

Business and Trade Committee

Oral evidence: Small business strategy, HC 1057

Tuesday 2 September 2025

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on Tuesday 2 September 2025.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Liam Byrne (Chair); John Cooper; Sarah Edwards; Alison Griffiths; Sonia Kumar; Charlie Maynard; Gregor Poynton; Mr Joshua Reynolds; Matt Western; Rosie Wrighting.

Questions 171 to 199

Witnesses

III: James Lowman, Chief Executive, Association of Convenience Stores; Chris Morris, Deputy Head of Research and Policy, USDAW; Superintendent Lisa Maslen, Lead, National Business Crime Centre, City of London Police.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: James Lowman, Chris Morris and Lisa Maslen.

Q171 **Chair:** Thanks so much for joining us. Welcome to the third panel in today's inquiry session on small business in the UK. Mr Lowman, perhaps I could begin with you. The stories that we have heard from businesses around the country paint a picture of crime being completely out of control on our high streets. Is that what your members are telling you?

James Lowman: In some places and in some instances, that is true. Shop theft is not a new thing, but what we have seen really change in recent years is the brazenness and lack of any regard for consequences that many thieves have. You have instances of shelves being cleared and people just walking in and walking out with no attempt to hide what they are doing. That is relatively new behaviour, certainly to the extent that we are seeing it now.

There are examples, which I am sure we will get on to, of good initiatives and good progress in tackling those things, but this is the No. 1 issue facing our members. The cost of the crime amounts to a 10p crime tax on every single transaction. If you add up all the cost of crime and divide that by all the transactions in the convenience store sector, it comes to a 10p tax that we are all paying every time we go to the shops. There is also the personal impact, the human impact, on people working in stores and running stores. Mindful that this is the Business and Trade Committee, there is also a business impact in areas such as recruitment, retention, colleague morale and the viability of that business faced with all those very significant costs and investment demands.

Q172 **Chair:** Mr Morris, what are your members telling you about the way things have changed over the last few years?

Chris Morris: You have to look back over the last 10 years, which is when the problem seemed to tick up. In 2016, around half our members were telling us that they were abused as part of the job.

Chair: Half of your members were telling you that they had been abused as part of their job.

Chris Morris: Yes, at that point in 2016. That is the lower end of where we are now. That went up to two-thirds by 2019. Then the pandemic happened, and the scale of abuse right across the sector went up to well over 90%. Since the pandemic it has come back down. Last year, the figure was 77%. Last year, 77% of our members were abused just as a result of going to work.

There are similar figures for physical assaults. It was around 2% back in 2016. That went up to around 5% in 2019. It got up to 18% last year. One in five were physically assaulted simply as a result of going about their job. It has fallen back to 10% last year. We will get on to the initiatives that James was just mentioning, which have helped to tackle



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that a bit. We are saying that 10% is an improvement, but one in 10 retail workers are getting assaulted simply as a result of going to work.

Chair: That is incredible. Thank you very much indeed just for setting that out.

Q173 **Gregor Poynton:** As the Chairman said, the impact is huge. I have been to Waz's in Broxburn, a convenience store, Scotmid in Deans and Boots in the centre. These are different types and sizes of businesses. They have all told me that this is having a huge impact on their businesses. Mr Lowman, would you just describe for me what impact this is having on your members and the businesses that they run?

James Lowman: It is a genuinely business-critical thing for our members. There is that cost. There is the cost of the crime itself. The losses, in some cases, are significant enough to push a business from profitability into loss making. When you add to that the cost of security measures in the store, which have to be constantly updated and changed to tackle the latest way that people are stealing from the store, that adds another significant impediment to the viability and profitability of the business.

As I say, there is also the human element. When Chris describes those violent incidents, you have to put yourself in the position of someone who has been the victim of that, who has then gone home that night and told their family. They may reach the conclusion, "Well, I do not want to go back and work in that store". That is something that their family might think they ought not to do.

We still have 443,000 people working in convenience, most of whom get through their day safely, but there are far too many of these incidents. It affects recruitment, retention and morale among the people who are working there. It is a human issue, but it is a really powerful business issue as well.

