

Retailers fear click-and-collect ban as Hancock hails John Lewis

By Simon Foy

MATT HANCOCK has backed John Lewis's decision to suspend its click and collect service despite industry leaders saying it is "very low risk" and a "life-line" for many small businesses.

The Health Secretary said he was "grateful" to John Lewis for its decision to halt its click and collect service, adding "it's important that everybody abides by ... the spirit of the rules and not just the letter".

The department store became the first major retailer to suspend the service on Tuesday, citing a "change in tone" from the Government and a desire to help the national effort by discouraging non-essential travel.

It came as Scotland moved to tighten its own click and collect rules. From Saturday, only stores selling essential goods – such as baby equipment, footwear, clothing, books and homeware – will be allowed to offer a click and collect service in Scotland. Takeaways must operate from doorways or hatches and not allow customers inside.

Business leaders criticised Mr Hancock's remarks, arguing that they could put implicit pressure on smaller retailers to stop collection services and wipe more than £300m a month from Britain's takeaway trade.

Andrew Goodacre, chief executive of the British Independent Retailers Association, said: "[Click and collect] is often a consumer preference and is very safe. Entry to the shop is not allowed.

"The goods for collection are pre-packed and there is minimal interaction between people.

"We see no reason why this service should be suspended as it is very low-risk, but an important lifeline to many businesses."

Tom Ironside, a director at the British Retail Consortium, said preventing people using click and collect services "would harm the viability of many retailers already suffering under lockdown", as well as severely limiting the choice for some consumers.

It follows Sainsbury's, Tesco, Morrisons, Aldi and Asda announcing tougher plans to ensure customers wear face masks in stores.

Mike Cherry, head of the Federation of Small Businesses, hit out at what he called vague government messaging.

He said SMEs did not want to see a "return of Captain Clipboard", but if further restrictions are in the pipeline, ministers must announce them "in a clear fashion and match this with a suitable financial package".

He added: "For many small firms, operating through a shop window or a click and collect service has been the only thing keeping them going through much of the past year, so any new rules that prevent this must be made clear."

On Monday, *The Daily Telegraph* revealed that ministers had discussed plans to ban click and collect services everywhere apart from supermarkets and "essential retail".

The NPD Group, a market research firm, said banning click and collect would wipe more than £300m a month from the country's takeaway trade. During the second national lockdown in November, Britons spent almost £330m

on click and collect takeaways.

Mr Goodacre said delivery, the alternative to click and collect, was not necessarily safer when considering the risks in distribution centres.