



## Justice and Home Affairs Committee

### Corrected oral evidence: Tackling shoplifting

Tuesday 21 May 2024

10.35 am

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Members present: Lord Foster of Bath (The Chair); Lord Bach; Baroness Buscombe; Lord Dubs; Lord Henley; Baroness Hughes of Stretford; Lord McInnes of Kilwinning; Baroness Meacher; Baroness Prashar; Lord Sandhurst.

Evidence Session No. 1

Heard in Public

Questions 1 – 20

#### Witnesses

! Katy Bourne, Sussex Police & Crime Commissioner and National Lead for Business & Retail Crime; Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman, National Police Chiefs' Council; Detective Chief Superintendent Jim Taylor, Head of Opal.

#### USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on [www.parliamentlive.tv](http://www.parliamentlive.tv).

## Examination of witnesses

Katy Bourne, Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman and Detective Chief Superintendent Jim Taylor.

**Q1 The Chair:** The meeting is now being recorded, and public proceedings are beginning. This is our very first evidence session in our new inquiry looking at various aspects of shoplifting. We are enormously grateful to our three witnesses for coming. Could you begin by introducing yourselves?

**Katy Bourne:** Good morning. I am the police and crime commissioner for Sussex, and I lead on behalf of the police and crime commissioners for business and retail crime.

**Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman:** Bore da, good morning, I am the chief constable of North Wales Police, and the NPCC lead for volume crime.

**The Chair:** Just for the record, what is the NPCC?

**Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman:** It is the National Police Chiefs' Council.

**Detective Chief Superintendent Jim Taylor:** Good morning, I am the detective chief superintendent and head of Opal, which is the national intelligence unit for serious organised acquisitive crime.

**Q2 The Chair:** Thank you. We look forward to hearing a bit more about that as we proceed. I will begin with a very simple question. We want to get a sense from you of the current situation with shoplifting, which we are looking at. There has been a lot of media coverage, and some of us are amazed by one report that suggested that there have been something like 8 million incidents of shoplifting in just one year. There are concerns about police not investigating if the theft is for less than £200, and as a result it is thought that 90% of shoplifting incidents go unreported.

So in that context of real concern about the issue, could you each suggest to us the main trends that we should be looking at?

**Katy Bourne:** One of my roles as a police and crime commissioner is to be the voice of the public in policing. It became quite apparent several years ago that there was an issue with shoplifting at a local level going unreported and that it was happening in large volumes. I formed a local partnership of businesses and brought them together with the police in Sussex to look at this. There were three areas that they wanted to take forward. One was how we could encourage the retailers to report a crime. There was a plethora of reasons why they would not, but we needed to encourage them to report.

**The Chair:** You said that there are a number of reasons why they do not report. Why would a retailer not report it?

**Katy Bourne:** It takes too long. If they are an independent retailer and they have very few staff on at the time who are having to do everything in the store, the last

thing they have time for is an arduous report to the police which, when they are reporting online, can take them up to 30 minutes. That might not seem a lot of time to a member of the public, but in a busy working day that is a huge amount of time for you. That was one of the big issues.

The other one was a lack of feeling that the police would do anything about it, as when they reported in the past there was not the response that they expected.

For me, shoplifting falls into three categories. You have opportunist thieves who do what it says on the tin: they see the opportunity and in they go. They tend to be younger, although not always. Then there are prolific offenders, the ones who go into the shops time and time again and shoplift constantly; they can be driven by drugs or alcohol, generally some form of substance misuse. Then, at the top end of the scale—we will come on to Pegasus—there are organised crime gangs who are operating across multiple force areas with impunity.

What was apparent to me was that there was no way for police to track this nationally. They are very good at tracking the drugs gangs and the child sexual exploitation gangs, but there was nobody with a real oversight over how many gangs were operating.

For me, those are the categories at a local level, in a nutshell. The organised crime gangs—the OCGs—were probably having a far greater impact than the prolific offenders and the opportunists.

**The Chair:** Thank you. Chief constable.

**Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman:** We are seeing a main trend of concern whereby we have rising levels of retail crime and violence that accompanies that retail crime. One of the main concerns raised with us, as Katy has said, is from retailers whose perception is that this type of crime is not a priority for policing. The Crime Survey for England and Wales will tell us that crime is falling overall, but retail crime is a very different picture, and we are seeing that increasing, including shop theft and violence against retail workers. Our latest police recorded data shows an increase of 32% compared to the previous year, which is up 12% on the pre-pandemic time period. We welcome that increase in reporting, but we know that that is not everything that is happening and, for us, understanding that data is a real challenge.

**The Chair:** Just so I am absolutely clear, you are saying that the increase in the figures that you have is due to increased reporting, not an increase in the number of incidents?

**Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman:** It is a mixture of both. There is an increase in the prevalence of violence that accompanies retail theft, and there is an increase in the reporting that is happening, as we now try to work our way through making it easier for retailers to report, and building retailer confidence that if they do report, something will happen about it.

Part of the work I have done around the retail crime action plan has been on making sure that all 43 forces across the country sign up to the commitment to attend every instance where a shop theft is reported and where an offender is detained, or where an offender has used violence against an individual, or where there is evidence to collect in response to a shop theft. We are starting to see those numbers increase significantly, which comes with the increase in confidence to report. So I want and expect to see those numbers increase, because it gives us a better picture of what is going on out there.

I am also the national lead on the police national database, and a few years ago we did a piece of work where we used the information that retailers had and put that through the database to understand how much of the crime was organised and how many of those associations we could link back to somebody. We saw the prevalence of organised criminality that sits across retail crime, it being a lucrative area where people are able to exploit individuals and make a profit. Hence the work that we have done in relation to Pegasus.

**Q3 The Chair:** Thank you. One final question on the increased reporting and on shop theft being linked to violence. As far as you can tell, is the shopkeeper more likely to report where violence is involved?

**Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman:** It is difficult to say, because I do not know what is out there that is not being reported. We are encouraging shop workers to report when any violence is used; hence, as part of the retail crime action plan, us including a really important commitment to attend and to deal with anybody who is violent to a shop worker.