This matters because our members want to trade and run businesses that can be profitable, but, if you think about the services that are offered through our members' stores, such as post offices, parcel collection points and prescription collections in some cases, we are often the only thing that is left in that housing estate or village. Yes, there is a business threat and an impact there, but the service provision implications of that are really serious for the wider community, as well as the provision of food and all the other things that we sell.

Chris Morris: In terms of the personal impact, to make a very broad generalisation, you generally have two types of criminals. There are those struggling with addiction and there are those in organised crime gangs. The prolific offenders in both categories can be incredibly violent.

Someone who is struggling with addiction wants to go into a store, get as much as they can and make sure they get out before whatever their



addiction is kicks in. They will go in with all sorts of weapons, needles and other measures to make sure they get out. When it is organised crime gangs, you are talking about multiple people going into a retail outlet. We have agreed policies with retailers now across the board that shop workers should not intervene in those instances. If someone comes in intent on violence, it is not up to the shop worker to put their own health at risk. That is the right policy, but we do get comments from members that that has a mental health impact in terms of feeling so powerless to stop these sorts of incidents happening.

One other thing that we do is to provide an assault at work grant. When our members are assaulted, if they cannot get compensation for that through the criminal injuries compensation scheme, there is an USDAW scheme that will support those workers. Thinking about some of the incidents that get reported there, someone being stabbed with a screwdriver is one that we have seen recently. We have seen other really serious cases where people have treated shop workers with complete disregard just to make sure they can get whatever the goods are and walk out.

Q174 Rosie Wrighting: Much like Gregor, in recess I was out talking to businesses on my high street. One thing they said that really shocked me is how little they called the police because they do not have trust that the police will come in time or, if they do, they will not necessarily respond quickly enough or effectively enough to catch the thief.

Superintendent, if I can start with you, why is that? What needs to change to bring back that confidence in the police around retail crime?

Lisa Maslen: There are a couple of elements to this. We moved away from community policing. At a time when everything was a focus, not that long ago, we were talking solely about VAWG. We were talking about robbery and burglary, and shoplifting fell off the policing agenda. That is my personal view. I cannot say I speak for every police officer, but certainly that is my view.

There have been some perception issues and a lack of confidence in policing. There have been several high-profile cases that have really diminished that confidence. That is hard to get back.

Chair: Can you unpack that a little bit? I did not quite follow your answer.

Lisa Maslen: You talk about some of the high-profile cases in the Met, for example, where officers have been convicted of murder and rape. It is all these kinds of things. There is a real perception that the police should have done more and should have known about this. It has damaged policing's reputation. I feel that very much, particularly as a female officer. It has been a tough few years. I do not feel as proud of the profession as I did when I joined 24 years ago because there are lots of negative connotations around the role. That is incredibly sad.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

There are some things that policing needs to do to educate. You do not need a police officer to turn up physically to get a response or an investigation. We have digital evidence management systems now. When a crime is reported, we can send a link and they can upload the CCTV and a statement. That has some real positives. It can be done by a security operations centre. It takes the fear of repercussions in the community away from those retail workers.

The negative side is that, if people do not physically see a police officer—perhaps their manager or the security operations centre is getting an update on the crime—the person in the shop just thinks we have not attended and we do not care. They perhaps do not know what is happening. We need to educate people a lot more that we do not have to physically be there.

I have done a lot of work in the last couple of years on trying to build those relationships back up again because that is what it comes down to. Particularly if it is a very small business, if you are taking somebody off the shop floor to do a statement or to produce CCTV, that is time-consuming. That is extra work they have to do or extra money they have to spend, which they cannot afford.

There is also a concern about the negative knock-on impact on someone if they have made a report to the police. Particularly in your sector, where convenience stores are thoroughly embedded in the community, people live and work in close vicinity.

Q175 Rosie Wrighting: That mirrors what I am hearing from businesses in my constituency. You spoke about using CCTV footage or private security. There is a concern that smaller and independent businesses might not be able to afford to have that sort of private system and would therefore be at higher risk. How can we level that out so it is not the independent businesses that might not have that that are being hit by retail crime?

Lisa Maslen: Yes, there are lots of major retailers that do not have very good CCTV. It is not always about cost and how they choose to spend their money. If there is a small standalone system in that store, officers can still attend and take the CCTV away on a disc or a USB stick, like we have done for years. We prefer to do it digitally. It saves the original copy; it is viewable instantly. That really helps. We appreciate that that does come at a cost.

