

Further lockdowns are major concern for High Street, says CEO of Fenwick

The chief executive of North East department store chain Fenwick says Government support will be needed to help the retail sector if further lockdowns are imposed.

The Newcastle-headquartered family firm, which has nine stores around the UK including its flagship Newcastle city centre site, announced in its accounts in September that the pandemic had created the most difficult trading conditions in living memory.

Gross sales for the year to January more than halved and its operating losses also widened, as Covid-19 restrictions and several lockdowns heavily impacted the firm's bottom line, forcing its stores to close during what should have been peak trading times covering two Easters and Christmas 2020.

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This festive season, however, chief executive John Edgar said trading had been much stronger, despite recent Government announcements affecting consumer confidence.

Looking ahead, and to the potential for further lockdowns, he said support would be needed – as well as certainty.

His comments, on the BBC Today programme, come after health secretary Sajid Javid says the Government is not planning on making any more announcements on post-Christmas measures this week.

Mr Edgar said: "This week has been pretty good, for different reasons. Like everybody, we've gone into the sales a little earlier because of the news of Omicron and because people are

looking to shop last minute up until Christmas like they always do.



Fenwick in Newcastle's Northumberland Street

"I think we had a very strong autumn and then following the news from the Government a couple of weeks ago there was definitely a softening, but this week's certainly stronger."

Mr Edgar took the helm at Fenwick at the start of the first lockdown in April 2020, following a career that has taken him to Selfridges, Woolworths, Arcadia and House of Fraser, giving him a strong insight into changing trends within the retail sector.

He said his chief concern now is that more lockdowns could be imposed.

He said: "I think like every retailer on the high street, more lockdowns are a real concern. The worry for me would be to institutionalise this lockdown at this time of the year and think that would be really difficult for the high street.

"I'm really focused on the eco-system of the high street and how everything on the high street works together – whether offices, leisure, food and beverage, retail et cetera. Take one chunk of that off the high street and suddenly you've got a bigger social problem for the long term. So where possible we need to avoid that."

If a lockdown affecting retail was to be imposed, Mr Edgar said Government support would be needed – but just as important would be clarity on the duration and nature of any restrictions.

He said: "If we were in lockdown we would definitely be looking for support from the Government. But also some certainty on what was going to happen, which is super-difficult for any Government right now.

"The lack of certainty is really hard to plan for. We're doing our best, we're investing in all our regional towns and working with local authorities to really create a hub for

those local communities but the lack of certainty is the biggest challenge.

He added: “It’s knocking some people. When people are going to the high street they are on a mission and definitely spending – when they go out the conversion is really strong – but certainly some customers are not going out, which is why our online offer is becoming increasingly important.”

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