**The Chair:** Is there not a problem, therefore, that if the police are encouraging people to report a shop theft if it involves violence, that is almost suggesting to the shopkeeper not even to bother if no violence is involved?

**Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman:** That is absolutely not the message we are giving to the retail community. Our message to the retail community is, "Report what's happening". We need to understand the intelligence picture, we need to identify those individuals. We have worked really hard to make sure that we have avenues to be able to capture CCTV evidence in shops, which is the critical evidence that the shop worker has.

We have worked really hard, certainly with the big stores, to make sure that when incidents are reported the key witness is available to attend court. There is a multitude of difficulties there, but our message to shop workers and to the retail community is very clear: "Report it to us. We want to know about it". From an attendance point of view, if there is violence, if you detain somebody or there is evidence to collect, we will obviously attend in order to be able to do that.

**The Chair:** Thank you. Detective chief inspector.

**Detective Chief Superintendent Jim Taylor:** From an organised crime point of view, it is really important to understand that, in order to manage organised crime, we

rely on information and intelligence. When we are only seeing a very small element of the picture, we do not see the bigger picture around organised crime, and that is crucial for us in identifying OCGs.

Over the last few years, we have seen a degree of sophistication in the committing of the offences. First, you will see recent events on TikTok, for instance, where offenders have organised to go to a particular store and then rob it. That is a very quick way of spreading a message very efficiently.

Secondly, we have seen criminals travelling from abroad to the UK purely to commit retail crime and then be on their way. Some are coming here and going back in a day on a very cheap flight with very little chance of being captured. They may not have been subject to the criminal justice system previously, so fingerprints, DNA and so on may not be on our system. We have seen a real shift.

Not only that, but, as the Chief said, we have also seen a change in the type of offending, of criminality, and the violence involved in it. You may also have seen the phenomenon of steaming offences: large groups of individuals going into high-tech shops en masse and just ripping high-tech property out of walls and from desks. There is a real change in the MO of what you would probably imagine was shoplifting traditionally—someone just walking in and covertly secreting something on themselves.

**The Chair:** It is sad that you describe that as an increase in sophistication, but I know exactly what you mean.

**Q4 Baroness Meacher:** What does the data tell us about the relative importance of the different types of shoplifters: the casual shoplifter relative to the criminal gangs and so on? The data is not very clear about the numbers, but you have given us a bit of information, which is very helpful. Certainly I assume that the increasing use of shopping online, for example, has completely changed the nature of shoplifting, and probably increased the role of the organised criminal gangs. Is that correct? Also, to what extent has the increase in online shopping changed the relative importance of the different types of shoplifters? It would be interesting to hear more from you about the numbers in relation to the types of shoplifters and shoplifting, if you like.

**Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman:** If we go back 20 years, a period that I remember in my police service, we were equipped to deal with a very different type of crime. We trained our officers to deal with burglary, theft and criminal damage. Now, 20 years on, people's sophistication online is very different, so our training for our officers is different.

We are expecting a lot more from them, such as the ability to carry out a crime inquiry involving things like online shops, but we also see violence against delivery drivers in relation to bits of freight that are being moved between shops for deliveries. There is a widespread problem where violence seems to be on the increase in our retail community, and we are very alive to that.

It is really difficult to interpret the data at the moment, because we are in the development process. Opal, and the work of Pegasus, exists partly to get the confidence of the retail community to report to us so that we can understand the data better and more holistically. James will be in a better place than I am to talk about the type of data that he is starting to see on the organised criminality and that side of things, but we are not yet in an advanced position to be able to interpret that data in the way I would like to. We have lots of plans in place to be able to collect the data, understand it better, and equip and deploy our resources better in order to combat the problem.

Online has definitely changed the make-up and the feel of high streets, and we have definitely seen a push towards big retail parks. For us, there is a balance to be struck between the big providers in the retail parks—those big high street brands that everybody knows—versus the small independent retailer who is part of the community and perhaps lives over the shop. When violence happens in their shop it feels to them very much like it is happening in their home, so we are actively working on being able to make sure that we have that response right for them. We are working with the *Grocer* magazine and that side of the industry to do that and to try to get to the heart of that with our police and crime commissioners. But I do not think we have the data in any advanced form to enable us to interpret it properly at the moment.

**Baroness Meacher:** That is right. There is a bit of a way to go. Katy, do you want to say anything further as a crime commissioner?

**Katy Bourne:** Yes, please. Here is the thing: you can only resource what you can measure, and the police are very evidence driven. Shoplifting has been increasing for many years, and it has not been measured effectively. It is a gateway crime. I spent Saturday morning with two ex-offenders who have turned their lives around and are now doing some amazing work in Sussex with young people and various other bits. Interestingly, they both served long terms in prison for some very bad crimes, but where did they start? One said he was eight when he went shoplifting, and the other said he was five when he went shoplifting. So they all begin somewhere, and this is where criminals hone their skills.

This is why it matters so much to the public, and it matters to us because we shop in those communities and high streets. Yes, online is changing the whole business model of the high street, but we need to support our retailers. We need those areas where we can come together as communities. Our high streets need to be strong, because they employ people who pay their taxes, which pay for the public services that the public want. For me, this goes right to the heart of it: if we are not measuring and recording it, we are not going to know what is out there.

That is a start, and it is great that Chief Constable Blakeman has the retail crime action plan that the chiefs across the country have all signed up to. It is not yet perfect, but at last we are moving in the right direction.

**Baroness Meacher:** That is encouraging to hear. Jim, do you want to add anything?

**Detective Chief Superintendent Jim Taylor:** No, the chief has said it all really.

Q5 **Baroness Buscombe:** Of course, you can only measure the data if you ask the right questions, so what are the key things that you are collecting data on? Is it a profile of the people? If it is violence, is it the weapons that they use? It is not just numbers. What is the profile of these people? You mentioned people flying in and flying out again. Could you just expand on that please?

**Detective Chief Superintendent Jim Taylor:** It would probably be helpful for me to talk about this. Part of the work that the organised retail crime will be doing on behalf of the Pegasus partnership will be on a strategic assessment. That is a kind of foot on the ball moment about what organised retail crime is.

