

Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Violence and abuse towards retail workers, HC 666

Wednesday 17 April 2024

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Members present: Dame Diana Johnson (Chair); James Daly; Simon Fell; Kim Johnson; Marco Longhi; Tim Loughton.

Questions 1-99

Witnesses

I: Joanne Cairns, Head of Research and Policy, Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers; Edward Woodall, Government Relations Director, Association of Convenience Stores; Paul Gerrard, Campaigns, Public Affairs and Board Secretariat Director, The Co-op; and Lyndsey Cambridge, Head of Engagement, Federation of Wholesale Distributors.

II: Superintendent Patrick Holdaway, Lead for the National Business Crime Centre, City of London Police; Chief Superintendent Alex Goss, Retail Crime Lead, National Police Chiefs' Council; and Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman, Acquisitive Crime Lead, National Police Chiefs' Council.

Written evidence from witnesses:

[Association of Convenience Stores](#)

[Association of Convenience Stores](#)

[The Co-op](#)

[Federation of Wholesale Distributors](#)

[Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Joanne Cairns, Lyndsey Cambridge, Paul Gerrard and Edward Woodall.

Q1 Chair: Good morning, and welcome to the Home Affairs Committee. This session is on violence and abuse towards retail workers, following up our report and inquiry in 2021. The session will seek to gather views on the growing rise in abuse towards retail workers since 2021, how equipped retailers are to deal with that, the support they receive from the police, what progress has been made on the recommendations from the Committee that were accepted by Government, and an initial response to the retail crime action plan launched in October last year.

We have two panels this morning. I welcome our first panel. I will ask each of our witnesses to introduce themselves, starting with Mr Gerrard.

Paul Gerrard: I am Paul Gerrard, and I am campaigns, public affairs and board secretariat director at the Co-op Group.

Lyndsey Cambridge: I am Lyndsey Cambridge, and I am head of engagement and communication at the Federation of Wholesale Distributors. I lead our crime forum.

Edward Woodall: Good morning. I am Ed Woodall, and I am government relations director at the Association of Convenience Stores.

Joanne Cairns: Good morning. I am Joanne Cairns, head of research and policy at USDAW.

Q2 Chair: You are all very welcome. I will start by asking each of you in turn to give an overview of where we are after the report the Committee produced in 2021, and how things have moved on, changed and developed since then.

Paul Gerrard: Thank you for the opportunity to give evidence, Chair. I will be brief, because I am sure colleagues will want to add to this. We run 2,500 stores across the UK, and we wholesale to another 5,000 or 6,000 independent retailers. In our own store estate—the 2,500—crime is at its highest point ever. It was up 44% last year, which means there are 1,000 crimes every day in our stores across the UK. That is the highest point we have ever seen.

In relation to violence and abuse, abuse and threats were up 35% in 2023 compared with 2022. They are also at their highest point ever. Violence is also up 35%, which is not quite as high as it was in the pandemic years, in 2020, but it is about two thirds to three quarters of what it was then. Violence dipped after the pandemic, and has gone up. It is not quite at the levels of 2020, but it is getting towards it.



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What does that look like? It can be everyday abuse. It can be threats: a colleague of mine, who is of Indian heritage, was abused in a store for his heritage and was threatened with a gun.

Chair: Threatened with a gun?

Paul Gerrard: Yes, for no reason except that the customer didn't like him and didn't like his tone.

It could be the colleague who could not do cashback because the customer had paid by contactless. The customer came round to the kiosk, smashed the kiosk door down and punched my colleague three times in the face. My colleague was hospitalised and was off work, and has only just come back. There is that kind of violence and abuse. There are threats where colleagues are followed home. We have had to move colleagues from their homes because of threats made to them.

Lastly, there is a level of violence that goes with individuals and gangs who are targeting our shops to steal for resale. They are not people who are stealing to feed themselves or stealing for thrills; they are stealing for resale. They will often be armed. Many will have substance abuse issues and be being exploited by other organisations. They need to get that product for the order they have got, and then they will use violence and weapons. Colleagues in a store in Leeds before Christmas were faced with three masked men with machetes, who took out the entire vapes, spirits and cigarettes section.

Certainly, abuse and threats are at their highest point ever. Violence is getting back to where it was in 2020, at the height of the pandemic. I will pause there, Chair.

Q3 **Chair:** Thank you. That is a very sobering account. I visited one of your stores in my constituency, on Greenwood Avenue in Hull. While I was there a man came in, went to the refrigeration unit, and basically cleared out all of the—I think—bacon. He put it all into a bag and left. It seems to me that that probably fits with your third category: people stealing to order for resale as part of organised crime. That was not an individual just getting something to eat for themselves, or nicking food for themselves, was it? Do you think the biggest increase is in that kind of organised criminal activity?

Paul Gerrard: From our perspective, in terms of the overall levels of crime, it is individuals and gangs who are targeting for resale. At the start of this year, Professor Emmeline Taylor produced some research for us that described the market for that. There is clearly a bigger market for this because many people are struggling to make ends meet, but in the main, the people who are stealing from our shops in volume are selling it on, not consuming it themselves.

Q4 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Ms Cambridge?

Lyndsey Cambridge: Thank you for letting me give evidence today. Our members supply food and drink to convenience stores—maybe around

72,000 convenience stores across the UK—and around 300,000 food service outlets. They also own large estates of convenience stores.

Over the three years since the inquiry opened in 2021, we have seen around a 30% hike in crimes, including violent crimes, against our members. These can include thefts against retailers in a cash and carry car park. They can include ram raids at wholesale depots. People have been known to come in over the top, through the roofs of wholesale depots. One ram raid was really catastrophic. They stole half a million pounds-worth of goods. Things that are very high value—high-end spirits, vapes, cigarettes—are easy to resell. It is predominantly organised crime in our sector. They use the motorway corridors up and down the country to target large warehouses that are rich in what they are stocking. Unlike retail stores we do hold those large quantities, which makes warehouses particularly vulnerable.

Another vulnerable point we have is when goods come in, so from suppliers at the back of their depots, and when those goods are in transit. Once they have left the depot, many of the convenience stores will opt for a delivered service, which means that there are vast quantities of tobacco, high-end spirits and vapes in the backs of lorries. Once they get to traffic lights, they are attacked, essentially. They don't go near the driver. They tend to just do what they are doing. Two will get out the car and open the doors, a third will take the stock and off they go when the traffic lights turn. It really is a problem. I am sure we will get on to the measures that our members are putting in place to try to prevent that, but that should give you a bit of an overview.

- Q5 **Chair:** That is a very good start. To be clear, your workers—the people who are employed—are not usually included in the retail category, so we need to make sure that they are included in the new offence.

Lyndsey Cambridge: Probably our biggest ask of you today is that the new stand-alone offence extends into retail. I know you are meeting with Patrick Holdaway later. He has agreed in principle via the NBCC that that will be the case, but we really need that in black and white.

- Q6 **Chair:** I think we will come back to that; I know that Members have questions on that. Mr Woodall.

Edward Woodall: Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to give evidence. I think I am telling a broadly similar picture to other colleagues. It is true that if you look at our data from the convenience sector or the wider retail sector, the level of violence and abuse against shop workers has increased. When the Committee was last doing its inquiry, that drive in violence and abuse was very much characterised by covid measures—face masks, social distancing—but now, the typical scenarios of violence and abuse in a convenience store setting are characterised by workers encountering someone who is stealing from the store, asking a customer to verify their age when they are buying an age-restricted product, or refusing to serve a customer, because by law you



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cannot serve some customers if they are intoxicated or for whatever reason. Those are the key flashpoints that we see for violence and abuse.

As Paul mentioned, the biggest driver of the rise of violence and abuse is increased levels of shop theft committed by prolific offenders who often have addiction issues or other issues that are not being dealt with, which is driving them to steal. The products that they typically steal are high-value items for resale in the wider community. That problem has really grown significantly, to the point where shop theft is at a pretty unprecedented level in our data. Pretty much from summer 2021 onwards, we have seen it rise very quickly.

When you ask retailers whether it is to do with the cost of living crisis, about two thirds say yes, but it is not typically because people are falling on hard times and then choosing to steal; it is because those prolific offenders are having to steal more to sustain what they need. It is also because there is a wider market for people wanting to buy the goods that are being stolen from stores, which are typically meat, cheese, alcohol—things that can be resold within the community.

The key driver is those prolific offenders. It is not opportunistic; it is very much prolific. In some sense it is organised, but I urge some caution about that. For convenience store settings it is very localised. It is two to three-people crime waves, which are known to the retailer, the police and the community, but are not being dealt with appropriately and properly. That is what we have seen as a real driver of violence and abuse at this time.

Q7 **Chair:** Thank you. Ms Cairns?

Joanne Cairns: We thank the Committee for reopening this issue and following up on your report. USDAW represents 360,000 members. The vast majority of our members work in retail, and we have been campaigning on this issue for a long time. We launched our “Freedom from fear” campaign back in 2003, so this is not a new issue for us, but what we have seen in recent years is that the scale and the seriousness of incidents have been heightened.

We have the results from our latest “Freedom from fear” survey, which covers 2023; we survey thousands of our members on this issue every year. We found that seven out of 10 respondents had been verbally abused, 46% had been threatened and 18% had been physically assaulted in the last year. The biggest change that we saw year to year was the increase in physical assaults. From 2022 to 2023, that went up from 8% to 18%. When we asked our members what had triggered these incidents, we found that shoplifting has now become the trigger for 61% of them. That, coupled with the record levels of retail crime that other people have talked about today, is driving a huge number of incidents. We are seeing increasing crime from organised gangs driving these incidents of abuse, threats and violence.



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We found that levels of abuse were particularly high during the pandemic, which we talked about last time we gave evidence on this issue. However, even though the abuse has fallen slightly since then, it is still significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels. If you look back to 2016, the figure for those experiencing abuse was only 20%—that is still far too many. But it is now 50 percentage points higher than that—70%. The figure for those being threatened was 18% and is now 46%. Physical assaults, which I have mentioned, have increased significantly. They are at an all-time high, according to our members. In 2016, 2% of our members said they had been physically assaulted; it is now 18%—almost one in five.

Our major concern, obviously, is about our members' safety and about how they feel when they go to work. It is particularly harmful not to feel safe in your place of work. When you see repeat offenders coming in—I am talking about the level of anxiety that that causes people; they feel unsafe in their workplace. I think it is very important to remember that retail workers are serving their communities. They play an absolutely essential role in their communities and they deserve to be protected.

Q8 Chair: Could you say something about whether there is more likelihood that a woman working in retail will be attacked or threatened, or particular racial groups will be? Are you able to break it down in that way?

Joanne Cairns: We asked our members whether they had experienced harassment. More than half of our black and minority ethnic members—54%—said that in the last year they had suffered racial harassment at work, and 41% of our women members said that they had experienced misogynistic abuse. That is higher for younger women—women under 27—57% of whom said that they had experienced sexist abuse at work.