Q176 Rosie Wrighting: Finally, is there a feeling within the police force that retail crime is a low-level crime? Is that a cultural feeling?

Lisa Maslen: Culturally, it was. In the last couple of years, a lot of things have changed largely due to the escalating levels of violence, threats and assaults. People realise it is not just shoplifting any more. That is the Home Office classification. That is what it is by law, but I always prefer to call it retail crime for that very reason. Sometimes “shoplifting” can have a negative connotation.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

It is frustrating for police officers. They are locking the same people up week after week. When they see that those people are not getting into the courts or getting any kind of sentence or diversion, that is frustrating for them as well. It does not all come from laziness or not wanting to do it. Some of it also comes from frustration.

Q177 **Chair:** Some polling that I published last night showed that 48% of people in the country think that their area is in decline. When we give people the opportunity to explain why, overwhelmingly the two words they use are "crime" and "shops". Within the harm reduction matrices that most forces now use, is retail crime anywhere like close enough to the top of the list?

Lisa Maslen: It has definitely gone up the list. It is definitely better. I can speak quite knowledgeably about this because I have been the London lead in the Met for the last two and a half years and have just taken on this national role for the last three months. I can talk quite confidently about the impact it has on people, but I can also talk about my own high street. I have seen the impact of the Boots being cleared out and the electric doors by the make-up aisle being shut so that people cannot come in and out as quickly. It is a very real concern. Retail crime is better understood now than it has been probably for a long time.

Q178 **Chair:** Over the last three months, have you been having conversations with police commanders up and down the country? They have a lot of problems on their plate. They do not have enough resources. The recruitment of neighbourhood police teams is behind schedule. What sentiments do they express to you when you come along and say, "Hey, do you know what, everyone? You need to think harder about retail crime"?

Lisa Maslen: We had a big launch of the Tackling Retail Crime Together strategy on 14 July. It was launched by Dame Diana Johnson. We had a fairly even split from across the country of policing, retail and academics. There are some pockets of really good work. Some of that does come down to money and resourcing. Some of it comes down to the individuals and the PCCs getting that vision, but there is some really good work. Part of my job is really just to standardise that best practice and share it across the country to try to bring that all together.

Q179 **Chair:** How would you characterise how frontline police commanders currently think about this as a priority, honestly?

Lisa Maslen: The priority is the neighbourhood policing guarantee and coming back to community-style policing because shops are an absolutely integral part of the local community. Like James said earlier, if you take a shop out of a community you have nowhere to cash your pension cheque and buy your daily paper. There is a real lack of community there without a shop.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The return to community policing and the neighbourhood policing guarantee have a large part to play in that, but that comes at the cost of getting those neighbourhood policing officers in the right place.

Q180 **Chair:** By and large, is it a top five issue for a local police commander?

Lisa Maslen: I would not say top five. I would say top 10.

Q181 **Alison Griffiths:** I just wanted to go back to the point about the perception of policing in the modern day and how the police can better communicate what you are doing. You talked about the CCTV at the station and digital solutions. The general public do not understand any of that. It is about confidence and the fear that people feel about going into their communities. Certainly, in Bognor Regis and Littlehampton, in those communities, people are concerned at times about going into town centres. If they do not know what else is going on behind the scenes, how can we improve that confidence? I suppose this is my question. What will the police do to improve that communication?

Lisa Maslen: Good news stories about policing never sell. They do not make the front pages of the papers. I have worked in roles before in neighbourhoods. You try to push good news stories about the work that you do, but it is incredibly difficult to get media attention on this.

As part of the launch of the Tackling Retail Crime Together strategy, we have launched a communication kit and a branding kit to get everybody talking about it. Across the country, policing, retailers, business improvement districts and business crime reduction partnerships are all using the same branding to show they are working together. The hope is that some of that will deter offenders. If they think everybody is working together a lot more efficiently, there is a greater chance of them getting caught. No criminal wants to be caught.

Communication and getting good news stories out about policing has probably been the bane of my career. It is incredibly difficult to get the media interested in that. You can get pockets of your community interested through safer neighbourhood panels and local events, but, in my experience, the same group of people will come to those meetings. You are not catching the wider public. "I do not know" is the answer to that question. I think it is repetition, repetition, repetition.