Bearing in mind that the police are attending only a small proportion of those offences, as we talked about, we have only a very small window in which to look, so we had to look a little wider. The work in partnership provides us with an opportunity to look at the partnership data as well as police data for the first time, so that we blend those two pieces of information together.

We have gone out to a huge number of sources; there are private companies that hold data on behalf of supermarkets and there are supermarkets that hold their own data, so we have put out a call to arms for all their information for two years so that we can assess that. What we are looking for in there is what constitutes serious and organised crime. Some retailers will have a different view of what organised crime is, and we had to come to a baseline assessment of what we are going to say is organised crime. We are also looking at the proportion of crime and incidents that are reported by retailers are actually reported to the police, so we can see where the gap is and who are the better reporters and who are the not so good reporters.

We can also assess the quality of the information, and the high-harm offenders are the ones we are looking for in this. The retail crime team will be focusing mostly on the people who cause the most threat, harm and risk to shop workers and the public. We know that some individuals are involved in other criminality, for instance, so we are not just thinking, "Okay, are they involved in shop theft?" They may be involved in drugs as well, and this may be an opportunity for us to manage those offenders.

So we are looking across a wide variety of sources to help us ultimately to target the high offenders, if that makes sense, rather than the criminality focusing on them.

**Baroness Buscombe:** And who are they? Is there a pattern?

**Detective Chief Superintendent Jim Taylor:** Again, it depends on where you look. That is the reality. You might find a completely different demographic in an inner city compared to perhaps the travelling offenders I have spoken about—effectively, the individuals who are coming into the UK. There is a wide and varied demographic. The strategic assessment will, I hope, tell us what the demographics look like, the make-up of the groups and the drivers.

**Q6 Lord Dubs:** Could you say a bit more about the challenges for the police in responding to shoplifting, and how you think this affects public confidence in the police? I will throw in one more. You have not mentioned schools. What is your relationship with schools? Some of the kids are young, and they are on a path that you want to get them off.

**Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman:** There are real challenges across policing from the amount of demand that comes into our control rooms and into every police force every day. Thousands and thousands of calls come into our control centre for a whole range of issues, be that mental health right through to serious crime. We have concentrated our efforts in our control rooms on prioritisation and making sure that we have the ability to attend. That is why the work on the retail crime action plan took some real consultation with our forces across the country.

As you are well aware, we have also increased our workforce, but that means that we have a relatively young new workforce, many of whom are still in the first couple of years of their experience of being police officers. So we are trying to work through those challenges and those issues.

Prioritisation is one of the elements that has caused us to think hard about how we respond to this. The work that James is doing on the volume crime team's behalf is really important to being able to understand the initial high-harm offenders who we can remove, and to have greater understanding that these individuals do not just commit retail crime; they commit any type of crime that is available and there is an opportunity to exploit a market on.

On the point about schools, we have different schools programmes across the country. There is huge investment in schools programmes. I have a schools programme across Wales, and I invest part of my policing budget in officers who work in schools with young individuals who are at risk of being and becoming involved in crime, so that we can look at every opportunity to offer them a different pathway. Obviously, we deal with young people as they enter the criminal justice system, so at the first opportunity we try to move them away from crime.

So our teams are very much working with our policing programme to look at restorative justice and at opportunities to turn these young lives around. We also do a huge amount of work—we certainly do across Wales, and I know other forces do as well—on being trauma-informed so that we understand what is going on in that young person's life and how we can intervene with other agencies to make a difference perhaps.

So a huge amount of work is going on in relation to young people and understanding the greater picture as we balance the ongoing demand that we see into our control rooms of every type of issue that people call the police about.

**Katy Bourne:** As the Chief Constable said, most forces have schools officers, and they add huge value. In my office in Sussex, I started a programme called Reboot, which works with young people, with funding from the Home Office several years



ago. It has now been adopted by Sussex Police as business as usual, and we use voluntary sector organisations across Sussex.

When a young person comes to the notice of the police they are put through a stepped programme. We have had huge results and changes. Interestingly, at stage one of the programme, in 80% of the cases all that is needed is a letter from the police to the parent or guardian saying, "Little Katy Bourne has been caught stealing. Don't do it again", and that is enough. Even parents with children who are kicking up want to do the right thing by their children.

We found that a lot of parents did not know that their child was misbehaving until they got to the magistrates' court. That was the first time the parent would know. So just a letter deters 80% of them from the start. There are more steps to it and others who are a bit more entrenched and need more help. With young people it is about focusing more on the positive behaviours, not on the negatives, because all they hear is, "You're doing it wrong, you're doing it wrong". When you ask them, "What do you think you're getting right?" it is a whole different thing, and it is a great teachable moment for them.

**Detective Chief Superintendent Jim Taylor:** From an organised crime point of view, one of the biggest concerns we have is child criminal exploitation, which will be one focus. One of the high harms we will be focusing on is where organised crime groups are exploiting children and using them to steal goods, which will certainly increase the prioritisation of that group.

**Q7 The Chair:** I am slightly concerned about this business of prioritisation. Chief constable, you talked about the increased workforce, but that they are quite young and have to be trained, et cetera, which I understand. You also both talked about prioritisation. In the pecking order up to about now, where has shoplifting been in prioritisation?

**Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman:** In the control room, we base the call not on the crime type but on the threat, harm and risks that are present at that time. If a retailer is being threatened by an individual at the store at the time, that will be high risk and high harm, so we will look to attend that. In the past, those individuals have left the store and so that call has been reprioritised. We have a concentrated effort going on to make sure that we prioritise calls from stores, and we have seen an increase in the amount of attendance, with some forces hitting 100% attendance in relation to the violence being perpetrated. So we are improving that.

I cannot say that it has been that way in the past, and that has not assisted our retail community's confidence. We have been doing work to increase that confidence level so that we get a better idea and a clearer picture of what is going on and we can recover the evidence, get the individuals before the courts if needed, and make sure that we are protecting our communities from further violence. That prioritisation has been an ongoing piece of work.