Q9 Tim Loughton: Welcome back, Mr Gerrard. Three years ago, you came and gave evidence to the Committee and came up with some quite alarming figures, as you have done again now. What, if anything, has changed in the Co-op's approach over the last three years?

Paul Gerrard: We have continued to innovate in terms of how we protect our colleagues. We continue to spend three or four times the sector average per store on security. We have introduced body-worn cameras on much more of our estate. We have increased the use of what we call tactical guarding, which is undercover guarding by people who go in and detain offenders in the act and call for police support.

Some of the crime types have changed. We have seen over the last 18 months a real rise in what we call kiosk breaches. Many of our stores will have kiosks in them. Last year, there were 1,200 kiosk breaches. The people are invariably armed and they are targeting high volumes, so we have invested £4 million to introduce, already, 200 very, very secure kiosks, and we are going to invest more. It is a case of innovating to do things differently, to try to tackle this.

The last thing I would say—I think this is the most important thing—is that we continue to develop more partnerships with the police. We currently



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have 12 different partnerships across the UK. One of our early ones was in Sussex, as you know, with Katy Bourne. In the first quarter of this year the results, in terms of offenders managed, sentences and CBOs, are about 200% up year on year. That is the secret: working with the police to maximise the impact they can make, as well as what we can do.

- Q10 Tim Loughton:** So you have spent a lot of additional money and have done a lot around designing out crime, supposedly, but you have just told us that the level of crime is the highest it has ever been, so that has not worked, has it?

Paul Gerrard: Well, there is a counterfactual: if we hadn't done it, something different would have happened. What is at the heart of the problem is that, no matter what we do, there comes a point when you need police support. That is the reality, and up until October, the police were not turning up.

I will give you two bits of data that are not unique to the Co-op; other retailers will say the same thing. In the first quarter of 2023, on 70% of occasions when we were asking for police support, the police did not turn up. We weren't asking for support with somebody who had nicked a ham sandwich. To give you an example, a colleague rang because there was an armed robbery in the space. He was told to ring 101, the non-emergency number. That is the first point.

The second point is that, when our security guards were detaining offenders in store—I stress that this was before October, because something different has happened since—we called police support and made a citizens' arrest, but the police did not turn up on 80% of occasions. That meant that we let the individual go. You can say that what we've done has not worked, but we think we have kept our colleagues as safe as we possibly could. We were disappointed by the police support, but it is worth saying that things have changed. I would like to explain at some point what changed.

- Q11 Tim Loughton:** In terms of your security guards—as you know, this has been a moot point in the Co-op stores in my constituency—has your policy on the use of Mitie security guards changed since you last gave evidence?

Paul Gerrard: In terms of?

Tim Loughton: You told us that they are a visual deterrent only.

Paul Gerrard: We have two kinds of guards. The static guards you see at the door are a visual deterrent and will intervene as needed. We can talk about some examples in your constituency of where they have intervened and were assaulted as a result. We also have undercover guards who are there deliberately to intervene and detain people. We have two types of guard, because we have developed how we work.

- Q12 Tim Loughton:** In terms of what your staff, including the security guards, can do, what are their powers? How often are they likely to exercise those powers, rather than rely on the police, who don't turn up?



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Paul Gerrard: Shop workers and security guards have no more powers than any other member of the public. They have the power of citizens' arrest, but in common with, I think, every retailer in this country, we tell our colleagues not to intervene if they are going to put themselves in danger, and the same applies to the security guards.

I can give the example of Lancing, which we have discussed before, Mr Loughton. We have a particular problem at that store and we were not getting a police response. When our security guard intervened with some youth offenders, the guard was attacked. They detained a youth offender and called for police support. The police didn't turn up on time, but the youth offender's family did, and they proceeded to give the guard a good kicking before the police arrived. The police response is critical in giving my colleagues, all shop workers and security guards, the confidence to intervene.

Q13 **Tim Loughton:** With respect, Mr Gerrard, as you know there are many incidents in that store and other stores in my constituency and elsewhere around the country, where the security guards specifically will not intervene because they are told to be a visual deterrent only. It is not they who are assaulted; it is members of the public who are assaulted because they have stepped in to try to stop people nicking stuff. They put themselves on the frontline of danger. The staff step back, which is not acceptable. You are not just there to protect your staff; you are also there to protect your customers, who bring you your earnings.

Paul Gerrard: Yes, absolutely, which is why we spend almost four times more than anybody else in the sector on security. What I would say is that there were 1,000 incidents reported in the Lancing store in 2023, including serious violent assaults. The police never turned up before July, and they only turned up in July because a video of a PCSO sat in the car refusing to intervene went viral. The really frustrating thing is that when Sussex police, who are normally really good on retail crime—versus youth offending—did intervene, the problem stopped within months. When we work with police—when we do our bit and they do their bit—we can tackle this. I think it is really dangerous to suggest that shop workers or security guards should intervene and put themselves at risk when they know there is no police support coming.

Tim Loughton: Without getting too parochial on this, you will know, because you were part of the meeting, that a neighbouring supermarket has a very different approach to security guards: it has security guards on the door who will physically prevent known or suspected shoplifters and troublemakers from coming in; its staff and security guards trail suspected shoplifters and troublemakers around the store and eject them; and where children are involved, staff will proactively go and speak to the parents of those children and threaten them with not being allowed to shop in that store unless they get a grip on their children's activities. The rates of shoplifting and violence in that neighbouring store is a fraction of those at your store—

Paul Gerrard: It is a very different store.



Q14 Tim Loughton: The problem is that the incidence of shoplifting and antisocial behaviour at the Co-op stores in my constituency is double or triple that of comparable stores elsewhere. When you came previously, Mr Gerrard, you said that most crimes are based on risk and reward. It has become a well-known fact that the risk of being intercepted by a member of staff, let alone a security guard where you have them—you don't have them in most of the stores in my constituency—is minimal, and the Co-op has therefore become the go-to store for shoplifters and troublemakers. I am afraid that is still the fact of the matter in my constituency.

Paul Gerrard: I don't think that is the fact of the matter. First, you are comparing a convenience store with a large-box retailer. Secondly, if that large-box retailer knew what that local store was doing, it would be extremely disappointed, because they are putting themselves at significant risk. We have shown in Sussex that when we have a proper response you can take these individuals off the street and solve the problem. In general, Sussex police are extremely good; this is a problem with youth offending, where, with 700 offences, there was no response whatsoever from the police, including the sergeant that spoke to you.

Q15 Tim Loughton: The issue is the same for the neighbouring retailers as it is for you; the numbers with the Co-op are just way higher. When I last went with the police around the Co-op, not so long ago, none of the shop workers were wearing body-worn cameras because they chose not to. The tagged items, which now include Nutella chocolate spread, which is tagged in a plastic box, were not actually tagged—it was for show only. Isn't that the problem, Mr Gerard? Criminals know that the Co-op is visual deterrence only, and that whatever the police response may be, you are not doing your bit to intervene on the criminals who are raiding from your store.

Paul Gerrard: That is a scandalous thing to say about an organisation that spends three times the sector average and that, because of our work with the police, has seen more than 100 offenders managed this quarter alone. I would say that if you compare convenience stores with convenience stores, you will see that the Co-op is no more targeted than anybody else. The data that Ed has provided—

Q16 Tim Loughton: That is just not true in my constituency. You know the figures in my constituency. You are targeted far more than anybody. I am just saying—

Paul Gerrard: You are comparing us with a big-box—

Chair: Order. Both cannot speak at once.

Tim Loughton: I am just saying that you have spent three times as much. With all the perfectly understandable, reasonable things you have done on designing out crime or whatever, at the end of the day, you are spending far more than other retailers and you are being targeted far more than other retailers.

Paul Gerrard: That is not true. That is factually not true.



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Q17 **Tim Loughton:** If you would like to give us the figures for the stores in my constituency, which I know, compared with others, I think we will see that that is true.

Paul Gerrard: If you compare convenience store estate with convenience store estate, you will have a very different perspective. You are comparing a big box with a specific entrance and products in different areas with a small-format store. It is frankly naive to compare the two.

Q18 **Chair:** Okay, so you will provide the information.

Paul Gerrard: I am very happy to.

Q19 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, panel. I would like to ask you about convenience stores and the fact that there are so many corner shops that are operated by non-white workers. I wanted to hear, from your point of view, how you are capturing information on the rise in race-hate crime towards those workers, and what support is provided to them when their shops are being attacked.

Edward Woodall: In our crime report, we collect data around verbal abuse generally. We do a colleague survey, which shows that 87% of colleagues had experienced some form of verbal abuse, so it happens in all stores and all locations, unfortunately. We also collect data around hate-motivated crime that suggests that 34% of those verbal instances are hate motivated in some way.

We provide advice and guidance to retailers separately on how to keep their core colleagues safe. We worked with the Suzy Lamplugh Trust on creating a workplace safety charter, which is about communication and training, risk assessments in stores, and tools for them to use. We have also delivered the ShopKind campaign for the Home Office to try and get the message out to consumers around being kind when they are in shops, and reminding them, as we touched on earlier, of the important work that shop workers do. We thought it was important to track that figure and give advice and guidance to all retailers around how to manage the best possible environment.

To the discussion we have just had, I think it is about the overall picture of security and the overall tools available to retailers in their retail settings. It is not just about security guarding; it is actually about how you can make colleagues feel connected with the investments that you make. As a sector, we have made £339 million worth of investment in crime prevention measures. A lot of those are about making colleagues feel connected, so that they can get support when they need it. Things like headsets, body-worn cameras, remotely monitored CCTV—CCTV for the store will be monitored externally and then someone can intervene so a colleague feels supported—and aftercare support and counselling services are some of the key areas we see retailers investing in more. It is an absolute priority to provide support to all colleagues when these incidents happen, and ultimately to prevent them from happening in stores.

Q20 **Kim Johnson:** Do you report those race-hate crimes to the police so that



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the information is captured?

Edward Woodall: We say to retailers, "Report all crime." That includes hate-motivated crime. They should be reporting those incidents. As we might come on to, I think retailers find it challenging sometimes when they are reporting those into policing systems. That is something that we want to do better, and that is addressed in the national retail crime action plan. The message is absolutely to try to report everything. We have to manage expectations around the response we will get from the police to some of those reports.

- Q21 **Kim Johnson:** I am sure we will touch on some of those issues with the second panel. Some of your colleagues have spoken about organised crime being involved in the increase in theft and crime within stores. From your point of view, do you feel that there is also an element of poverty that plays into that as well? Not everybody will go in and take out packs of bacon from a store; some people are reaching desperation point. I want to know if you have captured information on those local people who are stealing from shops? We have heard instances of women having to steal baby milk because they are so desperate, and because the price has been inflated. Do you capture that kind of data, so you separate organised crime from those desperate people?

