The impact of this year’s Easter holidays moving into March was felt by Scotland’s high streets as footfall declined by -9.1% in April when compared with the same period last year. Coupled with inclement weather conditions throughout the month and the disruption caused by rail strikes, it presented the high street landscape with the ultimate combination of challenges. However, this annual drop in footfall does align with figures from 2018 when Easter fell in the final week of March leading to annual footfall levels sitting -8.5% lower in April.

The first week of the month likely contributed to the overall average annual decline in footfall for April as activity declined by -6.4% following the Easter weekend and the week leading up to the bank holiday. This also coincided with a fresh wave of rail strike action and Storm Kathleen sweeping through parts of Scotland. The change in holidays may have led to further year on year declines throughout the month as comparison periods shifted.

High street activity fell by -9.1% year on year compared with a decline that was much less severe in retail parks (-3.1%) and shopping centres (-1.6%). Despite these challenges, the Easter Holidays spanning into April may well have been the saving grace for the month as footfall rose by +2.1% in Scotland’s retail destinations from March. This was driven by a +4.2% rise in high streets versus a marginal rise in shopping centres (+0.5%) and a marginal decline in retail parks (-0.7%). Mixed performance throughout April highlighted the true extent of the shift in Easter holidays, combined with a return to schools and offices following as footfall declined in Scotland’s high streets by -6.4% week on week in the first week which followed Easter weekend, and by -4.7% in the third week which signalled the end of the Easter school holidays.

As we approach May, retailers will face another wave of rail strike action coinciding with the early May bank holiday which could impact footfall in UK retail destinations. This could be particularly felt in towns and cities where people have already planned long weekend getaways. However, milder weather on the horizon could minimise the impact on retailers. In spite of these challenges, there is optimism for the sector which is supported by an improvement in consumer confidence (GFK) by two points in April to -19. This was driven by improvements in all areas including the measure for the general economic situation and how people view their personal financial situations over the last 12 months, as well as expectations for both of these indicators over the next 12 months.