If I could take a moment to explain, in any one day you can have anything from a very clearly in-crisis individual suffering a mental health episode where there is a serious and significant threat to their life, to some serious sexual offending, to a robbery, to a person presenting violence. It is about making sure that we have enough staff to attend to all those while also trying to deal with other issues that are really challenging for us such as being tied up at hospitals and in custody units. It is an ongoing balance for our control rooms every day, and as the chief constable I take a real, active interest in whether we have enough people to meet the challenges of the day.

**The Chair:** I am not trying to put words in your mouth, but the implication is that non-violent related shoplifting will not be addressed—even with all the work you are doing now on this issue—without even more staffing.

**Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman:** I would not say that. The retail crime action plan was written on the basis not only of attending when somebody is being violent to a retail worker or is detained, but of attending when there is evidence to gather; that might be CCTV evidence or evidence from the shop or retail worker. It might not be an immediate response—within 10 minutes—and we might attend within four hours, but it is recognition of the fact that that job will be on our system and we will be looking to attend in order to gather the CCTV, do the necessary inquiries, identify that individual, and bring them to justice.

James is working with the big retailers to look at all their data and use every technical capability we have to identify individuals who crop up time and time again. We are dealing with it in the same way, but that particular retailer may not see somebody from the Opal team attend their store. It is a case of prioritising the violence, prioritising where somebody is detained, and prioritising where we can gain evidence.

**Q8 Baroness Prashar:** I want to build on the Chair's question, because it seems to me that it is about prevention. We heard earlier that shoplifting starts very early on. If you do not prioritise shoplifting that is non-violent, are you not missing a trick in dealing with it at an early stage?

My other question is related to the first answer. What action is being taken to make the process of reporting this crime easier? We heard that it is quite difficult for small shopkeepers to report it, because they find it very time-consuming.

**Katy Bourne:** We have a pilot running currently in Sussex with the Co-op called One Touch Reporting, which we started a couple of years ago. We are working with the Co-op stores because they were reporting more crime than our other stores were. The pilot is in conjunction with the National Business Crime Solution, which is a not-for-profit organisation, and Sussex Police.

In 22 of the Co-op stores, we have reduced the reporting time from 30 minutes down to two minutes at the press of a button. Using an API, the information goes straight from that store into Sussex Police systems. It is brilliant, because we know

that volume crime is out there, and it has really helped me to shape the whole narrative around this nationally. Bearing in mind that there are 86 Co-ops in Sussex, those 22 stores alone amounted to 17% of the total volume of business crime reported to Sussex Police last year. Imagine what will happen when we switch them all on. As you have heard the chief constable say, we have to be realistic about policing. Of course we would love them to do everything, but that is where the prioritising comes in. This is just to give you an idea. It can be done.

The Government are now really interested in hotspot policing, for which there has been a lot of funding to forces. In my force, I asked that they focus the hotspot policing on several of our retail crime areas. Last year, they focused the hotspot patrolling on an area across the Adur and Worthing district in Sussex, and we saw a nearly 50% decrease in shoplifting in a year. So there are things that you can do such as prevention. It is good old-fashioned policing, but we know it works; the evidence is there. As a police and crime commissioner, my focus is on performance and challenging my chief constable to perform. And this matters to people, so this is an area of focus for me.

**Baroness Hughes of Stretford:** In terms of assisting the police, do you feel that the retailers themselves pay enough attention to target hardening and putting in preventive measures, such as infrastructure or changing the way the stores operate, to try to catch people earlier or prevent them entirely from coming into a store?

**Katy Bourne:** The retailers have gone above and beyond in recent years and have spent millions of pounds on target hardening. There is always more that they can do, and they would be the first to admit it. I have really enjoyed the can-do attitude of the retailers we are working with in the Pegasus partnership. They really want to support the police and see this as a joint partnership. We have been very lucky to be able to work with them.

**The Chair:** That is a very interesting segue into Lord McInnes.

**Q9 Lord McInnes of Kilwinning:** I am going to ask a bit more about the nuts and bolts of the retail crime action plan. Inevitably, whenever a new plan is announced, there is always public cynicism about how long it will continue and how it works in reality. Since October 2023, when the retail crime action plan was announced and then reported on in February, chief constables have reported a significant fall in retail crime thanks to it.

Chief Constable Blakeman and DCS Taylor, could you explain a bit more about how the day-to-day management of the plan works, who is involved in that on a daily basis, and the confidence you have that this will have longevity and not just be a quick fix that is not reported on? Could you also explain to us how Opal works in connection with the overall plan? Then perhaps Katy can come in on how Pegasus fits into the overall strategy.

**Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman:** We wrote the plan at the back end of last year, having spent some time doing work, listening, and understanding the problems we needed to solve at that particular time. We put a very strong governance model

around it, because that is an important part of making sure the sustainability and longevity are there.

Each force has a single point of contact. They come into a national meeting with ACC Alex Goss, who works as part of my team, and we look at how we are developing and delivering, and how we need to further develop the retail action plan so that it can deal with today's problems and look at tomorrow's issues. From that perspective, putting that strong governance around it helps us to monitor things like attendance levels and drops in crime, and understand how we are going to tackle One Touch Reporting for the future, which we need to be able to do. It also gives us an opportunity to look at what preventive measures we can put in place, which stores and outlets are particularly good at prevention, and how that is working to decrease the level of retail theft and violence, which, again, is really helpful to us.

Opal was part of the volume crime work that I started some years ago now. The premise was for us to look at volume crime and understand the trends that we see. These individuals are opportunists. They do not commit only retail crime; they would not walk past a vehicle with an open window and a handbag on the seat and say, "I don't do vehicle crime". They will take any opportunity to steal anything that is there.

It was so that we could understand the full gamut of individuals who work within that and the markets that sit behind it—these individuals do not steal this stuff for themselves but to sell—and look at working with avenues that allow that marketplace to thrive, whether that be online marketplaces or individual handlers in estates where we know that happens, so that we can innovate and be able use things like forensic marking, working with stores or any type of organisation that is affected by volume crime.