Edward Woodall: It is really hard to capture that in the data and the polling that we collect. We ask retailers about the perception of what is motivating people to steal from the stores, and the majority of the response we get is that it is a habit or an addiction issue. That is the number one response. The second response is that it is around organised criminality, and the third response is that it is opportunist. I think that falls into the opportunist category, because they do not know why others are stealing; it might be because they see the opportunity, or it might be for other reasons. We do not have particular data on that.

What has come through in our polling is that retailers feel that the cost of living crisis has driven an increase in shop thefts, so some of those factors might be at play there. But in the majority of cases, we are seeing people stealing to resell goods in the community.

- Q22 **Kim Johnson:** Joanne, in terms of the work that USDAW does with members and employers, what kind of training is provided to ensure that staff are safe? People have mentioned this morning about staff not taking on shoplifters. Is that enforced on workers? Do workers ever get disciplined or sacked if they have not confronted a shoplifter?

Joanne Cairns: First, I agree with what Paul said earlier about how it is extremely important that shop workers are not being pressured to intervene in those incidents, because their safety should be paramount. That is the approach taken by most of the retailers that we work with. They are very clear that people are not expected to put themselves at risk in these situations. Training is provided, although the quality of the training might vary. Whether policies work well always depends on how they are implemented on the ground and on the quality of the



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management support, but for the most part our members are given clear instructions on how to deal with those sorts of incidents.

What our members do report that they would like to see more of is management back-up when incidents happen. That is something that comes up quite often. Some 40% of our members said that they would like to see more management support when they are dealing with an incident. I think it leads into that wider issue about police support as well; if you are reporting to a manager, the manager needs to have somewhere to go with it. They need to have back-up and support from the police if they are going to deal with these incidents. It cannot all just be on the manager to resolve it. We think that better police support would actually help employers to provide better management support to our members.

- Q23 **Kim Johnson:** In terms of those staff members who have been affected returning to work and possibly suffering from post-traumatic stress, what kind of support do some of the employers that you work with provide to those workers?

Joanne Cairns: We ask employers to support staff coming back to work, to ensure that they are able to take the time off that they need in order to recover from these incidents and bring them back into work in a sensitive and supportive way. The immediate issue, of course, is the fear of a repeat incident. You can put all the supportive measures in the world in place, but if that person comes back to work and they think that the person who attacked them will come back into the workplace and potentially attack them again, they will be of limited effect. Again, that is where those wider issues around police resourcing and response are so important.

- Q24 **Simon Fell:** Thank you for joining us today. The last time we worked on this, the Committee made a recommendation that the Government bring forward a separate offence. To be honest, the Committee was quite finely balanced on whether we thought there was a need for it and whether existing laws covered many of the issues that you have raised today. I am interested to hear from each of you—I will come to you separately on wholesale, Lyndsey—why you think that this law will make a difference. I will start with you, Paul.

Paul Gerrard: There are a few points to make. As a point of principle—I think Ed alluded to this—many of the incidents of violence and abuse result from the enforcement of laws made here. If this place makes laws that need to be implemented by people on the ground, they should give them protection. That is not a particularly innovative thing to say. I am a former customs and excise law enforcement officer, and there has always been a specific offence of attacking a customs officer, and now emergency work is the same. There is a point of principle there.

The second thing is messaging. Telling retail workers that this place cares about them, particularly given what they did in the pandemic, is important. It is also about sending a message to the people who would seek to abuse and attack them.



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The most important thing is that the evidence in Scotland is that it works. What we see in Scotland, where there has been a stand-alone offence since 2021, is that there is a much higher rate of arrest. The British Retail Consortium—none of the data here is perfect and clean, but I think it is good enough for comparison purposes—estimates that 8% of incidents of violence or abuse across the UK result in a prosecution. In Scotland, since the introduction of that offence, 61% of reported incidents resulted in an arrest. An arrest is not a prosecution, I understand that, but 61% compared with 8% suggests that it helps to drive a better police response. There could be a number of things—the ease of the prosecution, the ability to track it and so on—but the most important thing for us is that it has worked in Scotland and resulted in a better police response with greater protection for shop workers.

Q25 Simon Fell: Thank you. I will come on to Scotland in a little bit. Edward, I will come to you.

Edward Woodall: Paul has given an excellent account of why you need that in terms of the principle and the messaging around this. However, from what you have heard this morning, there is a pretty unprecedented challenge facing retail workers in this space, as we have all described. It is a lot about police still attending and being more motivated to attend and seek prosecutions. Ultimately, this is still about police attending to catch those offenders and prolific offenders who are not only committing crime in stores but in the wider community. The difference with the stand-alone offence to the aggravating factor is that we can track this. We can look at this data, see how it is being used and come back to it. That has really been the challenge, because the aggravating factor is down to the discretion of magistrates courts to apply. We cannot see that, despite some of the best efforts of the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice. So I think there are benefits there as well.

Joanne Cairns: We have been campaigning for a stand-alone offence for many years and we are pleased the Government have finally taken action on that. There has been massive support from across the industry and a clear need for it. We need to look in detail at what comes forward. We think it is really important that the legislation mirrors legislation in Scotland, in that the scope would include abuse and threats, as well as physical violence and not just physical assaults. We support including wholesale in it, as Lyndsey was mentioning. We have members working in wholesale and we want them to be protected as well.

As others have said, the stand-alone offence would be really important in making sure that these crimes are more visible, that we fully understand the scale of them and that police forces can allocate their resources accordingly. In Scotland, I believe the detection rate, as Paul mentioned, is impressive at 61.7%. Unfortunately, because of the backlog in the court, there is only an 11.6% conviction rate so far, so that is obviously a wider issue that needs to be addressed.

Q26 Simon Fell: Lyndsey, do you want to give us an explanation of what you are looking for to cover wholesale? What would you like added to the



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proposal?

Lyndsey Cambridge: Really, it is as simple as the wording and the definition of “wholesale worker” to include anyone who works within a cash and carry setting or those drivers who are moving high-value goods around the country to their intended convenience store. For them to be included, as Joanne said, would be a critical thing for us. We feel that if that does not happen, we will see a displacement of crime from the high street, from somewhere like Paul’s stores in the Co-op, to industrial estates and big cash and carry warehouses. They will be out of scope of the protected status that retail workers on the high street will have, and will potentially be seen as the weaker link. We absolutely do not want to move the problem from one place in society to another, so we would strongly recommend that that is amended and included.

Q27 **Simon Fell:** That is very helpful and clear—thank you.

I come back to the debate we had last time, which was: how much of this is about the creation of a new offence and how much is about the response that law enforcement gives you to support your staff and teams. I have been on a couple of visits to Co-op stores in Barrow-in-Furness—in Askam and Ainslie Street. It is the point that has come up again and again in this panel: offences happen, but there is not the police response to back them up and we know that the police response is not coming. I am curious. When we look at the Scottish example, what is driving a better police response? When crimes are being committed as they are now, under laws on the statute book, you are still not seeing the police backfilling it. Why will this new law make that difference?

Paul Gerrard: That is a really good question; you will probably have to ask the police in Scotland. Our sense of it is that since that became legislation, the prioritisation of retail crime has improved, and the clarity about what they are trying to achieve, particularly around violent abuse, has improved, and that has driven a better response. In a sense, I think it has probably focused minds. I am told by serving police officers that this kind of offence is easier to prosecute, and if the new offence is triable both ways, which means that it can go to a magistrates court or a Crown court—I am not sure that is clear yet—that means that you can get relatively swift justice. So, my sense is that it has helped the police prioritise retail crime, so you do get a better rate of attendance.

If I may say so, since the publication of the retail crime action plan, attendance rates for some of the things that we monitor have improved—have trebled. They were detaining people 22% of the time before the retail crime action plan. Since the publication of the retail crime action plan, that has trebled; we detain somebody in 68% of incidents. I think the police attendance is critical. In Scotland, I think it has helped clarify and sharpen that.

Q28 **Simon Fell:** Finally from me, on visits, it has really struck me that where your team members are wearing body-worn cameras and you have CCTV in the stores, getting that information to the police has been challenging. Either they will not accept it or they do not think it is good-enough



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quality. Reading across to Scotland, where this law is now in place, are you seeing improvements in that sort of information sharing, so that the police are better equipped to go out and get the people responsible?

Paul Gerrard: I do not have any quantitative data for this, but having spoken to colleagues in Scotland, I will say that there is much greater co-operation in, to coin a phrase, getting that evidence into the hands of the police—by email ideally or, if not, by burning it on to a disc or a stick and getting it across. I think that is all about clarity and the prioritisation that the police in Scotland are giving it following the Act.

Q29 **Simon Fell:** That is helpful.

Edward Woodall: Obviously there is a Police Scotland, so there is more consistency, compared with the number of forces that you have in England. When you look at the whole sector, retailers engaging in the reporting processes are dealing with different systems and different processes, and the reporting processes are not always as easy. If you have one format that people can follow easily, that makes a big difference in terms of getting information in. For example, where the national retail crime action plan is published, there is a case study showing how a retailer can report crime. That is a 10-page document—2,500 words—that has to be printed out and filled in for a shop theft offence. That just goes to show the process that needs to be streamlined, and perhaps that is one of the factors that is driving it too.

Simon Fell: We will pick that up with the police later.

Q30 **Chair:** I wondered whether it is possible to get information about the differences between police forces. Obviously, we have just been talking about Police Scotland—one police force—but in England and Wales we have 43. Although the figures have gone up since the retail crime action plan, I think all constituency MPs would like to know what their own local force is doing and how well they are responding. Is it possible to get that information?

Paul Gerrard: Where our undercover officers have detained an individual and have called for police support, we can give you the data broken down by force, where we deployed those teams. That will vary across forces. Some forces are better than others. Some are attending on every single occasion; some aren't. We can give the Committee that data. I will explain it; it might be a very specific piece of data, but I think it is a good bellwether of the importance of this for various police forces.

Chair: That would be very helpful.

Q31 **Marco Longhi:** I will start with Mr Gerrard, and then any of you may come in afterwards. It is a question common to all. Wherever I go in my constituency, whether it is to a medium to small Co-op or a large Tesco or any retail store, and I ask about why we are seeing such high levels of crime and violence towards shop workers, there seems to be one common thread in all of it. Their response to me is typically—for example, at Woodsetton Co-op store in my constituency—"Because they



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know they can get away with it. There are no consequences.”

In this particular store at Woodsetton, and at the Tesco one as well, they say that it is the same people all the time. Some of them sit literally across the road from the entrance to the store. They know when the high-value goods are being delivered into the shop. They can tell when there are fewer customers coming in. They can literally walk in, and shop workers might stand aside—your instruction to them is, “Don’t put yourself at risk,” and I quite understand why you would say that—then they help themselves and leave.

For me, this is a policing issue. The more we see the police refusing to deal with what they have perhaps decided to describe as lower-level crime, the more these people feel emboldened. There is actually a ripple effect of these criminals pushing boundaries, becoming even bolder and committing even more serious crimes.

