

## Stirlingretail

Comments on retail issues from Leigh Sparks, the Institute for Retail Studies, University of Stirling

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### How is Coronavirus affecting the UK's Retail Sector?

Posted on [October 30, 2020](#) by [Leigh Sparks](#)

A couple of months ago, Professor Graeme Roy of the [Fraser of Allander Institute](#) invited me to try to answer the question posed at the head of this post. He is part of / leading [an ESRC funded 'observatory'](#) (Coronavirus and the Economy) which has been publishing such summary works on the progress of the pandemic and the economy, mainly from an economic viewpoint.

I thought it might be interesting to do, and so agreed. The outcome has just been published and the full piece can be found [here](#).

#### [How is coronavirus affecting the UK's retail sector](#)

I am not going to summarise or reproduce the piece here, but would rather encourage you to visit the observatory to read it, and some of the other pieces published there. I think it is an interesting and informative collection.

My piece follows initially some well-known ground. After noting the scale and importance of the retail sector it briefly recaps the essential vs non-essential issue of shops under lockdown. It then covers again the impacts of lockdown as for example in panic-buying, altered demand, supply chain issues and then the rise of sales via the internet and in local stores. Some of this I have covered in more detail before in various posts ([retail armageddon](#), [changing retail priorities](#), [retailing, shopping and covid-19](#), [the impact of lockdown](#), [Scottish and online sales in lockdown](#)). The graphs below (the observatory piece has updated figures) show some of the differential impacts and the variations. These are still going on and working through the system and as local lockdowns and restrictions are more commonly imposed, will have even more disruptive effects on general patterns. [This can be seen playing out in Wales with the closure again of non-essential retailing during the "fire-break", some revision to original rules on what could be bought](#), and the probability that such measures will be a frequent part of our winter.

Volume sales, seasonally adjusted, Great Britain, July 2012 to July 2020



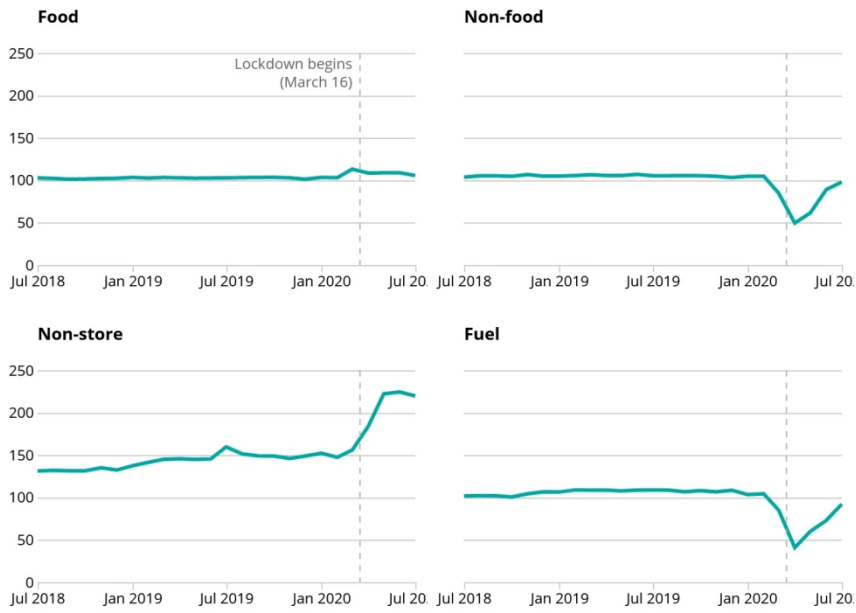
Source: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/retailindustry/bulletins/retailsales/july2020#retail-sales-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic>



Source: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/retailindustry/timeseries/j4mc/drsj>

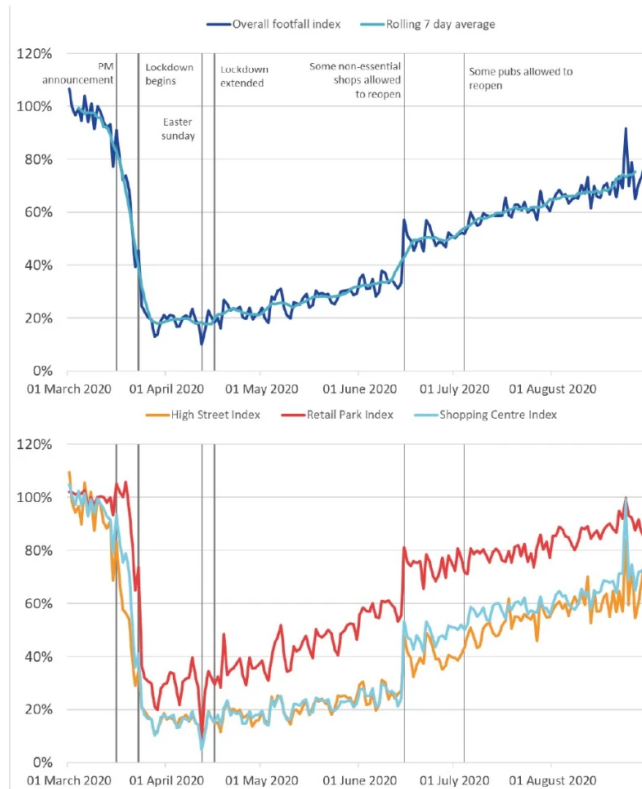
Volume sales, seasonally adjusted, Great Britain, July 2018 to July 2020

— Volume sales: Index 2016=100



Source: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/retailindustry/bulletins/retailsales/latest>

Volume of footfall, year-on-year percentage change between footfall on the same day, UK, 1 March to 30 August 2020



Source:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/bulletins/coronavirustheukconomyandsocietyfasterindicators/3septembe>

In putting together the piece, I read a lot of commentary on the situation and came across various sources of data being used. Some of these are more novel or radical than others, but there is a sense that if we could join up some of these sources and bring things together then we could get a much better, more comprehensive and consistent, data supply based around coherent definitions of place and activity. At the moment the data is often very interesting but partial or restricted and so coverage and comparability remain an issue. National data tells us some things, but understanding the impacts and the situation on the ground, in towns and cities, is really very important. We are not that well served at the moment, though there are some very interesting “green shoots” of this approach, as some of the publications noted in my commentary are demonstrating..

Can we thus get to a comprehensive understanding of retailing and consumer behaviour at both a local and a national level, and do this consistently? If we could, then there might be a different sense of the impact of the virus on the retail economy and eco-system and what measures might be suitable for what places. We also might have [a more realistic expectation of outcomes](#). At the moment, as the recent weeks have shown, there seems to be a lot of mis-information, rhetoric and assumption and not enough grounded evidence. Hopefully, from this pandemic a positive story around enhanced existing and novel data for the UK at various levels can emerge.

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**About Leigh Sparks**

I am Professor of Retail Studies at the Institute for Retail Studies, University of Stirling, where I research and teach aspects of retailing and retail supply chains, alongside various colleagues. I am Chair of Scotland's Towns Partnership. I am also a Deputy Principal of the University, with responsibility for Education and Students.

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