

Strategic Equity Capital plc

Factsheet commentary – Q1 2026

Past performance is not necessarily a guide to future performance. Portfolio investments in smaller companies typically involve a higher degree of risk. Capital at risk. Extracted portfolio performance is not necessarily indicative of the performance of the fund. Not to be construed as investment advice or recommendation. Views expressed by the investment team are correct at the time of writing but are subject to change.

Overview – Q1 2026

UK equity market performance was mixed in the first quarter of 2026 as smaller company stocks generally underperformed their larger peers. The Deutsche Numis Smaller Companies plus AIM ex-Investment Trusts Index, FTSE AIM All Share, and FTSE 250 Index fell by **6.6%**, **6.2%** and **5.1%** respectively, while the FTSE 100 Index rose by **3.4%** in comparison.

During the first quarter, the FTSE 100 continued to outperform, largely driven by the Energy sector as war in the Middle East drove an increase in energy prices. Mega Cap mining and pharma companies also contributed positively. The ‘US diversification trade’ - which diverted global money flow away from the US and into international equity markets over the second half of 2025 – continued this quarter though there was a return to safe haven assets, particularly a strengthening of the US Dollar. With the uncertain direction of US economic and foreign policy under the Trump administration, we believe US equity allocations will continue to reduce and the backdrop for marginal buying of UK equities looks more supportive than at any point over the last few years.

In addition, there was a sharp and broad-based sell-off in software, professional services and data platform businesses during February, triggered by multiple AI product launches that raised fears over the long-term viability of traditional subscription-based business models as well as connected businesses where concerns about the risk of disintermediation weighted heavily on investor sentiment and share prices. Our relevant investments are well positioned within a framework of significant barriers to entry that meaningfully constrain AI-led disruption and act as a foundation from which to benefit from AI tools such as: strong proprietary data; deep domain expertise; and trusted system-of-record status in regulated and complex markets, amongst others. While the sell-off was indiscriminate across several areas of the portfolio, we see this as an opportunity to selectively invest in well-positioned and protected businesses that can thrive in an AI-powered world, yet which potentially command undemanding valuations.

The widening jaw between UK large cap and small cap valuations was another key feature of the first quarter, with companies below £500 million market cap trading at a 21% median price-to-earnings discount to companies with over £4 billion market cap at period-end.¹ While UK-based investors remained risk-off domestic equities – withdrawing £1.8 billion from UK-focused equity funds over the period – ² the large-to-

¹ Bloomberg data, March 2026

² Calastone Fund Flow Data, 7 April 2026

small relative value trade provides an attractive incentive for money to trickle down into the UK smaller companies space. Historically, when investors have capitalised on this opportunity, they have been rewarded – over each peak-to-trough and trough-to-peak UK equity market cycle since 1998, UK small caps have rebounded over 70% higher than the FTSE All Share on average, with that recovery often coming within a six-month window.³ Moreover, private equity and strategic buyers have materially capitalised on this relative value dynamic over the last two years and public-to-private transaction activity continued apace during the first quarter with £17.6 billion-worth of takeovers of UK-listed companies.

We believe our high-conviction stock selection and portfolio management style provides investors with a source of potential outperformance driven by earnings growth, cash generation and organic re-rating. Our focus is on businesses with high-quality fundamentals such as structural market drivers, solid and defensible market positions, high-quality earnings streams such as recurring revenues, high margins, resilient balance sheets, and capable and aligned management teams. These fundamentals translated into resilient operational delivery during the period, whereby 100% of trading updates or financial results across the portfolio were either positive or in-line relative to market expectations.

Performance – Q1 2026

The Trust's NAV Total Return decreased by **10.3%** over the quarter ended 31 March 2026, underperforming the FTSE Small Cap Index (excluding Investment Companies)⁴ which decreased by **4.7%**.

Key contributors to returns in the quarter came from: **Costain (+1.2% Contribution to Total Return ("CTR"))**, following a January trading update highlighting another strong year of trading with increased profitability, strong cash generation and substantial new contract awards across growth markets, alongside a new pension scheme agreement supporting enhanced shareholder returns including a planned £20m share buyback and potential dividend increase; **Diaceutics (+1.2% CTR)**, following a trading update which reported robust revenue growth, improved profitability and a record order book; and **TruFin (+0.5% CTR)**, following a trading update which indicated profit ahead of expectations, supported by continued strong performance in its Playstack division and the announcement of a share buyback programme, reinforcing confidence in earnings momentum and capital allocation.

The main detractors in the period were: **Everplay (-3.2% CTR)**, following full-year results which showed a slight shifting of 2026 revenues from H1 to H2, which weighed on investor sentiment; **Next 15 (-1.7% CTR)**, following an in-line trading update and a successful capital markets day where they outlined their business strategy going forward at the start of the year, sentiment remains weak due to the perceived threat of AI; and **Brooks Macdonald (-1.6% CTR)**, where the shares de-rated despite reporting interim results in-line with market expectations and a return to net positive flows.

Portfolio activity

The Fund made no new investments during the quarter but made several follow-on investments, including into: **Netcall**, a UK software provider specialising in low-code platforms and customer engagement solutions,

³ Bloomberg data, March 2026

⁴ Where holdings' returns are stated, please note these are Total Returns, including dividends, for each of those stocks over the quarter

which we view as well positioned to benefit from increasing enterprise demand for automation and digital transformation, with strong recurring revenue characteristics, growing adoption of its Liberty platform and improving sales execution supporting long-term earnings visibility; and **Watkin Jones**, a property development business with leadership positions in the build-to-rent and purpose-built student accommodation sectors in the UK, deploying a capital-light forward funding model with a strong balance sheet, and which is potentially poised to benefit from gradual recovery in the forward funding environment.

The Fund made one full exit during the period, from **Property Franchise Group**, following a period of strong operational performance and share price appreciation after a record year of growth, with profitability ahead of expectations, prompting a crystallisation of gains and recycling capital into higher-conviction opportunities.

Outlook – Q2 2026

Despite the large amount of geopolitical noise in Q1, we believe the fund is well positioned to benefit from a small and mid-cap recovery. We maintain we have a well-constructed portfolio of companies with strong long-term fundamental characteristics: earnings growth with high visibility of revenues in less cyclical segments of the economy; attractive margins reflecting solid market positions; low or no financial leverage providing resilience in an uncertain macro environment; good cash generation underpinning financial returns; capable and agile management teams aligned with creating long-term shareholder value. In our view these are companies that should command premium ratings on the public markets. Instead, many trade at historically low valuations. If the market fails to rate these businesses appropriately then it is likely we will continue to see an elevated level of takeover approaches for businesses where private equity and strategic buyers appreciate the value on offer.

Despite the uncertainty driven by geopolitical tensions and conflict in the Middle East, there are a number of reasons to be more cheerful about the outlook for 2026:

- Continued material outperformance of the FTSE 100 against not only other domestic indices but also the S&P 500, particularly in US dollar terms, leading to improved sentiment towards the UK market after several years of underperformance
- Valuation dispersion between large and smaller companies remains historically wide, incentivising a relative value trade and a positive trickle-down effect
- Should the path for further UK interest rate cuts become clearer, this would improve liquidity conditions and provide valuation support for smaller companies
- Signs of a gradual reopening of the IPO market, alongside elevated corporate activity, could provide tangible catalysts for re-ratings
- History suggests that although small caps typically lag in a market recovery, when they do recover they can do so rapidly and sharply, contributing substantially to their long-term outperformance over the wider market

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