This is not rocket science. A few decades ago—whenever it was—when the Mayor of New York implemented the broken windows principle, they went after what we these days would describe as almost non-crimes, whether that is graffiti or drunken behaviour, or lower-level crimes as the police like to describe them. That had a dramatic effect on reducing levels of crime everywhere.

Would you all agree with what I have just summarised, or do you feel there is any self-reflection as a sector that perhaps the sector itself could do more?

Paul Gerrard: The assessment that people think that they can get away with it is right. The assessment that this is by a relatively small number of prolific offenders is also right. Those prolific offenders are known to my colleagues and to local policing. Up until recently, the police have not prioritised that.

The point on self-reflection is a fair one. We should always look at what more we can do, but our priority as employers has to be to ensure that our colleagues are safe, and how we can keep them safe. Our view is that the best way we can keep them safe is to work with the police to help identify people.

I will give you one example. I have been critical of policing in the past. It is not something that I would want to do—I am a former law enforcement officer; it is not what I want to do—but I have been critical. There have been plenty of examples where individual police forces have shown leadership. In Nottinghamshire, through Operation Synergy, Inspector Ollie Vale worked with the Co-op to identify the prolific offenders. We knew who they were and he arrested 17 within two or three weeks.

This is fixable. Businesses absolutely have to come forward to help and play their full part, as do the police. I repeat, though, that since the retail action plan, certainly for us, we are seeing a better police response. They are attending, and once they have attended, they can intervene and tackle it. If you tackle the small number of prolific offenders, you address a lot of this issue.



Marco Longhi: Would anyone else like to come in?

Lyndsey Cambridge: Within the wholesale sector, on your point about whether the sector could do more as a whole, I want to run you through a bit of an itinerary of what a typical wholesaler may have in place for crime prevention. Their budgets have typically tripled over the past three years. An average wholesaler can spend up to £4 million a year on security now.

The measures they are investing in are some of the following: barriers when you enter cash and carry car parks; security guards; shutters; vibration sensors on the walls for ram raid prevention; infrared and motion sensors; caged roofs to prevent coming in over the top; daily visits from something like G4S to limit the amount of cash on the premises; smoke cloaks; a switch from slam locks to freight locks as security mechanisms on lorries; body-worn cameras; and enhanced CCTV, so that they have every chance of giving over to the police enough evidence for prosecution.

Q32 **Marco Longhi:** If they bother to turn up.

Lyndsey Cambridge: That is the trouble. As Paul said, I do not like to criticise the police—they are very busy people—but our evidence is that there is a woeful response when there are crimes—violent crimes and high-value theft as well. As I said, we are talking about £20,000, £25,000 or £30,000 stolen at a time, and obviously we had the incident of £500,000. Those goods are tobacco, vapes and high-end spirits, which are being resold in organised crime. Without a police response, our wholesale members cannot do any more than they are doing.

There is obviously a varying degree of these measures in place between wholesalers. We do not want regional wholesalers to not be able to afford these measures and to have a displacement from larger, national wholesalers that have these measures and are fortifying their warehouses. You will see a monopoly being created, where regional wholesalers will drop off. That is absolutely not what we want to happen and I know it is not what the likes of DEFRA want to happen; we work with them closely and they are very keen to ensure that regional supply remains.

Marco Longhi: Thank you. Mr Woodall?

Edward Woodall: I agree with your assessment of the challenge. It is about prolific offenders around stores. I hope we can get to a point where policing sees the scale of the challenge as an opportunity to try to address some of those earlier. There are 5.6 million shop theft offences recorded—that is 5.6 million opportunities to get some good, rich data on who is committing these offences.

As a sector, we will always feel like we want to do more; we will always want to invest more in keeping colleagues safe. If there is one area that we should focus on more, and have more partnership with the police on, it is how we get the data in and reported to the police. If we can get that information in, we can target the very limited resource that the police have at those prolific offenders and make sure that we are dealing with the volume of crime we are seeing from them.



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Marco Longhi: Thank you. Do you want to come in, Joanne?

Joanne Cairns: We have seen retailers who we work with put in increased security measures, which we welcome. They have been investing in security, and in body cams, panic buttons and all those important things. To repeat what everyone else has said: that has to be backed up with adequate police response. That means adequate police resourcing, including more police in neighbourhood policing and more PCSOs in town centres. We support Labour's community policing guarantee, which would include new powers to ban repeat offenders from town centres.

Lyndsey talked about high-value theft. It is also important to think about low-value theft and those repeat offenders. Incidents of shoplifting under £200 are treated as a summary offence, and that has driven a lack of police response and prosecutions in those situations. We would support removing that £200 limit in order to drive up more prosecutions and demonstrate that all shoplifting is being taken seriously. It is not a victimless crime; the victims are the retail workers who are subjected to horrendous abuse and physical assaults.

Q33 **James Daly:** You have two types of offence: one where the offender is detained and one where the offender has left. If there is CCTV, how quickly can a police officer get a copy of that CCTV?

Paul Gerrard: They can get it there and then. We can burn it on to a disc or email it if that is how the systems work.

Q34 **James Daly:** In your experience, is that the same across the retail sector—that if a police officer attends, the CCTV can be provided straightaway?

Edward Woodall: Retailers will endeavour to give it to them as quickly as possible. There are different ways that the systems work for uploading CCTV. Sometimes you will need a crime reference number to be able to submit the CCTV through the digital evidence management system, so there can be a lag, but if the police officer is there and asking for it, we would always endeavour to give it to them as quickly as possible.

Q35 **James Daly:** You are talking to the most technically inefficient person in the universe. How long would that lag take? I have been dealing with this issue for a long time in my life before I came here. Everything that you have all said could have been said 20 years ago—the numbers are just bigger. What used to happen is that a police officer would attend, take a witness statement, get the CCTV if it was there and you had a case. It was as simple as that.

When a police officer attends and the shop worker says, "I've been assaulted," if they know the person, they can say, "I've been assaulted by Fred," because they may be a regular in the shop, but if not, the CCTV becomes an issue for identification. If nobody else can identify, it is something for further investigation. In my view, that information can be given to the police within 24 hours, mostly, but certainly within 48 hours at a push. Would I be right?



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Edward Woodall: Yes, if not more quickly.

- Q36 **James Daly:** Therefore the problem is that it's always excuses. This is a very easy problem to solve. If a police officer attends, you are there. If the person has been detained and a statement is put forward by shop worker X, who says, "I've been punched in the face," or, "This item has been taken," the shoplifter will be taken to the police station. Consideration of the statement will be made. It would seem unlikely that a retail worker is simply going to start lying about somebody who has come into the shop. Then a charge can occur within 24 hours. That is what used to happen. Does that happen now?

Paul Gerrard: Where they attend—and they are attending more—and the person is detained by our guards, that can happen. I do not have the data on how often it happens. I can make inquiries and try to give you a sense. The number of prosecutions has gone up, I think.

- Q37 **James Daly:** It has gone up because for a long period of time the police did not attend, as Mr Longhi said. The reason you have the problem is that because the police did not attend, it was open season. It was the biggest invite to shoplifters you could ever have. There was no deterrent because people were not getting arrested anyway. We have reports to this Committee, and all across the country, of people just parking up outside major stores, walking in, maybe with a weapon, maybe not—you are quite right; I would not expect anybody who works in a shop to confront a violent offender, and why on earth should you go to work to think it is your job to confront somebody who is violent?—taking half the store with them, and nothing happening. The reason comes back to the decision of the prosecuting authorities, for a lengthy period of time, to not take this seriously—to class it as low-level offending. The people you work with are paying the price for that.

I will make a final point. The situation in Scotland is quite clear: it is not down to police numbers, but police priority. You can get the outcomes with the same number of police officers, so all this about resources is nonsense. It is about actually doing the job properly. Would anybody disagree with that?

Paul Gerrard: Our experiences were that there has been police leadership—Sussex, with Katy Bourne, is a really good example, and Nottinghamshire. Where you have police leadership, you have really different outcomes.

- Q38 **James Daly:** So if the police want to arrest and prosecute people, it will happen?

Paul Gerrard: Yes.

James Daly: Thank you very much.

Lyndsey Cambridge: There is a number of police initiatives that should be credited. The National Police Chiefs' Council is very supportive of members of the Association of Convenience Stores and of the Federation of Wholesale Distributors. They do provide information to help to prevent



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crime. In the retail crime plan, you will see Project Pegasus, which we are really keen to see come to fruition. It has been talked about for a little while now—a good few months.

If you are not familiar with Project Pegasus, what it will do is allow businesses to report crimes into one central data point. There will be a dedicated team to divvy those out to the regional police forces so that they can try to tackle organised crime in a more collective way. One of our wholesalers has outstanding crimes with 14 different forces, and it has a good bird's-eye view of how the different forces operate. Some are very responsive, and some are not so much. So we have to be careful when we are criticising the police—it is not a blanket criticism. There are different forces that take this very seriously, and it is high on their agenda, as you alluded to, and some are possibly catching up.

Marco Longhi: That bears out Mr Daly's point, which is that it is a question of choice for the police whether they decide to prioritise it or not, and therefore respond to it or not. Where they do not, these prolific offenders do not just target shops; they end up committing crimes elsewhere as well, because they simply know that they can get away with it.

James Daly: In general, in terms of the local offenders, if you give the CCTV to police, the police will know who that is. The issue of organised crime is a different thing, because people are travelling around the country. That was happening 20 years ago. I just feel that we are complicating a very straightforward issue—but thank you very much for your evidence.

Q39 **Chair:** I would like to ask you a couple of questions. Do you think sufficient resources are going into policing initiatives such as the national business crime centre or the national retail crime steering group, and, locally, the business crime partnerships?

Lyndsey Cambridge: I think there is a worry that Project Pegasus does not have enough resource behind it. An awful lot of data could be feeding into that project and we would urge that that should have enough funding and that it is robust enough to see what is coming.

Chair: More would be better.

Lyndsey Cambridge: Yes.

Paul Gerrard: We are one of the funders of Pegasus and we are beginning to see some outcomes from that. It is very much across force lines, so I hope that Pegasus continues.

In relation to the NBCC, I think things have changed—I repeat that things have changed since the retail crime action plan—but the NBCC has been a long-standing and valuable member of the police response, and a very effective one. The NBCC was the only organisation that was bringing police together nationally. I really hope that it gets the funding it needs. I am not sure it has the funding it needs at the minute, but the value it adds to

retailers is enormous and I would be a huge supporter of it getting more funding than it currently gets.

Edward Woodall: The national business crime centre has done some valuable work in terms of the guidance and information that it has provided to smaller retailers in particular around how to manage shop theft incidents and de-escalate violence in stores. They also do great work around business crime reduction partnerships and increasing the standards around those. We work together on running a number of campaigns, such as safer business action days and ShopKind.