Q182 **Sonia Kumar:** Lisa, you just mentioned the neighbourhood policing guarantee and the safer streets mission. Is that enough to tackle high street retail crime?

Lisa Maslen: If it is resourced properly, yes. If policing is resourced, if it has the money, the visibility and is policing physically in neighbourhoods, yes.

Q183 **Sonia Kumar:** Are you resourced currently or do you think you will be?

Lisa Maslen: No.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q184 **Sonia Kumar:** What is required? What is the vision? If this could be the gold standard, what would that be?

Lisa Maslen: I am a superintendent. I do not run a police force. If I did, I would think having the numbers to ensure that I have visibility on every high street every day would be the gold standard. Will we ever get there? I do not know. There has been a return to the mindset that that is what we need, but now we just need the numbers and the resources to go behind it.

Q185 **Sonia Kumar:** I have also gone to town centres and spoken to lots of businesses on the high street in Dudley. People say that they do see a police officer, but, as soon as there is an incident, that police officer is now taken up by another one. Two of them have now gone. That might leave the whole entire day with no visible policing. If an incident happens in the morning, there is no policing for the whole day. It is not just about visibility. Because police officers are not visible on the ground, a lot of small businesses are now investing in having extra security or CCTV.

The ACS is saying that it is costing just over £5,000 for each business to invest in trying to make sure its business is secure, so it is not spending hours and hours having to chase police officers and crime numbers and then trying to get those people prosecuted.

Lisa Maslen: Yes, you are absolutely right. If an officer arrests somebody at the beginning of their shift, the custody process, the preparation of a case file, getting CCTV or a statement, whatever it may be, does take time. There is no getting away from that. You cannot prosecute without it.

Retailers can help by having CCTV readily available and having somebody there who can make it available to the police officer straightaway. If the suspect gets bailed, you are in the position where they are straight back out committing further offences. That case is building and building, and the police officer is going to be off the street for longer. We need retailers to be confident and to give us statements and CCTV as soon as possible, so that every time somebody is arrested we are evidentially ready to go.

Q186 **Sonia Kumar:** On the back of that, Chris, what needs to happen at local level? How can we support small businesses and work in partnership with them to make sure their businesses are secure? What should we be doing? That might be giving them additional grant or funding for CCTV or making them more aware of how to get staff training. That could be for the business, from a local government point of view or a national strategy. What needs to be done?

Chris Morris: There is a whole range of measures that could be taken. We have seen some in the Crime and Policing Bill, with the specific offence of assaulting a retail worker and the presumption that, if you are found guilty of that offence, you will get a criminal behaviour order. If people are not sentenced to prison, that can ensure that the person is taken off the street or taken away from those retailers.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

We also need to do some amount of simplifying processes. This is what Lisa was talking about earlier. When a retailer wants to report an issue, a national retailer might be looking at 42 or 43 police forces all with slightly different reporting procedures. We need to try to streamline that process and make sure that there is a simplified process, which would encourage people to report. At the moment, one of the barriers to reporting is the length of time it takes and the complication in terms of being able to do that. If reporting rates rise, that will help the police identify where they need to respond.

There is the question about the resourcing of the police as well. The anecdotal evidence and the suggestions from our survey evidence indicate that the level of physical assaults went down following the implementation of the national retail crime action plan, which prioritised attendance for retail crime and incidents where a worker had been assaulted, where there was evidence that needed to be gathered or where someone had been detained by the shop. Those things, as a start of a priority, have helped to tackle some level of retail crime, but we need to make sure that the resources are there to drive it down even further than where we are now.

In local areas, we have seen retailers coming together with local authorities and metropolitan areas to tackle it as a community and figure out how they can best utilise the police force in the local area and how they can share best practice among themselves. We have seen some really good initiatives in Oldham in north Manchester, where retailers are coming together to try to tackle it as a community issue, alongside the police and the local authority. That can really help.

Q187 Mr Reynolds: In 2024-25, 800 shoplifting incidents a day went unsolved, which was an 18% increase since the year before. What made that 18% increase? Why is it still going up?

Lisa Maslen: I do not know why it is going up, but part of it—I cannot speak to the figures exactly—is the volume in reporting. We have really pushed and actively asked retailers to report. The ONS data up to the end of March said that retail crime had gone up to 530,000 offences. We know that is nowhere near what is actually happening; that is just what is being reported.