Opal came together to give us the ability to do that, and it seemed the perfect platform for Pegasus to work within, because it concentrated on that. James has put a lot of work and effort into making sure that Opal works at the same levels as our Regional Organised Crime Units and that we link in with the National Crime Agency, Europol and other big agencies. That allows us to understand the mechanisms by which people exploit this whole opportunity to make money.

We talked about it being the gateway offence for some young people, but we have individuals who are exploiting this at quite a senior level and see it as an opportunity to make money in this particular frame and then move on to something else. That is why Pegasus' work is so important: it looks at those who are exploiting, orchestrating and manipulating individuals to commit this type of criminality.

**Lord McInnes of Kilwinning:** How often is the governance meeting with the point of contact from each force?

**Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman:** It is a quarterly governance meeting, but there will be much more regular ongoing meetings than that in force. This obviously now

feeds into policing performance; it is part of our investigation standards. We made a commitment to follow up all reasonable lines of inquiry, which is part of the HMIC view of how forces are performing. The interconnections ensure its sustainability, because whatever you look at, whether it be the theft of a lawnmower from a shed or a substantial amount of alcohol from Sainsbury's, it is following all the reasonable lines of inquiry and taking every opportunity to detect that particular offence.

**Q10 Lord Sandhurst:** This question follows on from what you have all said: that the more organised stealing is done to resell it. Years ago it used to be said that without handlers there would be no thieves. People used to resell goods in the pub. What are you doing nowadays about eBay and TikTok? TikTok is obviously a forum where it can be said, "Come on, this shop's got good stuff. Let's mob it", and it might be sold on eBay or other online fora that I am not privy to.

**Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman:** We have been working very closely with the Policing Minister on what is available to enable us to work with eBay, Facebook Marketplace—all those opportunity areas where people sell things online—to show how those providers can be better at policing those areas. Having to show and submit ID in order to sell, making things trackable, and no cash payments are all areas that we are working on.

**The Chair:** You say "we". Lord Sandhurst's point was about online marketplaces, which of course are right across the country, so it is not an individual force. Who are you referring to when you say "we"?

**Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman:** It is me as the lead for the National Police Chiefs' Council for volume crime, James as the lead for Pegasus, Katy in relation to the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, and the Home Office's crime unit. It is an amalgamation of a partnership to look at how we can work with providers like eBay and Facebook Marketplace.

**Q11 The Chair:** How many officers across the whole country are looking into the issue of crimes that involve eBay, Facebook Marketplace, et cetera?

**Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman:** I could not give you a definitive number, but each force and Regional Organised Crime Unit has the ability to look at online activity. We spoke earlier about the complexity of training officers to gather evidence in a different format and a different way, and present that. We are currently looking at those areas.

**Lord Sandhurst:** They might have the ability to do it, but do they have the individuals who are focused on doing it? If I go to North Wales Police, are you still the chief constable there, because you have this other role as well?

**Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman:** Yes.

**Lord Sandhurst:** What is your force doing? Does it have people who are really focused on this?

**Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman:** My force is doing much the same as other forces, which is prioritising the work that comes into my online team and looking at that against child sexual abuse online and all the other things that we see. In the same way we deal with threat, harm and risk, we are trying to match that against an incident involving a young person in danger who we need to deal with, and we may be doing work in the background on other areas as well. It is really difficult. I am not suggesting that it is not. It is a threat, harm and risk-based approach on the basis of the officers I have.

Q12 **Lord Sandhurst:** Do you need more resources?

**Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman:** Yes. I would always say that I need more resources.

**Lord Sandhurst:** I thought you were going to say that.

**Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman:** Every chief constable in the country would say that.

**Lord Sandhurst:** This is your opportunity to sell.

**Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman:** Policing costs 1% of the GDP. It is a really big area. Finances and budgets are tight. Being able to put the right police officers or police staff into areas like this remains an ongoing and constant juggle to make sure that I am dealing with the threats, harm and risks that are most important to my communities across the board in what is a largely rural force but also has some very big towns.

Q13 **Lord Bach:** My question is fairly simple, but I want to preface it by saying that I really wish Pegasus had been in existence when I was a police and crime commissioner. My first reaction to it is very favourable.

You have chosen a number of large companies, and Asda is about the only big supermarket I can think of at the moment that is not a member. I might ask about that if it is legitimate to ask. How are you going to persuade the retailers to contribute funding after the first two years or so? They are obviously being pretty generous with their funding, but only because they are hoping to see results and save themselves some money from shoplifting, but are you happy? Are you going to persuade them to contribute?

**Katy Bourne:** That is probably a question for me, because I got them all to cough up the money in the first place.

**Lord Bach:** It is for you.

**Katy Bourne:** Just over a year ago, I was approached by some of the major retailers in the country. They had been meeting for several months, or years, to discuss the problem of organised criminality that they were seeing. I had just recently started the business and retail crime portfolio at the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners. They reached out and said, "Come and talk to us", and I said to

them, “Explain the type of OCGs that you’re seeing. Help me to understand it, so I can relay this on”.

They described one couple of brothers who had taken two and a half years to catch and had managed to amass about £1.5 million-worth of goods in that time. Some police forces had done really good work around that case, but they were looking only at isolated incidences within their own police force area. They were not joining up the dots with other forces; why should they? They were dealing just in their own areas and not seeing the pattern across, and, when I asked a few more questions, it became pretty apparent to me that policing nationally did not have this oversight.

Having been a police and crime commissioner for as long as I have—since day one—I knew that the National Police Chiefs’ Council led on various thematics across the country, because this is how it does its prioritisation, and rightly so. I knew Opal existed and that Chief Constable Blakeman had the lead for all serious acquisitive crime, and this very much seemed to me where it sat. So I picked the phone up, we had a conversation, and I invited her along to this group of retailers with me.

As a very sensible person who knows how to delegate, Chief Constable Blakeman delegated Chief Superintendent Taylor, who came to the first meeting—I have to say he was probably quite worried that he was going to get a hard time from the retailers, but we promised him top cover. Everybody vented at that point, and then he was very much tasked to go away and come up with a plan for how Opal—the operational arm for the serious acquisitive crime—would be able to stand a team up. He came back with a gold, silver and bronze solution for the retailers. The retailers being retailers wanted the gold, and we agreed we needed a minimum of 10 retailers in the first instance that would pay a sum of £60,000 over two years. So we needed £600,000 to stand up a small team within Opal, which would come under Chief Superintendent Taylor’s domain and leadership, and that is how it would be tasked.