To Lyndsey's point, the national business crime centre connect us with different police forces, so when we have a problem that we need to escalate, they can connect us into the business crime single point of contact. They do that with two people—I think it is actually one person at the moment—and that is for all business, not just retail, so it does need to be resourced more.

Where we are seeing a positive is that we now have a dedicated person on the National Police Chiefs' Council, focusing on retail—you will hear from him later. Hopefully that is a great way to take across policing the need to focus more on retail and the need to take the retail crime action plan forward.

You mentioned the national retail crime steering group, which has also been a very effective group to bring everyone together and hold everyone to account nationally to make sure that we are focused on the right areas. I hope that continues to be able to focus on delivering the national retail crime action plan.

Joanne Cairns: We have a seat on the retail crime steering group and we obviously support anything that brings together and co-ordinates the industry and police, so we fully support it. We also really welcome Project Pegasus and the investment that retailers have made in that. Greater co-ordination between the police and retailers is something that we would always support and encourage, but it does need to happen alongside a holistic range of measures, including local police resourcing.

Q40 Chair: We have the Government's updated action plan. Briefly—we have to move on to the next panel—what is one thing that you would like to see that is not in the updated action plan but that the Government should introduce to help to deal with retail violence and crime?

Joanne Cairns: Going back to my earlier point about the community policing guarantee, we would like to see police being put back into town centres and neighbourhoods so that our members feel safe and customers feel safe when they are out and about in their town centres. We would like to see more investment in neighbourhood policing.

Edward Woodall: My recommendation would be more for the police and crime commissioners, if I am honest, and their police and crime plans. When they come forward, they set the priorities and the budgets, so that is where we need to have a commitment around retail crime and a

commitment to deliver the national retail crime action plan at an operational policing level.

Lyndsey Cambridge: I think you can guess what I am going to say: that it should extend to wholesale workers as well and to make sure that there is a really clear definition of what a retail worker is, which does extend to industrial estates, cash and carries, depots, drivers. I can help you with that particular definition if you should wish—you can follow up later.

If I could be so bold as to make one other request or recommendation, there is something that your next panel may touch on. We have a method of tracking and tracing illicit tobacco in this country. It already exists, but HMRC are the ones that own the rights and the data for that. It is used in cash and carries. When you purchase tobacco you have to scan a barcode. Essentially it is tracked. Once it goes to your store, if HMRC ever wanted to come in and scan your goods, you could see where it originated from, where you bought it from and that you paid the tax.

It is also a very good way of detecting black market tobacco that has been purchased illicitly. The police are moving forward on a project to ensure that HMRC share the rights to this with the police so that police can go in and identify stolen goods. If we tackle it at that end—it needs a multifaceted approach. I urge that that is considered and fast-tracked.

Chair: That is very interesting. Mr Gerrard?

Paul Gerrard: We welcome the police retail crime action plan and the commitments. We have begun to see an improved response. I welcome the Government's announcement last week. I agree with Mr Daly that we can overcomplicate this and it just needs to be policed now. It just needs to be actioned on the ground and I therefore agree with Ed. There is a really important role for police and crime commissioners to make sure that that action plan—the Government action plan and the police action plan—is put in place on the ground. If it is, retailers will absolutely play every role they can to support the police in taking action.

Q41 **Chair:** Excellent. Thank you very much for your evidence this morning. We will reflect on what you have told us. We are now going to hear from our second panel. I am sure we will pick up some of the points with them directly. Thank you.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Superintendent Patrick Holdaway, Chief Superintendent Alex Goss and Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman.

Chair: Good morning and welcome to the Home Affairs Committee. I think you were all at the back of the room during the first session, so you will be aware that there were issues raised that we will want to ask you about. May I start by asking each of you to introduce yourselves? Chief Constable, would you like to start?



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Chief Constable Blakeman: I am Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman, chief constable of North Wales police and the lead for acquisitive crime for the National Police Chiefs' Council and the police national database.

Superintendent Holdaway: I am Patrick Holdaway, a superintendent at City of London police and I lead the national business crime centre.

Chief Superintendent Goss: I am Alex Goss, chief superintendent in North Wales police at the moment, but soon to move to Merseyside. I was appointed as the NPCC leader of retail crime as of August last year.

Q42 **Chair:** You will have heard from that first session that we talked quite a lot about the police response, or the lack of response. Chief Constable, will you respond to those criticisms about the lack of police response? Perhaps look forward as well, because at the end of the session we were aware that things have improved; it is not clear they have improved across all police forces, but in your role perhaps you are able to give us an overview about what is happening now in terms of the police response to retail crime.

Chief Constable Blakeman: In terms of the role of policing in society, it is not a simple situation; it is complex. We get called upon for all sorts of issues in communities. For some years now we have been identifying our attendance at incidents based on threat, harm and risk. That is the way we have been able to deploy to all sorts of incidents. No doubt you will be aware of things like mental health issues in our communities, supporting ambulance colleagues and so on. That means the resources that we have are called on to do a variety of different tasks.

Since last year, we have been working really hard to reprioritise some of the areas where we see that increasing harm identifying itself. One of those has been retail crime. We have worked really hard on the retail crime action plan to try to have that conversation across policing to reprioritise. We have worked with our police and crime commissioners to try to reprioritise and to make sure that we are giving a good level of service across the board. But policing is pulled in many different ways. The budget in relation to policing is 0.7% of GDP. We do not have a never-ending amount of resource to be able to attend absolutely everything. We have had to do that on the basis of threat, harm and risk. I have been fortunate enough to work with retailers and partners, as well as across policing, to devise the retail crime action plan to make sure we can respond to some of the incidents you heard about this morning and that I have been hearing about over the past couple of years. Our response levels are better.

Q43 **Chair:** That is good. Which police forces are doing very well on this?

Chief Constable Blakeman: Out of the data we have pulled, 10 police forces have 100% attendance.

Chair: One hundred per cent? Oh, right.



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Chief Constable Blakeman: They have 100% for offenders who are violent in relation to shop workers. Those are areas that I would suggest are good and I can provide details of them to you afterwards. We have some forces that have really prioritised. We have some forces that are doing excellent work around their business crime partnerships, but that is not across the board at the moment and therefore we are working hard with forces to help with that reprioritisation.

- Q44 **Chair:** Were you shocked to hear some of the figures about the increases in levels of violence against retail workers after covid? We know that with covid there were particular issues, but we hear now, in the latest figures, that they have gone up to be so high again. What do you say about that?

Chief Constable Blakeman: Any figures like that are shocking to hear, aren't they? Nobody goes to work, in any environment, to find themselves subjected to abuse and threats of violence. We are seeing that increase in, I suppose, a lack of tolerance across communities broadly. If you speak to any GP's receptionist, you find that since covid we have had a decrease in levels of the understanding that we saw prior to covid. It is shocking to hear those figures and that is why we have worked on the police retail crime action plan and why we have worked with retailers across the country to get to a better place.

We have tried to categorise our offending cohort into three areas: those people who take an opportunity to commit crime and might have a different driver in relation to that; those who are substance users who are stealing to sell on goods, and in doing so exploit individuals who might be suffering a lack of income—we are trying to tackle that very local level of organised criminality; and those more national organised criminals we see who move up and down the country, and exploit people in committing this crime. We have tried to make sure that our response covers all three bases and that we work with our retail community to make sure they are not subjected to the threats we are hearing about.

- Q45 **Chair:** Okay, I will come to Kim Johnson in a moment, but first I want to ask you a question. The Committee undertook an inquiry into drugs recently. We are well aware of the 10-year drugs strategy and the positive investment that has gone into treatment and services for people with substance misuse problems. Are you seeing that playing out? One of the categories you have just described there is people with these addiction problems. We have a rise in retail crime, and in the violence and the levels of assaults on workers. Are you seeing anything happening around that drugs strategy that is having an impact on retail crime, or is that something you cannot put together?

Chief Constable Blakeman: At the moment, I do not think it is having the impact that I would want it to have. If you talk to any of my officers, they will talk about the challenge of being able to make sure that people are referred into services around addiction because of the lack of availability of some of those services. That is a challenge for us and something that we have to work through, which is why policing is not the only answer in relation to this. I think the investment in the action plan is



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really worth while, as is the steering group, because it is about bringing a number of people together to solve the problem that we are seeing. But for me, the ability to refer is not clear enough and not reliable enough to make sure that the individual will get the help that they need in order to be able to prevent the scale of offending that we are seeing.

- Q46 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, panel. Chief Constable, you mentioned that the police were reprioritising. I wanted to know whether part of that involved the use of facial recognition technology and whether Project Pegasus was part of that. Could you say a little about that, please?

Chief Constable Blakeman: Absolutely. Project Pegasus is part of the national intelligence facility that I am responsible for across policing and that looks at acquisitive crime. What we have done is work with retailers who have invested in this particular concept. We are working with those retailers to identify those offenders who work in the category that I spoke about lastly—those who work across the country and move from one part of the country to the next part of the country, crossing police force areas, committing offences and not being identified in the process of doing so.

As I say, we are working with a number of different retailers now. Each retailer has lots and lots of information and data available to them from their control centres, which we are reaching into so that we are able to identify those offenders. To do that, we do use retrospective facial recognition, so where we have a custody image captured in relation to an individual—if an individual is caught on CCTV—we will run the image through a database to see whether they come up in our custody images, and we are having some positive results from that.

We are also asking and pushing for police forces to use that more, and they are doing so. As far as facial recognition is concerned, it is retrospective; it is done from a custody image dataset and off crime scene footage that we are capturing.

- Q47 **Kim Johnson:** But Chief Constable, you will be aware that there is criticism about the use of facial recognition, particularly in terms of some groups—particularly for black people, who are over-represented in the criminal justice system, and in terms of targeting people at the margins of society. I would like to know from you how you ensure that people are not misidentified and the wrong people are not picked up, because we heard from the first panel that a lot of retail crime is undertaken by people who are already known to the police.

Chief Constable Blakeman: Yes, absolutely. If we know who the individual is, there is absolutely no need to put an image through the police national database—that's the first thing. That is a needless exercise: we have identified the offender, so there would be no need to do that. For situations where we do not know the offender, in 2021 we updated the algorithm in the PND and saw a 51% decrease in the number of images that were retrieved, but the amount that were positive went up, so the identification around the algorithm was much better. False positive ethnicity matches decreased by 71% in relation to the algorithm.



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I am working with the national team in relation to this particular area, and the College of Policing—there is the APP that is set out and all the work that has gone on in terms of live facial recognition—to make sure that what we use to capture those individuals who should be caught and brought to justice is used in a reliable way. What we try to do is to make sure that any identification via facial recognition is dealt with for intelligence and we look at corresponding evidence to identify the individual, whether that be clothing or whatever.

Q48 Kim Johnson: Could you say a little about how widespread the use of that technology is nationally at the moment? Is it used by all forces?

