

## **Written evidence submitted by Boots (VTR0026)**

### **Introduction**

1. Thank you for the opportunity to submit evidence to the Committee's Call for Evidence with regard to violence and abuse towards retail workers. For over 170 years, Boots has been a pioneer in the evolution of retail and pharmacy in the UK since its foundation, with a proud history of innovation and trust. With almost 2,500 health and beauty stores, most of which include a pharmacy, our colleagues are at the heart of local communities across the UK. The safety and security of every colleague is important to us, and we welcome the fact that the committee is examining this critical issue.
2. At Boots, we do all we can to make sure our stores are safe places to work and visit. The vast majority of our customers show patience, kindness and care towards our store colleagues and pharmacy teams. Over the last 5 years, around £110m has been invested in Boots in the UK and The Republic of Ireland to support colleague safety, security and loss prevention. This includes:
  - Guarding in larger loss or high-risk stores
  - Creating the CCTV Monitoring Centre (CMC) to provide real-time support to colleagues during incidents
    - Digital CCTV, linking 900+ stores to the CMC, bundling crime reports to enable more effective prosecution and helping prevent crimes
  - Body worn video (BWV) in high risk stores for colleagues and security guards
  - Physical security enhancements (including Electronic Article Surveillance (EAS) barriers) to reduce opportunistic crime during trade and outside of trading hours
  - Increased product protection to reduce theft opportunities
  - Public display monitors (PDMs) to visually highlight the use of CCTV in stores
  - Lone-working devices pilot into 'late hour' trading shops
3. Our approach to combating crime is a community and collaborative response and we stand firm alongside our retail colleagues. We invest significantly to share advice, tips and additional training with our pharmacy and store teams to ensure they remain safe. This includes providing our Pharmacists and Store Managers with additional support should they need to ban any customers from store who have been violent or abusive. Our #PrescribeKindness campaign, which we started on social media at the start of the first lockdown, encourages customers to take a safe, sensible and considerate approach towards colleagues and each other.
4. We also work closely with external stakeholders to highlight these issues, share learnings and collaborate on solutions in forums ranging from the British Retail Consortium (BRC) and the National Retailers Against Crime Steering Group (NRCSG) to the National Business Crime Centre (NBCC) hosted by the police.
5. However, there is still more to be done. It is clear that incidents of retail abuse and violence have shown a steady upwards trend. The BRC's 2018/19 Annual Crime Survey showed that there were 424 violent or abusive incidents against retail workers every day. With the Covid pandemic and implementation of safety measures, we have seen increases in aggressive behaviour towards colleagues, including acting in a threatening way when asked to follow Covid guidance as well as racially aggravated crimes. Worryingly, we saw a dramatic increase in spitting incidents with individuals attempting to intimidate colleagues with the threat of Covid. In one particular incident, a pharmacist asked an individual to leave the store after spotting them concealing two products. This person, a prolific shoplifter who was already banned from the store for theft, punched the pharmacist twice in the face, knocking them to the ground, before spitting on them

and saying they now had the virus. Despite reporting this incident, the individual has neither been arrested nor charged in relation to the event.

6. While recognising the pressure on police forces across the country, colleagues tell us that there are times that they will not bother reporting an incident as the police will not show up. It is worth highlighting that shoplifting in particular can be perceived as a victimless crime, particularly if the value of what is stolen is 'small' e.g. less than £200. This is categorically not the case. We have perpetrators, who despite being banned from stores, will repeatedly shoplift under this threshold while knowing these actions will not lead to arrest or judicial consequences. For our colleagues, who take pride in their work and are protective of their workplace, the associated mental, physical, and economic impact of shoplifting and interaction with persistent offenders takes its toll. It is critical that this is recognised by the authorities.
7. Where a case is pursued, the lack of use of an aggravated offence which already exists for sentencing purposes has also prevented justice for victims. We would urge that 'spitting', 'coughing' and 'threats to spit or cough' are explicitly referenced as a factor increasing the offence seriousness, given how serious the impact of these actions can be with the spread of Covid. Coupled with an increasing backlog of cases, it is clear victims are not being provided justice in a timely fashion. In one instance, a store manager called for police assistance after a female customer pulled apart the Perspex screening in store and was seen spitting and coughing at the pharmacist and store manager. Nine police officers attended, and the woman was arrested. The woman's behaviour – and the spitting – was captured by three different camera angles which were shared for evidence. Three colleagues also wrote statements attesting to what had happened. When the case came before the courts, the lack of technical resource meant that an insufficiently inadequate CCTV clip was shown, requiring three magistrates to huddle around a small tablet device. In a rushed closing of the case, they found this person not guilty due to lack of evidence. This is not an isolated incident and makes it very hard for colleagues who have been victims of these experiences to find closure.
8. With regard to the Government's response to its call for evidence in 2018, it was extremely disappointing that the findings of the original call for evidence were delayed for so long. While we welcome the Task & Finish groups (T&F) that were set up as a result, they have much ground and time to make up and therefore need to deliver credible and timely outputs that demonstrate that this issue is being taken seriously. Given the vital role pharmacy and retail colleagues have played during Covid and the recognition of their contribution to the economy and society, the rising trend of abuse and violence towards them needs swift policy action.
- 9 We therefore support the BRC's policy recommendations on the issues that have been raised in your call for evidence, including,

## **10 Improving Sentencing**

- Increase penalties and sentences for offenders by legislating for a specific new statutory offence for assaults towards retail workers. This would include assaulting, threatening or abusing a retail worker, and making those offences aggravated where the retail worker is enforcing a statutory age restriction.
- Review the Sentencing Guidelines and make specific reference to shopworkers as public facing workers.
- A comprehensive review of the Out of Court Disposals system to ensure that interventions are tackling the root cause of offending such as drug and alcohol addiction, instead of issuing fines to repeat offenders.

## **11. Police Response to Retail Violence**

- The Home Office should commission and fund H.M. Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire Services (HMICFRS) to undertake a thematic review of violence against retail colleagues, including the links to theft and damage, and invite representatives from retail onto the Steering Group.
- Encourage Police and Crime Commissioners to make provision for retail violence in their Police and Crime Plans, making retail violence a local priority for each force.
- Provide appropriate resources for local police forces to properly prioritise this issue by allocating some of the new policing resource to focus on retail crime.
- Look to establish a cross-region taskforce tasked with identifying, tracking, and apprehending the most seriously violent offenders who work across and between force boundaries.

## **12. Justice for victims**

- Resource the criminal justice system, including the courts, to enable more cases to be dealt with more efficiently and reduce the backlog.

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