That is very much how it grew. Some retailers that were at the table did not want to, or could not, participate because sometimes their financial cycles are such that they have already agreed the amount for their security for that year; others were able to be more flexible. Some larger retailers obviously had more money. We called ourselves Pegasus, so we had an identity, and we are now the governance for this. It will run for two years while that money is being spent, but it is about us all coming together and agreeing measures and performance measures that we can all adopt. It is not just about having those performance measures for the police; it is about the retailers stepping up and doing their bit.

It was very much on the understanding that, first, the police have operational direction from day one in all decisions—it has to work that way because that is how policing works best—and secondly, that the retailers around the table were not exclusive; it was not going to be just about their problems and their issues. This was to benefit everybody nationally, and that is where we are.

**The Chair:** We will pick that point up in a couple of seconds. Baroness Hughes, you

wanted to come in.

**Q14 Baroness Hughes of Stretford:** Could you explain to the committee how Pegasus, which is a national oversight operation, connects regionally with the Regional Organised Crime Units and with local police services? For instance, does every ROCU now start mapping gangs involved in shoplifting? Does every local police service have its own partnership board following and driving the action plan? Do you have the infrastructure at those different levels to support the national activity?

**Katy Bourne:** The answer is yes. I am a great believer in kick a rolling stone and do not try to reinvent something. Pegasus is very much the governance piece. I chair it, the retailers come together, Chief Superintendent Taylor and Chief Constable Blakeman attend, the Home Office is around the table, and Mitie support us with the secretariat function, although the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners is going to take that over. If it is all right with you, I will pass over to Chief Superintendent Taylor to give an operational point of view.

**Detective Chief Superintendent Jim Taylor:** There are nationally recognised ways in which we identify and map OCGs. Part of my role was to make sure that organised retail crime was now very much embedded within policing. We had to have some conversations with the heads of ROCU to make sure that they were aware of this initiative and that this would be something that they had not seen before. There are systems and processes in place regarding how we map OCGs. There is a set criterion which we need to meet, and the threshold needs to be met. We agreed right at the beginning that if the threshold was not met then we could not just change the process just to fit these crime—

**Baroness Hughes of Stretford:** Are you monitoring their activity?

**Detective Chief Superintendent Jim Taylor:** We had our first operational meeting on 1 May, and we have had some operational success in the last week, so we are getting there. With the operational work we had last week, we are now pushing towards getting that group scored and mapped.

**Lord Sandhurst:** I think I understood you as saying, “We’ve got £600,000 for the first two years”. In other words, is it £600,000 up front which will be spread over two years? What is going to happen at the end of that? I realise the figures may change and you have only been going six months. How do people see it?

**Katy Bourne:** We have been so successful we have a bit more than the £600,000. We currently have 14, I believe, members around the table. We have a couple of others who are really interested in joining as well, and we are being approached all the time by other organisations that are keen. I can see it continuing, but my preference, and I speak from a business background, is that this becomes business as usual for policing nationally because they should be doing this anyway.

How do we make this business as usual? We need the evidence base. Once Opal has been able to map and can say definitively, “There are this many OCGs operating at any one time across retail in this country”, that gives police nationally, and Chief



Constable Blakeman, a massive hand to then go to Treasury when it comes to the policing budgets for the following year—to be able to evidence the need for that funding in a way that has not been possible before.

**Lord Sandhurst:** OCG being organised crime groups.

**Katy Bourne:** Organised crime gang, yes.

Q15 **Lord Henley:** We have gone through the list of the 14 members you have at the moment, and my colleague Lord Bach already identified that Asda and one or two other big ones were missing. What about the small ones that are probably more important? Are there any representatives of businesses such as SPAR? I am trying to remember the name of the body that represents all the smaller businesses.

**Katy Bourne:** Yes, we have an organisation called National Business Crime Solutions that represents a lot of the smaller retailers. It is around the table too. The work that Opal is doing is the national work to map the OCGs, which will have a benefit to everybody longer term because once they get disrupted it will filter down, and it will bring up the importance of business and retail crime at every Regional Organised Crime Unit around the country. I believe there are nine of them, is that right?

**Detective Chief Superintendent Jim Taylor:** Nine ROCUs? Yes.

**Katy Bourne:** There are nine ROCUs. I sit on the south-east one, and we now have it as a standing item. When police and crime commissioners and chief constables come together, we use that as an opportunity to drive performance and look at how they are tackling it there. So, it is early days, but we are moving in the right direction.

**The Chair:** Can I be slightly provocative? You could argue that the scheme that has been described, Pegasus, is very similar to what happened 100-plus years ago when individual fire brigades were set up in a particular area. They were funded by some rich people who could afford to have them, so the fire engine would trundle along ignoring a fire from somebody who had not paid to go and deal with a fire from somebody who had paid. It could be argued that Pegasus is somewhat like that: the rich people affording to have police time, secretariat back-up and so on, and the small guys lose out. I think I know what your answer is, but rather than put words in your mouth, how would you justify that situation and why is what I have said wrong?

**Katy Bourne:** The whole ethos of the Pegasus governance group is that this is for the greater good, not for the individuals round the table. It works as a partnership, as a team, and that is why it is so important that policing has ultimate operational independence, oversight and say. It is Chief Superintendent Taylor's decision which OCGs they map, who they go after and so on. The beauty of our British policing model is that it keeps everybody safe regardless of how much money you have in the bank.

**Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman:** In the same way that our organised criminals do not really discriminate in terms of the crime type, they do not discriminate in terms of the store either. They would not say, "I only steal from Marks & Spencer". They steal at any opportunity that is there. Obviously, targeting those individuals from organised crime groups allows us to cover the breadth of the retail community rather than concentrating on becoming a private police service for one particular company.