Chief Constable Blakeman: It is available to all forces, because it is part of the police national database, which all forces feed into. They feed all their information into the police national database. The technology is available to each force to use. What we have been doing is training individuals to be competent to put images through and identify people. It is not available to every single officer. It is a super-user, who works under a set of regulations, under a set of principles. They have been identified and trained to use the technology properly.

Q49 Kim Johnson: How would you respond to those criticisms about looking disproportionately at black people and at poorer people?

Chief Constable Blakeman: We are very, very aware of the concern, and very aware of the mistrust that that brings about. We are working really hard to be transparent around that with the communities that are concerned about it. But ultimately, if individuals are going into stores, causing that type of offending and participating in the type of violent behaviour that we heard about, the public would expect us to use what we have available to us to identify those offenders.

Q50 Kim Johnson: What processes are available for people who are misidentified?

Chief Constable Blakeman: In terms of complaint, obviously—

Kim Johnson: Being taken off the system altogether?

Chief Constable Blakeman: Yes, absolutely. The image would be matched to a custody image from when somebody has been in custody, so it would not be that we had a capture image in terms of the general population. It would be from a time a person has—

Q51 Kim Johnson: That is also one of the criticisms at the moment: you are capturing lots of people from wider communities.

Chief Constable Blakeman: I have not had that criticism, no.

Q52 Kim Johnson: Finally, how effective do you think the stand-alone legislation will be in dealing with retail crime, given the comments that we had this morning from the first panel?

Chief Constable Blakeman: When I last appeared here at the Home Affairs Committee, I said that I did not think there was a need for any



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additional legislation. While my view on that has not changed, I understand the desire behind it, and I understand the weight of feeling that is there. What I would not want to happen is for a violent offence against a shop worker to replace something like a robbery, and to be used as an alternative for something that somebody is involved in that is perhaps more substantial. I would not want to see it diminish that.

I would want to see it being effective around speedy justice: something that is available to magistrates courts, where we know that people can be seen and there is a quicker process for the retail workers, rather than it being a very long process in relation to a Crown court trial.

- Q53 **James Daly:** I was going to say "Chief Superintendent Goss", but I also have some information here that says you are actually Assistant Chief Constable Goss. Is that correct?

Chief Superintendent Goss: Soon to be.

James Daly: Oh, soon to be. We will stick to "Chief Superintendent" for the moment, then. Could you remind me whether the police have charging powers for shoplifting offences?

Chief Superintendent Goss: No, they go to the Crown Prosecution Service.

- Q54 **James Daly:** Okay. I am certainly a proponent—in some ways a lone proponent, but I am sure that other colleagues will rush in and say they are as well—of giving full charging powers back to the police. In terms of the way that police deal with retail crime, do you think it that would be a positive step to give the custody sergeant the right to charge shoplifting offences?

Chief Superintendent Goss: I think it is a really good point, and it is certainly a step in the right direction. There is certainly much debate at the moment between policing, the Crown Prosecution Service and the Ministry of Justice about bringing some charging decisions back into policing. I think you said in the previous panel that retail crime, as I refer to it—not shoplifting—is a very simple investigation. A decision on a very simple case can be made by a custody officer, with certain circumstances wrapped around it, so I am a real big advocate of bringing some of those decisions back in.

- Q55 **James Daly:** Okay. To give an example of the bureaucratic process for a police officer, a police officer attends and a statement—I am assuming—would be taken. There may be more than one statement. There may be CCTV—we don't need to go into whether you've got it or not. When the police officer has that in their hands, what has to happen for a charge to happen? If the police officer gets there at 2 o'clock in the afternoon, what happens after those statements are taken?

Chief Superintendent Goss: Statements will be taken from the store itself. All the relevant evidence will be gathered, whether it be CCTV or witness evidence, which would encompass further statements. Depending on the complexity of the investigation and the complexity of the crime, if



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there is an offender detained, they will be arrested and taken back to the custody suite. There will then be a tape-recorded interview with an officer, with the suspect and a solicitor present. Depending on what is said—

- Q56 **James Daly:** To interrupt at that point, I hesitate to say that that was the old days, but when I started off as a criminal defence solicitor, I sat in many of those interviews, and that is what happened in that process. The defendant says whatever they are going to say, whether they accept it or they do not. What happens then?

Chief Superintendent Goss: The charging decision is then one for the Crown Prosecution Service.

- Q57 **James Daly:** How does that happen? How does the officer speak to the Crown Prosecution Service?

Chief Superintendent Goss: That is done via telephone or an online system. They create a number of forms based on the case and that goes through to a decision maker and a decision is made.

- Q58 **James Daly:** How long, on average, does that take?

Chief Superintendent Goss: Depending on how busy the custody suite is at the time and depending on the availability of a lawyer to make the decision, it can be quite quick but it can also, as you can imagine—

- Q59 **James Daly:** Can it take hours?

Chief Superintendent Goss: It can do, yes.

- Q60 **James Daly:** I think to anybody listening to the process, it would seem—I hesitate to use the word, as I do not know whether it is a very legal word—nuts that a police officer is potentially sat at a desk rather than out on their duties for what could be the theft of a very small amount or item. That is a serious matter, but we have created a system where we have police officers away from doing policing, waiting on the other end of a phone in the hope that a lawyer may look at what is a very straightforward case.

Chief Superintendent Goss: Agreed. There definitely has to be some headroom in terms of making that a more streamlined process. There is a discussion to be had around bringing some charging decisions back into a policing environment.

- Q61 **James Daly:** Do you think that, as a result of that and other approaches, the police have just thought on occasion, although I am not saying on every occasion, that that is a very bureaucratic, time-consuming process for a retail crime offence—not a shoplifting offence—and the police have therefore taken the view that “Perhaps we have better things to do and will therefore not prioritise this type of offending, because we have lots of other things on our time and if we go there we will be spending hours waiting on a telephone to try and get a charge, and basically the whole shift has gone.”



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Chief Superintendent Goss: I would like to think not and that that does not happen, but as I just described and you described yourself, Mr Daly, it is a complex situation with a lot of work for an officer. At times that can take a considerable length and take them off the streets where they are visible and working.

- Q62 **James Daly:** This is not a blanket statement, but I think there is a problematic relationship in many ways between the police and the Crown Prosecution Service. I am sure that both organisations are heading towards the same outcomes, but one of the things that we have been told repeatedly is that the level of evidence required of the police and the evidence the police are required to get from various sources for a charge to even be considered is considerable and frustrating.

Do you think that that requirement by the Crown Prosecution Service and, on occasion, the problematic relationship that some forces may have with the Crown Prosecution Service has led to many people who should be charged not being charged?

Chief Superintendent Goss: I certainly cannot comment for the Crown Prosecution Service—

- Q63 **James Daly:** I am asking for your experience as a police officer dealing with the Crown Prosecution Service.

Chief Superintendent Goss: Yes, very much so. There are certainly cases where you have what you think is the reasonable level of evidence for a charging decision and the Crown Prosecution Service may well have a different viewpoint on that. Ultimately, this is all about getting the right decision for the victim, whether that be a court decision or an alternative.

- Q64 **James Daly:** Superintendent Holdaway, forgive me for coming past you for a second; I just want to go to the chief constable. Chief Constable Blakeman, I think the situation in policing is like in every organisation in the country, in that it comes down to leadership. If, through leadership, and in this case policing organisation, that leader, whoever that is, wants to prioritise and wants to ensure that the police attend retail crime offending, that will happen.

You very helpfully gave an example of that with the 10 forces that have prioritised this type of offending and decided they are going to ensure that police officers attend—and that is exactly what happens. Do you agree with that assessment?

Chief Constable Blakeman: Yes.

- Q65 **James Daly:** I can understand why the offence of assaulting retail workers is being introduced, but when you also have section 39 assault and section 47, it seems to me to be repeating things that we already have. I do not know whether you have had a chance to look at the example from Scotland. How do you account for that, where it appears to have led to a 61% increase in arrests? I think was the figure that was given. When we come down to this, we can have an intellectual hypothetical argument, but Scotland appears to show that this approach



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with the retail worker offence works. I do not know whether you have a view on that.

Chief Constable Blakeman: Putting an individual stand-alone offence before a magistrates court and getting sentencing, where you have additional powers attached to it such as a criminal behaviour order and so on, is really useful. In this instance, where we see a stand-alone offence, it is useful to be able to attach that to it. It certainly increases the confidence of shop workers to contact us when something happens.

If they have been in a situation where they have been ringing us and no one has turned up, you can understand them not wanting to call us. I expect to see the amount of calls that we have from the retail community increasing, and I expect to see those increasing as part of the retail action plan and us responding, so I expect those to go up in the same way that they have done in Scotland.

Q66 **James Daly:** Would it also be correct—certainly this is my own personal experience in my constituency—that the vast majority of this type of offending is carried out by people known to the police?

Chief Constable Blakeman: In most instances that is correct. They might not be known to the shop worker, but might be known to the police. It depends on which police officer attends.

Q67 **James Daly:** Taking into account Ms Johnson's well-founded points regarding facial recognition, in terms of identification for this type of offending and people with a local knowledge of the area, and certainly the PC for the area in question, identification for the vast majority of these cases is a relatively straightforward matter, isn't it?

Chief Constable Blakeman: Yes.

James Daly: Superintendent Holdaway, according to the brief I have, you deal with business crime, which may have many different aspects. One thing that I think has happened—I think the large retailers are right in respect of this and the evidence given this morning is right—is that in this type of offending, people have been emboldened by a lack of police over a number of years. I am not criticising anybody sitting on this panel, but they have been emboldened by a lack of police prioritisation.

That is a mixture of a lot of things. I once sat with a very senior member of the Crown Prosecution Service who felt that we should not prosecute any retail offences whatever and they made it clear to their local chief constable that that was their view. Bearing in mind they are the prosecuting authority, that is a thing.

I remember a chief constable in my area who decided—I am paraphrasing, but I am sure you all know who I am talking about—to tell his police officers that when they go out to an offence, they should do what they think is right and not necessarily arrest people for the offence that they have committed. We have created an atmosphere in certain forces throughout the country where there is an attitude of, "This is not serious. It is not a thing we should prioritise and not a thing we should



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arrest people for.” What that has created is businesses that are just sitting ducks now for professional shoplifters.

In my constituency, there is one well-known retailer who can say that every single week somebody will come in, park outside the store, go in, threaten the workers, grab hold of a lot of very expensive items and off they go and nothing ever happens. From a business perspective, has that been fed back to you from the people that you deal with? Do they say that this attitude of law enforcement has created more threats of violence and more large-scale offending and that has to change?

Superintendent Holdaway: Thank you for that. I think there is an issue: they report, they do not see a response and they do not bother reporting again, so there is a challenge around that. On the marker that you talked about earlier in Scotland, the challenge we have had is that we have not had a similar marker in England and Wales. We probably do a really good job around assaults against shop workers, but I could not give you the data to say either way. If nothing else, that marker will allow us to give that data and identify best practice and share best practice. There are opportunities around that going forward.