For policing, to get those resources, police officers and all those things that we have already discussed, I have to show there is a problem. I need the data from the retailers to really identify the problem. What is the scale of retail crime, where are the high-harm places within the country and who are my prolific offenders? If a police force, at chief constable level or at PC level in a town centre, has that information, it is better placed to deal with it.

We have definitely pushed for reporting. We have changed some things to try to make reporting a bit easier. Some of our traditional methods online have not been very friendly to businesses. They are very much



HOUSE OF COMMONS

kitted out for individuals, such as Lisa Maslen who may report one crime a year, rather than somebody who works in a convenience store on a high street who is reporting 10 a week. We have tried to simplify processes and make reporting less of a barrier and less time-consuming. I hope that has driven the numbers up.

Q188 Mr Reynolds: In terms of reporting, I spent years working in grocery stores and would report on Disc three or four times a day every day for multiple years, but from those reports on Disc I probably saw or heard from an officer only five times over three years. That does not give confidence for me or the team that worked for me to continue reporting these incidents.

How can we give confidence to these store teams that they are doing the right thing by reporting it? They are not hearing or seeing anything. They are still seeing the same shoplifters come in two or three times a day every day, often at the same times each day as well. They are still seeing them come in, so they know that nothing is happening off the back of it.

Lisa Maslen: It is an external platform. It is one that many retailers use to record their stock losses, incidents or crimes. It does not directly link into police reporting. Because an incident is loaded on to that or any of the other platforms, it will not necessarily go straight to police.

Q189 Mr Reynolds: Police and crime commissioners are asking stores to use Disc and saying that it will be fed in.

Lisa Maslen: In parts of the country, yes, but not everywhere. One of the challenges that I have often had is exactly that conversation. Somebody is saying, "I have reported it on one of the platforms and the police did not attend". It does not come through to the police. In some areas, police will have an information sharing agreement with the provider of Disc in that area, be it their business crime reduction partnership, et cetera. In others, that data will be purely used by the retailer. It will not ever make it to the police.

This is another one of my real challenges. There are three or four really big ones that are monopolising. It is a little bit like policing. If you were going to design it today on a blank piece of paper, you would not put every police force on a different crime recording standard and digital evidence management system. Retailers have the prerogative to choose which platform and which CCTV manufacturer and installer they want to use. Collating and bringing all of that together in one place is incredibly challenging.

Q190 Mr Reynolds: Is there a role for the Government to bring that together and to make sure that every incident that is reported on Disc is fed in? You say that some forces will go directly, but others will not. How do we bring everyone in line so all those incidents that stores are reporting—they are doing the right thing—go to the police and those stores see outcomes off the back of that?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Lisa Maslen: There is some work going on at the moment. There is a team in the Home Office looking at certain platforms. We should remember that data is very complicated. The retailer owns the data and then a third-party intermediary, for want of a better phrase, is taking that data and either cleansing it or putting it into a usable format to give to police. It becomes very complicated around data protection and what is clear and what is accurate. Some of these platforms also use AI or facial rec in the background, so there is lots to work on there, in policing terms, around how we integrate them. You then have to integrate all of those platforms into every police force's crime recording system.

Q191 **Mr Reynolds:** Is it just too complicated?

Lisa Maslen: It is doable. It will take investment and require some level of standardisation. Those tech providers, whether CCTV or platforms, are all competitors in their own market, which makes it incredibly challenging to get people round the table.

Q192 **Charlie Maynard:** I have just done a PCSO shift in Witney and Carterton. I was impressed by lots that I saw. The CCTV systems are very good. The knowledge of key perpetrators is very good. Where it gets much stickier, to a point of deep depression, is that everybody in town knows that it is this guy or that girl, or whoever it may be, doing it. Exactly as Josh says, they are doing it time after time after time, day after day after day. There is the whole aspect of solving that problem, getting statements, following through and coming up with a sensible solution for those perpetrators, and the incredibly negative feedback loop back into the high street and the community of this just not being dealt with.

We recognise that Disc does not work perfectly, but let us assume that it did. Could you say a bit more about that back-end within police control in terms of courts, sentencing and locking people up? What would you say are the biggest problems at that end that need to be addressed? The front end is largely known.