Q16 **Baroness Hughes of Stretford:** Some of you have touched on issues relevant to this question, so your answers might be quite quick. You mentioned the role of the private companies in providing the secretariat to Pegasus, and, I think, Katy, you also indicated that role would be translated to the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners in due course. What do you see as the potential conflicts while you have them providing the secretariat function, and how are those conflicts of interest addressed?

**Katy Bourne:** I do not think there was a conflict initially because the retailers were already talking. It had very much been initiated by Mitie in the first instance, but they were not all Mitie customers that were coming together so I felt quite confident that there was a good cross-section. The reason the APCC did not take it up sooner was because it was less than a year old, but we are now, which will help to give that bit of independence. For me, it is the governance side that keeps the transparency alive. That is why we called ourselves Pegasus. We know who we are. We have set ourselves performance measures for each of us around the table, so it is not just about one organisation having a sway and a bigger say than another.

**Detective Chief Superintendent Jim Taylor:** To reiterate around that matter of independence, as part of the process to inform the retailers of how they can engage with Opal to put forward their packages and their organised crime groups, we have run a number of engagement sessions. We have had nine formal engagement sessions, over 400 people have attended those, and 90-plus partners, including businesses and other organisations that support businesses, have attended to see how they can engage with us. We had our first tasking meeting on 1 May. We accepted four packages from 19 that were put forward, which is really encouraging. Of those four, one of them was from a business that is not on the steering group; so it is without fear or favour.

Q17 **The Chair:** I am going to turn to Baroness Buscombe in a second, but I just want to raise with you another issue, again not being critical but just inquiring. We have, certainly in England, a large number of organisations that bring businesses together and that would include many of both small and large shopkeepers, the most obvious example being business improvement districts. Why was the scheme set up in effect to create another body rather than to work with the bodies that already exist?

**Katy Bourne:** It was not to create another body, because the whole point of it was to work operationally through Opal, and Opal already existed. One of the pillars that Chief Constable Blakeman had under Opal was serious and acquisitive crime.

Another one was around vehicle crime and theft of plant machinery and so on. One was the retail business piece, which is why, for me, it felt sensible that it should sit there. The structure is already there. The group of retailers, Pegasus, the governance group, is not separate. The BIDs, the business improvement districts, are very much at the local level. I have seven across Sussex, and I work very closely with them. They all attend my quarterly partnership meeting where all our local businesses are represented if they wish to be around that table. I am not trying to invent extra structures. Pegasus, the partnership, is now a governance piece and that is important to drive performance going forwards.

**The Chair:** Thank you, very helpful.

**Q18 Baroness Buscombe:** I just want to quickly pay tribute to you all. We know the organised crime gangs are very powerful and can be very threatening, so well done to you for doing this, because I would not be surprised if your personal lives are at risk as a result. That may sound a little extreme, but people ought to be aware that these gangs can be extraordinarily threatening.

How much does organised crime now account for shoplifting overall? Should we tell the public more about what is going on because we need deterrence? For far too long, those gangs have been acting in the most extraordinary way, and of course we know that the issue has grown and grown. What can we do to inform the public so they can be more alert and play their part in supporting you?

**Detective Chief Superintendent Jim Taylor:** Could you repeat the first part of your question again?

**Baroness Buscombe:** How much shoplifting does organised crime account for overall?

**Detective Chief Superintendent Jim Taylor:** At the moment, we do not know. When we had our first conversations with the Pegasus partnership, we heard about the different pockets of what organised retail crime looks like and the gangs affecting them, and it sounded horrendous. We need to take all that data in and map it against our criteria to say, "This is organised crime; this is localised offending". That strategic assessment would distil all that information to have a coherent picture of what organised retail crime looks like.

In terms of warning and informing the public, Katy has been an absolute force of nature in raising retail crime as a national problem. I do not think there was a day going by where retail crime was not mentioned on the news for a period, which is really encouraging. I think the public are very much more aware and informed now about retail crime and what to look out for around organised retail crime. There is still more to do in that space and, as Lord Sandhurst talked about, the second-hand market is something that we need to target, which will take time. A culture change will be needed.

**Baroness Buscombe:** We still have car boot sales. They are so popular, are they not? Are you checking those out?

**Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman:** We talked earlier about an entry route into criminality for young people and, when we look at the scale of it, that is not a massive amount in terms of the totality of retail crime we are seeing. We talked a little about substance abusers involved in retail crime as a way of funding their habits. Those individuals are the people who are utilising our person on the estate that handles stolen goods or the car boot sale and so on. I know from my own force that my staff have some real frustration when they are dealing with that individual and putting them before the court but finding that they are back out and quite quickly reoffending.

We really welcome things like tagging for us to be able to put some controls around that behaviour, but there is a lot of work to do in relation to us identifying those people who handle, and that includes things like car boot sales but also the person on the estate that people can go through. They have been exploiting the cost of living crisis. We are appealing to the public to think about where they are buying things from; if it is really cheap and too good to be true, then it is probably stolen. Give us the intelligence. Let us know, so that we can take action in relation to those people because they are driving up costs in shops. There is a huge amount to do in terms of informing the public and getting people to make those choices and tell us when they believe that somebody is selling second-hand goods, so that we are able to target that individual rather than randomly visit car boot sales trying to identify something there.

**Lord Sandhurst:** I just had this thought: we talked about, for example, TikTok—I am not picking on it, but you identified it as being where flash mobs can originate from—and then there are the different web marketplaces. They are all regulated by Ofcom, are they not? In a sense, it is very important that Ofcom puts them under pressure, first, not to allow this sort of mob to stir up and, secondly, to take even more care not to allow resale and to penalise them. It can fine them enormous sums if it wants to and publicise it. Have you thought of that?

**Detective Chief Superintendent Jim Taylor:** Yes. On the flash mobs that you spoke about, the challenge with social media that is being used is that as soon as we ask them to take it down, a new one will appear, and we are just chasing our tail with it. Of course, we are talking about foreign entities as well.