We talked earlier about the identification. Fifty-five per cent of shop thefts are closed with no known suspects. Invariably that is down to the fact that we do not get the CCTV. To your point in the earlier session around getting CCTV, we want it sent to us electronically. We need to get away from police officers turning up and trying to get a USB pen and a disc that we then cannot view inside, so there is a bit about the technology that allows that information to come in to allow us that immediate justice. That makes a real difference in that respect.

The other bit from me is around the reporting side. In the last 12 months, if we take 2023, we have had about 425,000 shop thefts, which is an increase of a third on the year before. Yet the British Retail Consortium talk about 16 million, so what are we missing?

Q68 **James Daly:** I think it is a very strong argument to say that because no police officers attend, they have given up reporting—not all of it, but some of it.

Superintendent Holdaway: Yes, but I think some of the challenge of that is that we will deal with prolific offenders for six or seven offences when they might have committed 50 or 60 offences. When that goes to court that makes a significant difference. Subsequently at court they might get a three-month prison sentence but be out in six weeks, and then we come to start that process again. That’s a challenge.

Q69 **James Daly:** Two final quick points. I know this is a difficult question for you to answer, and I think a very diplomatic answer was given by Chief Superintendent Goss. Do you agree that it would be helpful if your custody sergeants could charge for retail offending and take the Crown Prosecution Service out of that process?



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Superintendent Holdaway: Yes. There are some examples, and we are looking at best practice of where some forces are able to do that. We are looking to get the CPS on board and raise it out nationally.

- Q70 **James Daly:** Sorry to continue this thread, but that applies not just to shoplifting but assaults on retail workers as well?

Superintendent Holdaway: I think assaults are somewhat different, because there is a bit more of a burden of proof.

- Q71 **James Daly:** I have faith in the police to be able to deal with that. You are dealing with this, and you are knowledgeable about the law. You have the experience that the Crown Prosecution Service has. Proving an assault does not take a mastermind. Therefore, the police should have that power as well. Do you not think?

Superintendent Holdaway: You get different levels of assault. Looking at the data, in the last 12 months we have had something like 1.4 million different types of assaults, so they cover a wide gambit. To come out with a simple yes or no is very difficult. We need to look at it and identify those that we can actually deal with.

Chief Constable Blakeman: I think that we should have some of those charging decisions back in policing. It would make life a lot more straightforward in terms of how you explain an investigation.

I know from speaking to my officers on a daily basis the frustrations that they are seeing, but alongside that are other things that need to change too, such as the sentencing guidelines and the impact of that when it does get to court. There has to be a wholesale response, including the ability to refer into sustainable addiction services. The problem requires a number of people around the table, rather than just one of us having charging back.

- Q72 **Marco Longhi:** I have authored a paper on policing in recent weeks, and I have to say that some of the research numbers I came across were truly horrifying. If I may, I will refer to some of them, as they are in front of me and I prefer to be precise.

Half of police forces are not investigating crimes properly according to the official watchdog. When the police tolerate small offences and effectively decriminalise crimes such as shoplifting—sorry, retail crime—and burglary, they allow criminal behaviour to escalate. Passive policing has also led to more passive citizenry. Polling in 2022 showed that over one in 10 people would not report a burglary, assault or mugging to the police. This increased to one in four for not reporting antisocial behaviour. More than half of those people believed the police would not solve a crime even if they did make a report. The Victims' Commissioner found that 34% of victims surveyed would not report a crime again to the police.

It is true, isn't it, that the most vulnerable are likely the ones who will suffer most as a result of certain police forces—we are talking about half of them—choosing to have a policing operating model that specifically



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disadvantages the vulnerable? I would really like to know what NPCC is going to do about this.

My research has also shown that trust in the police is at an all-time low. It has never been as low as this. Following the plans back in 2019, policing numbers are also at the highest they have ever been. So what are the plans? I am in the West Midlands, and they are in special measures, like several other police forces. What are you going to do about this? Obviously retail crime fits into all this, but this is a manifestation that the lack of policing of retail crime, and solving cases is just one element of what is happening in society overall. Burglaries are not being attended, and violent crime is not being attended.

Chief Constable Blakeman: I do not know the paper you refer to, so apologies. I am not sure of the source of the data that you have collated as part of it. I would be really interested to read it, if you would not mind sending it to me.

Q73 **Marco Longhi:** I will send you the details.

Chief Constable Blakeman: I would find it fascinating, so thank you very much. From an NPCC point of view, we are working incredibly hard to make sure that we are prioritising the things that matter to our communities. We are working hard with our police and crime commissioners to make sure that those police and crime plans prioritise the right things. If there is anything, particularly for my area, that I do not think is picked up in the police and crime plan, then I am picking that up as a force priority, for us to work on and make sure that we deliver to our communities.

While I accept your research and data saying that trust and confidence is at an all-time low, that is not the case for every police force across the country. Again, it is about working with the College of Policing, making sure we have that clear knowledge bank, and using best practice. Good people like Alex here are working to co-ordinate our response across various areas.

You talk about burglary. The lead for burglary works to myself, as the acquisitive crime lead. We have done a huge amount of work around burglary attendance and investigations, professionalising that and making sure that our officers know what they are doing. We have had a record number of people entering policing at the same time that we have had a record number of people exiting policing. We are continually catching up in training and making sure that we have that response on the ground.

Marco Longhi: I refer to the Peelian principles of policing in my report, where wider society is the police itself. I find it terribly disturbing that we are seeing such increased levels of cynicism now, where people are choosing not to report crimes anymore.

I have neighbours, I have people I talk to as a Member of Parliament—I engage with as many people as I can. Yes, you might describe it as anecdotal evidence, but it triangulates very, very strongly. As the NPCC,



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you guys are at the leadership side of things. I hope you do not mind me saying that I do believe this is a failure of leadership. This is much more so in certain police forces than others—it would be wrong of me to tar everybody with the same brush—but the data I refer to is nationally collected.

- Q74 **Tim Loughton:** Chief Superintendent, you heard from Mr Gerrard earlier that basically the rise we have seen in retail crime and attacks on staff is all due to the police not taking it seriously. What is your response to that?

Chief Superintendent Goss: I don't think it is as simple as just the police not taking it seriously. The police have absolutely got a fundamental part to play in retail crime, without a shadow of a doubt, but police will not resolve this on their own. This is very much a multi-faceted, partnership approach.

I am leaving here this morning to go to a summit with retailers and the security industry, and then we have a whole day tomorrow where we are going to talk this all through. Police have definitely got to improve with their attendance at the scene of a detained retail offender, and where violence has been offered or used. We have demonstrated that we have made significant progress in that regard in the last six months.

I do not, however, think it is as simple as just police attendance at the scene. We talk a lot about retail crime happening. We have spoken a lot about sentencing guidelines and having the relevant regulations in place. But we have to talk about prevention. We have to talk about stopping this happening in the first place.

Somebody made a point today about stopping offenders from coming into stores because they are known—they are prolific offenders. Just asking them not to come in the store, banning them from the store, or the guard on the front door not wanting them to come in, is the starting point. Everything we talk about is after the offence has occurred, so we have got to get back into the discussion around the prevention of retail crime in the first place.

- Q75 **Tim Loughton:** All those things you have mentioned are at the discretion of individual stores to enforce now, are they not?

Chief Superintendent Goss: Yes.

- Q76 **Tim Loughton:** What is the law around a member of staff in a store, be it a security guard or shop assistant, detaining somebody who has been caught shoplifting?

Chief Superintendent Goss: It is very much down to the stores themselves whether they have a detain or a non-detain policy. Whether that policy applies to security guards, or the staff themselves, is dependent on the store. As we know, we have common law powers and citizen's arrest, should that be needed.



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Not for one minute am I saying that members of store staff should detain people and put themselves at harm whatsoever, but what stores do is very much down to them and their policies. We see a lot of stores, and I have met a significant number over the last six months, that have non-detain policies. That is very difficult when you have repeat, prolific offenders, who know that there is a non-detain policy, coming in and out of the store—I think you described it earlier on—committing theft. One of the prevention arms that we are looking at is the detain policy for guards regarding prolific offenders, which might need an enhanced level of training from the guarding companies and them working with the retailers to certainly give ourselves half a chance in that regard.

- Q77 **Tim Loughton:** But what does the law say about the rights of a member of the public, who is no different to a shop worker, physically detaining somebody while waiting for the police to arrive?

Chief Superintendent Goss: There is common law to say that any member of the public—whether that be a guard, a shop worker or a member of public shopping in the store—has the power of the citizen's arrest to detain somebody if an offence has been committed. That is available to anybody.

- Q78 **Tim Loughton:** But what are the conditions? It is not unconditional. What are the terms connected with it?

Chief Superintendent Goss: So when an offence has been committed, they can effect a citizen's arrest.

- Q79 **Tim Loughton:** Right, but you cannot lock them up, go home for the night and leave them in a cupboard, can you? What are the conditions of that?

Chief Superintendent Goss: The conditions within a retail store would be that they are arrested by a guard or a member of the public and then the police are called. The police would then deal with the matter thereafter.

- Q80 **Tim Loughton:** Is there a time limit on that?

Chief Superintendent Goss: There is no time limit on it at all, obviously dependent on the police resource, the demand in the organisation at that time and the availability of officers as to when they can get to the scene. Again, it is dependent on the circumstance itself.

- Q81 **Tim Loughton:** If I was a security guard in a store who had clearly caught somebody shoplifting or assaulting a member of staff or member of the public who tried to intervene on them shoplifting, and I physically detained that person, could I lock them in a cupboard and wait for four hours for the police to arrive?

Chief Superintendent Goss: I am not sure "locking in the cupboard" would be the right term, but you can hold them there and wait for the police to arrive. That is some of the work we have done with the security industry, and we are going to do this afternoon, around potentially looking



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at giving extra powers to the security industry regarding the detain or non-detain policy at retail stores. Some of the data that we spoke about earlier on around police attending detained offenders is really encouraging and moving in the right direction.

- Q82 **Tim Loughton:** Not according to Mr Gerrard. He said that 80% of the times that the Co-op have detained an offender and called the police, the police have not turned up. Do you believe that figure?

Chief Superintendent Goss: I have not seen the data from Mr Gerrard. I do lots of work with Paul and the Co-op, working together in partnership with the police. The data that he refers to is prior to the Retail Crime Action Plan, so early 2023. Subsequently, when we wrote and brought in the Retail Crime Action Plan at the latter end of 2023—based on police data and a dip sample of a large number of crimes—police were attending at 75% to 76% of detained retail crime offenders within stores. That is police data.

- Q83 **Tim Loughton:** So Mr Gerrard has given us out-of-date information, or is the Co-op an exception?

Chief Superintendent Goss: The Co-op data was prior to the Retail Crime Action Plan, so that is 2023. I think he did say—if I recall—that it has improved since then and that it is now at 60% to 70% within the Co-op. Don't quote me, but I think that is what he said.