Lisa Maslen: There is a lack of deterrent. That is the biggest challenge. As Chris mentioned, a lot of stores now have a policy of not detaining. I agree with that, given the levels of violence. As a police officer, you are expected to deal with it with the right kit and the right people around you, but, working in a convenience store with possibly one other person, you are absolutely not. They know that there is no deterrent from anybody physically grabbing hold of them and detaining them. If they do get to the courts, the sentence is minimal.

There is a lack of understanding around what a prolific offender is. A prolific offender, or the offender who is causing the most harm in shops, does not have to be the person who is taking the £1,000 telly. They could be going in every day and taking £10. This is what is really challenging. As a police officer, if I am assaulted today, the chance of me being in the same location tomorrow is minimal. If you are working in Boots on your



high street, you know that that person is coming. Some people have said to me that they can set their watch by the time that they will come back in.

It is incredibly difficult for policing to get a batch of cases, which is almost what you need, to show the severity and the recidivism of these offenders to the courts, or to get it through CPS to get it to the courts. It does not always happen like that. It could be one arrest for one, and then people say, "It is £10". "Yes, it is £10, but it has been every day", with levels of abuse and threats, intimidation, and intimating or physically showing weapons.

Q193 **Charlie Maynard:** As far as you would like to say, what would be good to see between the police and the CPS for this to change and improve?

Lisa Maslen: I would like to see the CPS take shoplifting as seriously as we are trying to take it. If we can get these people in front of the courts, I would like to see that there are meaningful sentences, or, for those who are offending to fund a habit and require support, that there is a more holistic approach to them. That is hit and miss. Some areas are very good at that. A lot of that depends on third-party organisations. The overall cost of funding drug rehabilitation in particular is minimal when you think about how much they are stealing every day to fund it.

Q194 **Chair:** I have one more question on the system failure that you have described here. We also heard evidence from people who wanted to see police officers going in alongside trading standards, HMRC and UK Border Agency. That sounds to me like a multi-agency taskforce in which no one is in charge. How often do you see those kinds of joint initiatives? Who should be in charge? What do we need to do to make sure that we have more of that kind of policing?

Lisa Maslen: They do not happen as often as they used to. There used to be a lot more, particularly with trading standards at a local level, and that was very much community information and intelligence-led. If somebody was selling something that is branded to another store, trading standards and police would work on that, but that would be intelligence-led.

Likewise, in terms of Border Force issues, a lot of organised gangs will perhaps run children who are being exploited. There is lots of crossover with other Government agencies, and you are right that that is not being looked at. In terms of who should own that, I do not know. It is probably above my pay grade.

Q195 **Sonia Kumar:** Everyone knows who the frequent flyers are, or however you want to brand those people who shoplift time and time again. The traders will know. The businesses will know. The police will know. These people are just going round in a circle. It is just like a merry-go-round, and no one manages to get to a point of them getting prosecuted.

What needs to happen? What do you see happening in the future to build



those relationships with businesses and for intelligence to be shared more widely? Everyone knows, but people are sometimes not having those conversations or do not feel able to have those conversations. Does there need to be a platform, some sort of meeting, or something like that? In some parts of the country, there are forums set up for this, while, in others, it is just a desert and there is nobody talking at all. What do you see as the gold standard? On the back of that, what preventive things should we be doing? We are talking about prosecutions, but what preventive work needs to happen?

Lisa Maslen: Probation has a big part to play in this. If we are talking about keeping people out of prisons, probation has a big part to play in pulling together a multi-agency approach to make sure that we are collecting all of that. Probation is after they have been arrested or what have you, but that is probably the most natural place for those repeat offenders who are constantly being arrested and going through the court system. Whether it is housing, issues with children at school, health or mental health trusts, a full multi-agency approach there for some of our offenders would really help.

In terms of prevention, I could prevent retail crime tomorrow, because I could make every shop look like an Argos. That would be great, but it is not a customer journey that people want to experience, and nor should we have to. There is a real balance to be had. Some retailers can definitely do more, but they are already investing in RFID tags, DNA sprays, CCTV, locked cabinets, and all those kinds of things. Some retailers are very good at investing in all of that, although they are generally those that are larger and have the money and the outlay to do that.