**Lord Sandhurst:** What I was looking at was that the regulators can usually say, “If this carries on, we are going to whack you with big fines, so, somehow, Mr TikTok, or whoever you are, you are going to have to stop this happening in the first place and build in filters”. And ditto with the reselling. Usually, if big enough fines are levied, people then say, “Ah, we’d better find a way of doing this”, because it ceases to be economic for those enormous organisations.

**Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman:** There is definitely work to do in this area, and it is an area that we are actively looking at. From the point of view of people selling online, it is a real frustration that you do not have to have and give identification in order to sell. Clearly, there are other agencies that we can work with in terms of

income tax revenue et cetera for people who are using those sites online and selling lots and lots of products. There is an opportunity for us to work with wider agencies to target this area as well as the regulators, and it is certainly a piece of work that we have to get our head around and do.

**The Chair:** I should know the answer to this, but I really do not: in terms of the online harms Bill—now an Act that has gone through Parliament recently<sup>1</sup>—was this issue addressed at all during the passage of that? Did the police lobby for it to be addressed? I am getting a shaking of heads; we certainly ought to look at it.

Do the police have a notification and take-down power? When you say you contact them and you notify, and they then take it down, do you have the power to require a take-down?

**Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman:** I do not think we do. I would have to double-check.

**The Chair:** I do not think you do either, but because certain organisations do, presumably there would be some merit in the police having that power.

**Baroness Buscombe:** As you are building up the databases now, do you have a sense of when you are going to have a picture of what is really happening that you can work with?

**Detective Chief Superintendent Jim Taylor:** Yes, the strategic assessment is being written, so we have put out a call for all the data that we have. To the call that we have put out, we have had some 32 police forces respond, eight of the big retailers, and we are also interrogating a number of retail crime platforms to help us with that. You can imagine that is a huge amount of data, and it is going to take some months. We anticipate two or three months before that paper will be published.

**The Chair:** Baroness Meacher will now move us on to look at another issue that this committee has previously been looking at.

Q19 **Baroness Meacher:** What is the role of facial recognition technology in dealing with shoplifting? Is it a major tool?

**Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman:** Yes. I have talked about gaining evidence and attending a store to get evidence. CCTV evidence is the main thing that we are interested in as well as witness evidence. We will use the police national database, which retains custody records across the country, to do a retrospective: only looking at a crime scene, only looking at the individual who is relevant, and seeing whether they match an image that we have already stored for somebody who has been through custody units across the country. If we get a match in relation to that, we use that as part of the intelligence picture of the investigation and seek to triangulate it with other evidence that might be available, i.e. evidence from the store assistant, et cetera.

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<sup>1</sup> The Online Safety Act 2023

We utilise it as a way of being able to identify individuals and especially people who are not known at all. If somebody is known, there is no need to put them through the retrospective facial recognition; we already know who they are. From that perspective, we are working hard with forces to make sure that those reasonable lines of inquiry include exploiting opportunities to look at the evidence that we already have retained on police systems.

**Baroness Meacher:** How significant would you say facial recognition technology is in your evidence gathering?

**Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman:** It is a really important tool for us in identifying individuals as part of an investigation. It is a slightly different concept for stores. Within stores, there might be opportunities for providers that are nothing to do with policing to identify people who have cropped up repeatedly in that store or other stores. Shoplifting is a way of alerting a member of staff. They can then go over and challenge people in a productive way in relation to why they are in the store.

Facial recognition forms an ability to prevent; it forms an ability to gather intelligence, and it provides us with an important opportunity to identify some of those prolific offenders. It has certainly been an important part of the work that James is doing in relation to those individuals who travel up and down the country and appear at perhaps eight or nine different locations in forces, and of our being able to identify who they are and get some good intelligence around them.

**Q20 The Chair:** I would like to know a little more about how easy it is, or hard it is, for an individual police force to secure a prosecution against shoplifters. Are there any issues we should be aware of?

**Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman:** It is a really challenging picture in terms of criminal justice at the moment, and our job is to put those individuals with the evidence to CPS to secure a charge and put them before the court. We can charge in certain circumstances. Clearly, it is more beneficial for those individuals who are organised for us to look at bigger offences and bigger charges with more substantial custodial sentences attached to them. We work with our CPS colleagues to be able to do that.

Sentencing in terms of individuals causes some frustration, as I have mentioned. We can find individuals who are prolific in their offending. An officer works really hard and puts them into the court system; they get a non-custodial sentence—perhaps a fine, perhaps something else—and then they are back out the next day doing exactly the same thing. Being able to look at wider mechanisms for controlling behaviour, such as tagging, is important for us because it allows us to make sure that we can identify. Criminal behaviour orders are also important. For persistent nuisances going into stores and continually shoplifting, it is important for us to be able to place additional control measures around them so that they do not become a threat, a nuisance and a source of intimidation to people trying to use the store and to shop workers.

**The Chair:** We talked earlier about small shopkeepers—those who do not have the time to fill in a complaint in the first place, unless the new, wonderful two-minute app is available to everybody.

**Katy Bourne:** Not yet.

**The Chair:** Those small shopkeepers will not have CCTV. How easy is it to get a prosecution of a shoplifter in one of those smaller stores without CCTV evidence being available?

**Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman:** A lot of the stores have CCTV; it is commonplace in relation to stores. It is more the intimidation and nuisance factor and the persistence of that individual going into the store. It is about looking at those additional measures that we can put in place, and the judicial system can put in place, around somebody who is persistent in what they are doing. I am not 100% aware that not having CCTV is a huge problem for small retailers, but we want to work with any retailer out there that needs us in relation to preventing those individuals causing a problem and capturing them, hence us working across that broad range of providers to make sure that we are in a position to be able to support.

**The Chair:** Unless any colleagues have any last-minute questions, I thank all three of you. We are learning a lot, and you are real experts, so we are enormously grateful for the information you have given us. There will be a transcript of the proceedings and you will have an opportunity to check that you are happy with what is on it. Much more importantly, I am sure that you will follow our deliberations over the coming weeks. Where you find there is something that, clearly, we do not understand or have not got right, or there is additional information that you think we need, please feel free to contact us quickly and make sure that we are not going down the wrong path. On behalf of the entire committee, thank you all very much.