- Q84 **Tim Loughton:** I am not sure whether he gave us a new figure. He certainly suggested that, in a very large number of cases—however historic—the police were not turning up. Do you think the Co-op is any different to any other comparable retailer in terms of its approach to dealing with offenders?

Chief Superintendent Goss: I think the challenge that the Co-op has is that it has a large number of convenience stores, so lots of smaller stores that are not necessarily in town or city centres, and they are very sporadic. We mentioned socially deprived areas earlier on and guarding is expensive for the retailers, without a shadow of a doubt—it does not come cheap. It does not have guards in every single store; it is very much risk-based where it deploys the guards.

There is a really big challenge for the convenience stores because they are small stores in rural communities, doing a fantastic job for the community. They are the social fabric of the community, without a shadow of a doubt, and we saw that in covid. But it is a definite challenge for the convenience stores, and the Co-op is one of those.

- Q85 **Tim Loughton:** The Co-op does not just operate convenience stores. It operates quite big stores, which Mr Gerrard seemed to term convenience stores, but they are effectively smaller supermarkets and some larger supermarkets. All the Co-op stores I have in my constituency are on the main high streets in the town centres; none of them is in a rural location, and none could be described as being in a particularly deprived area, yet the rates of shoplifting are worse by several multiples than other



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comparable nearby retailers, which suggests something about the Co-op's policy. What I challenged Mr Gerrard on was the fact that it has a contract centrally with Mitie to provide security guards, who are only available randomly in stores. In most of my stores, they are not there on a permanent basis at all. The national policy is visual deterrent only—that is, they do not physically intervene. Do you see any benefit in having visual deterrent security guards, or is it really as useful as a chocolate teapot?

Chief Superintendent Goss: A visual deterrent security guard will help, without a doubt. If you have a guard on the door, it will help if there is an offender seeking to go into the store.

Q86 **Tim Loughton:** Why?

Chief Superintendent Goss: Because we know from interviews that we have done over time that having a guard on the front door is a deterrent, but having—

Q87 **Tim Loughton:** Why?

Chief Superintendent Goss: Because there would be a guard there, and it is something that they would not necessarily want to confront.

Q88 **Tim Loughton:** If they know they will not be confronted by that guard, and that the guard will not intercept them entering the store or intervene if they are seen to be shoving a bar of chocolate in their pocket, why is that a deterrent?

Chief Superintendent Goss: Having a guard there is a deterrent; it does help. Having a guard there who has a detain policy as well is an extra deterrent. Having no guard there is where we do not want to be if we can help it. I think there are three levels. We want a guard there if we can—the visible deterrent will certainly help—but the detain policy is an extra insurance policy on top of that, because these repeat offenders go into stores all the time. We described that, and we know that. They have got to know that if go into that store, they could well be detained by that guard. I think we are saying the same thing, really.

Q89 **Tim Loughton:** That is the point, isn't it? If it is known that you will not be intercepted, then it is effectively open season, isn't it? You just said, though, that you will have further meetings today and beyond, and one of the things you are discussing is additional powers for security guards. Why do guards need additional powers? They have powers like—well, I won't say you; you have additional powers—anybody in this Committee to intervene on the terms we have just discussed. What actual powers do you think they need additionally now for Parliament to legislate on?

Chief Superintendent Goss: There will be extra things they can do. For example, they can support the staff in store with witness statements. That is something they can do. They can have extra powers and support to do that. They can certainly have some extra powers around the detention, which we mentioned earlier on, and holding people in store for longer. There is certainly work to do with security guarding, but they are not in



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every store, remember. They are only in some stores; they are not in every store.

- Q90 **Tim Loughton:** I understand that. Most of what you have just described is extra support, not extra powers for which we need to legislate, with the exception of that extended time to detain. But there is no standard time to detain at the moment. Should there be? My understanding, and this is what the police were suggesting to me, which was why we had to have a seminar of all the local retailers with the police and local councillors to find out exactly what retailers are entitled to do or not, is the common acceptance is you can detain somebody for half an hour, and if the police do not arrive, you have to let them go. But that does not seem to have any basis in law, does it?

Chief Superintendent Goss: I have never heard that half hour figure.

- Q91 **Tim Loughton:** Right. This was getting back to me. What is reasonable when detaining somebody who has just biffed a customer trying to prevent them from nicking a bottle of gin? Is it an hour, two hours, four hours? Does it depend on how you treat them? Do you have to give them refreshment during that period? Can you put them in a locked cupboard? What can the retailers do while awaiting the police? It is understood that they have to tell the police that they have someone there, but there should be an expectation that the police will arrive.

Chief Superintendent Goss: It is very dependent on the circumstance itself. I do not want to give a time limit for how long retailers can hold someone—in case people are being violent with the staff worker or the security guard, and the police are not able to attend. It is difficult to put a time limit on how long they will hold them for, but as I said before, we are getting to 75% of detained retail offenders. How long that takes to get there, I do not know at the moment, but it is certainly encouraging and moving in the right direction in that regard. I certainly cannot put a time limit on how long people can be held for, because it is very dependent on what has happened, the circumstance and the offender.

- Q92 **Tim Loughton:** But do you agree that we have to have greater clarity there, so that retailers know what their entitlement is and the police in effect know what is expected of them by the retailer?

Chief Superintendent Goss: Agreed. That is some of the stuff that we can work through. We are in the process of writing a national strategy for retail crime, which we will be discussing this afternoon and tomorrow, and that is certainly one of the points we need to do to work more closely with the retailers. *[Interruption.]*

- Q93 **Chair:** Don't worry about the bell—it just tells us that the House of Commons Chamber is about to sit, warning us that that is happening. We are coming to the end of the session, because we will have Prime Minister's Question Time shortly—that is why there has been some movement around the table—but I will ask a couple of questions, if I may.

First, we have had reference to police and crime commissioners and to



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how important it is that their police and crime plan includes reference to retail crime. Chief Constable, you talked a little about this. On the whole, has that changed? In 2018, we had information that there was little about it in police and crime plans. Do you think that now most police and crime commissioners are aware that this is an issue?

Chief Constable Blakeman: I think that they are aware that it is an issue. We are coming up to PCC elections, so there will be an opportunity to reset police and crime plans. I hope to see that there is clarity and focus on some of the things that matter for our communities, and our shop workers are our local communities.

Q94 **Chair:** That is helpful. I also want to ask about the national business crime centre and whether it is sufficiently resourced. I will ask you that, Superintendent Holdaway.

Superintendent Holdaway: There were two of us; there is one of us at the moment. One person has just left, and we are just going through a recruitment process. My post is currently funded by the City of London Police and the inspector was covered by the Met Police. That is how it has been for perhaps the past two or three years. I would argue that that is probably not sustainable, but I know that Amanda Blakeman is looking at it along with other colleagues.

Chief Constable Blakeman: For clarity, we are looking at that. We realise, understand and have experienced the impact that Patrick's team—just Patrick at the moment—makes in this important area and on the confidence that retailers have to flag issues and to be able to have the conversations that we need to have. We are working on what the solution looks like, and I raised permanent funding with the Policing Minister as well. I will not go into and rehearse the issues of police funding at this moment in time—I am sure you would not want me to.

Q95 **Chair:** No. That is a whole other area where we could spend a lot of time. Again Superintendent Holdaway, may I ask about the numbers of partnerships? There were 250 business crime reduction partnerships in 2021, and that number has not gone up, has it?

Superintendent Holdaway: To give you a bit of an update, at the end of 2022 an academic review was carried on the BCRPs and their future. We are working towards an accreditation process. There are 335 business improvement districts around the country, with about 70% of them in our town centres. The vast majority of those will have some form of business crime reduction partnership capability, even if they do not consider themselves a BCRP, so we are working with the National Association of Business Crime Partnerships and other police partners to accredit BCRPs, raise their standards and share intelligence.

Q96 **Chair:** You think there are more; it is just that they are not calling themselves that.

Superintendent Holdaway: Yes, there are more, and we are professionalising the approach.

Q97 **Chair:** Okay. Do you have a date for Project Pegasus to be fully operational?

Chief Constable Blakeman: We have just gone through all the recruitment, so it will now begin at the start of May, so next month. We will be up and running on Pegasus then, and we have already started some work. We have not just waited for that go date; we have already started work and we have a couple of jobs that we are working on now, which demonstrate some good return on value. I cannot go into the specifics of course, but we are seeing the ability to track offenders from the bottom of the country to the top of the country who are committing offences that fall into the cohort of non-identification that Patrick mentioned. They fall into the 55% that are closed, no further action, because we are not able to identify the offender. We have actually been able to do that and to pull together a package for a relevant force to deal with.

Q98 **Chair:** That is helpful. Finally, as I asked the previous panel, what is the one recommendation that you would like the Government to take forward to tackle this issue? Is it about funding, resources?

Chief Constable Blakeman: I suppose I would always go to that 0.7% of GDP. A funding situation that is on an ongoing yearly basis does not allow us to plan in the longer term and is not sufficient—we have a gap around it. I do not have police officers sat in police stations refusing to attend these types of jobs; other issues are taking their time. We are doing a lot on “Right Care, Right Person”, trying to make sure that we do not go to things that do not need police attendance, so that we can concentrate on the things that matter to our communities. I would definitely say that, and I would definitely say unblocking the red tape that sits around charging—that sees us having to bail people and them committing further offences, which loses the confidence of our shop workers to ring up and report matters to us. That would be helpful.

Superintendent Holdaway: For me, it is the criminal justice process beyond policing. There is nothing more frustrating for police and for retailers to see a prolific offender go to court, get a short or suspended sentence, and be out walking the street doing the same thing the next day. That is very frustrating. Often that reflects on policing, because it looks like we have not done anything, although clearly we have taken it through. Many of those offenders have hundreds of convictions, and that is why they are well known and so on. That can be a frustration. Also, some of the outcomes need to be a bit more nuanced towards some of those offenders; rather than just a simple, “We do this, we do that,” I think we need to look at their profiles and make sure we pick the right solutions.

Chief Superintendent Goss: Certainly the partnership approach on retail crime and ensuring that we work as one. That is critical to us. I agree with the funding position. I certainly agree with not only the Ministry of Justice position, unblocking it and clearing out the bureaucratic red tape, but the partnership position around retailers, police, the security industry, HMRC



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and trading standards all working as one—because that is what it will take for us to tackle this issue and to be consolidated as we move forward.

Q99 **Chair:** Finally, do you all support wholesale workers being included in the definition of this new offence?

Chief Constable Blakeman, Superintendent Holdaway and Chief Superintendent Goss *indicated assent.*

Chair: Right, thank you. That is very helpful. Thank you for your evidence this morning. It will be very useful to us in our deliberations. We welcome the opportunity to have reflected on our report and what has happened since, so thank you very much for that.