	2.3	8.8%	9.1%	8.8%	8.6%	8.4%	8.2%	0.9
MINT	9%	14%	13.3	5.4%	5.7%	5.7%	5.6%	5.5%	5.4%	1.4
MLT	59%	50%	9.0	6.6%	6.9%	6.8%	6.6%	6.5%	6.3%	1.0
KDCREIT	20%	18%	9.0	4.5%	5.1%	4.9%	4.8%	4.6%	4.4%	1.6
AIMS	32%	32%	9.4	7.2%	8.5%	8.0%	7.5%	7.0%	6.5%	1.0
FLT	100%	100%	7.1	6.5%	6.4%	6.2%	6.0%	5.8%	5.6%	0.9
Daiwa Log	49%	50%	5.0	8.6%	8.8%	8.7%	8.5%	8.4%	8.3%	0.9
Digital Core (USD)	42%	100%	3.6	4.6%	5.9%	5.8%	5.6%	5.5%	5.3%	0.9
Healthcare										
P-Life	0%	0%	14.9	4.1%	4.7%	4.6%	4.4%	4.3%	4.1%	1.6
First REIT	50%	50%	2.4	9.9%	10.5%	10.1%	9.8%	9.4%	9.0%	0.9
European – DPU est in lcl curr										
Cromwell(Eur)	0%	0%	14.2	9.7%	10.1%	10.0%	9.9%	9.8%	9.7%	0.7
IREIT (Sgd)	0%	0%	2.0	10.1%	10.8%	10.7%	10.5%	10.3%	10.1%	0.5
Elite (Gbp)	0%	0%	2.8	10.7%	11.7%	11.5%	11.2%	11.0%	10.7%	0.7

Source: DBS

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*Share price appreciation + dividends

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7. Su Shan TAN, a member of DBS Group Management Committee, is a Director of Mapletree Pan Asia Commercial Trust as of 2 Sep 2024.
8. Judy LEE, a member of DBS Group Holdings Board of Directors, is a Director of Mapletree Logistics Trust as of 30 Jun 2024.

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