For smaller retailers, it is incredibly challenging to ask them to do that kind of prevention. Policing offers “designing out crime” support. There is lots of crime prevention on the national business crime website, but there is a balance to be had for the one who is going to spend money in a shop and us having a nice experience in that store. It is a difficult one and, like I said, I could prevent it all tomorrow.

Q196 **Sonia Kumar:** James, on the back of that, what needs to be done to help small businesses distribute that burden? Who should be giving that support to small businesses to prevent crime?

James Lowman: We should look at ways in which we can help retailers to make those investments. It might be grants. It might be incentivising that investment, or taking away some of the disincentive. If you install CCTV and other measures in your store, the valuation of the premises might go up, so your business rates bill might go up, which is surely the exact opposite of what anyone would want to happen. I am thinking about ways of incentivising that investment, through either the business rates system or the tax system. Maybe it is a super deduction on crime prevention measures or something like that.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The biggest incentive around prevention is confidence. Superintendent Maslen is right. There are complexities. It is also very simple. Retailers need to report crime, police need to investigate it, and courts need to implement effective penalties. While we have to embrace the fact that there are complexities in there, it is as simple as that. That works only when everyone is playing their part and when there is feedback through that.

What I hear from members a lot of the time is, "I reported through the online system"—and, ultimately, whatever the system is, the police get to see that and can investigate on that basis—"but I did not hear anything back". Nothing seemed to happen, the same people kept coming in, and so they do not bother to do it the next time. You have to really work to keep that retailer reporting. Otherwise, you miss that first link in the chain.

Superintendent Maslen is also right when she talks about the CPS and about cases coming to court. Where we hear about great success is when you have 30 or 40 incidents associated with that one individual and one case, which can then lead to a meaningful penalty, whether that is a custodial sentence or intervention, rehabilitation and a community order. We are agnostic about what the best way to do it is. The objective is to break the cycle of reoffending, however that is done. At the moment, if crime is not being reported and investigated, you do not have a chance. There is no possibility of doing that. We are a long way away and there is complexity, but you have to keep it simple as well.

Q197 Matt Western: Just briefly on that, businesses such as corner shops and convenience stores in my constituency of Warwick and Leamington all speak to that, saying, "Please extend the relief on adding CCTV and other equipment such as facial recognition systems". I am not sure how legal that is currently, but perhaps you can explain that to me.

I was struck by a story in the papers just the other day of a petrol station forecourt owner in Romford, who said that they had lost £30,000 worth of fuel over the last four years and have had to install £13,000 worth of CCTV. Surely, the time has now come for this to be very much standardised and enabled through such relief as you are describing.

James Lowman: Yes, absolutely. When you get into drive-offs in certain parts of the country, it can be very intense. We call them drive-offs, where people have filled up their car with fuel. Those incidents are almost always linked to other crime as well, by the way. CCTV and automatic number plate recognition can be very helpful, particularly as a lot of those vehicles are stolen.

With all the crimes that we are talking about, there is another way of looking at this. Traditionally, we have seen it as such a high-volume set of crimes that it has almost been too difficult to get our arms around and tackle. We could look at it the other way and say that this is an incredible data source on the individuals who are blighting communities up and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

down the country. If we identify the repeat shop thieves, they are also people burgling houses; they are also stealing cars; they are also stealing fuel. If we see that as a way of identifying those people, we might be able to make more progress rather than just thinking, "Is this almost an impossible tide to hold back?" I do not believe that that is the case. It can be tackled and we need to look at it differently.

Q198 **Chair:** You said that it was, basically, a 10p tax. Is that right?

James Lowman: Yes.

Q199 **Chair:** Chris, you said that half of shopworkers have now had some kind of abuse.

Chris Morris: It used to be half. It was 77% last year.

Chair: Just to draw this to a close, thank you very much indeed for your evidence. The story that you have described today is that business crime is now so expensive that it is equivalent to a 10p tax. Over three-quarters of shopworkers have now experienced some kind of abuse. Business crime is not a top three or a top five, but possibly a top 10 issue for police around the country. You said that there was not sufficient policing resource in place at the moment to tackle this crisis. There is a failure of leadership on the frontline and a system crisis that characterises this problem. That is contributing to an overwhelming failure of confidence in how we are going to tackle this.

That is quite a bleak picture, but thank you for being very candid with us today and making sure that that evidence is on the record. That concludes this panel and this session.