

Violence in Retail

What's going to happen in 2022?

Over the course of the last 18 months, violence in the workplace has been a key concern for the retail sector.

In the various lockdown stages, Government urged retailers and supermarkets in particular to enforce the wearing of face coverings, but the pandemic led to a significant rise in verbal abuse, threats and assaults on retail staff.

We previously examined how retailers can balance government guidance with protecting workers, and we also kept clients updated on the inquiry that was being undertaken via the Home Affairs Select Committee (HASC).

As we end 2021, we have the return of face coverings in supermarkets and shops. This month, the Government tabled an amendment to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill which would render assaults against retail workers an aggravating offence. This is welcome news and we will watch the report stage in the House of Lords with interest.

So, as we head into 2022, is the retail sector in a better place – and what still needs to be done to protect workers?

What do the statistics say?

First, a reminder of what the statistics showed earlier in the year:



At the end of Summer 2021, the HASC released their findings, followed a few weeks later by the Government's response – we have summarise both below:

Impact of Covid-19

Committee's Recommendation:

- Learn lessons from the pandemic
- Work with retailers to ensure there are workable systems in place and clear guidance for the public

Government Response:

- It stresses that they have worked with businesses to ensure a Covid-secure workplace for employees, and agrees this relationship should continue to ensure any further Covid-19 guidance is clear and workable

Improved Reporting and Recording

Committee's Recommendation:

- Make a "business crime flag" mandatory to offences committed in a retail environment, including assaults on retail workers
- The National Business Crime Centre (NBCC) to work with the National Police Chiefs' Council to agree a better long-term way to identify and properly measure the violence and abuse suffered by retail workers
- Look at a more appropriate flag, such as retail business crime, which more accurately reflects the nature of the abuse.

Government Response:

- It will work with the NBCC to make changes to how retail crimes are reported, but that this will require a consultation to weigh up the additional burden this would place on police forces

Leadership from the National Business Crime Centre

Committee's Recommendation:

- The Home Office to provide central funding for the continued operation of the NBCC, as this body is well placed to ensure the sharing of best practice approaches, improve links with the business community and drive up consistency in policing response to retail crime

Government Response:

- The NBCC should not be funded centrally, as it is more appropriately funded by police forces
- While it will not be funded directly by the Home Office, the NBCC will receive appropriate Government support so it can co-ordinate nationally

Business Crime Reduction Partnerships

Committee's Recommendation:

- Greater support for the creation of Business Crime Reduction Partnerships
- Actively encouraging partnerships to cover smaller town centres, and to include shopworkers and major employers
- Prioritise the safety of shop workers through the Safer Streets Fund

Government Response:

- Business Crime Reduction Partnerships (BCRPS) play a key role. The Home Office will continue to work with the National Association of Business Crime Partnerships (NABCP) to consider how to encourage the creation of BCRPs
- The Government highlight the Build Back Better High Streets plan, High Streets Task Force, and Future High Streets Fund instead - none of these specifically address safety, but rather focus on economic recovery

What do Retail Workers Want?

Committee's Recommendation:

- The Home Office strengthen its action by working with the National Retail Crime Steering group to agree an Employers Charter, specifically targeted at retail workers and retail crime

Government Response:

- Work is ongoing concerning exploring ways to support victims

Preventative Measures

Committee's Recommendation:

- Government resources, to include specific 'tool kit' style material to support all employers to take action to prevent violence against retail workers, and better manage instances where it occurs

Government Response:

- The Home Office will review the resources produced.
- There is a commitment to publishing a Drugs Strategy later on this year



Funding Rehabilitation

Committee's Recommendation:

- As a result of drugs playing a significant role in the large number of these types of crimes, the committee recommends central funding for rehabilitation programmes, and ring fenced funding to enable Police and Crime Commissioners to work with local councils to restore drug rehabilitation services in their local area

Government Response:

- The Government is absolutely committed to tackling drugs as a driver of crime, including theft and violence driven by drug misuse
- Dame Carol Black has conducted a Government-commissioned review of drugs that look into these issues which makes clear that the Government must take a whole-system approach to tackle both the supply of drugs and the demand for them
- It also plans to publish a Drug Strategy later this year after the Spending Review, to set out longer term plans to tackle drug misuse in the coming years

Are Retail Workers a Special Case?

Committee's Recommendation:

- Extra protection by way of a specific offence for retail workers
- The Government should consult urgently on the scope of the offence, recognising the particular pressure on those in different occupations who are asked to enforce the law
- Consideration should be given to a new standalone offence for violence against retail workers

Government Response:

- The Government has said that this is already regarded an aggravating factor in sentencing
- An MP has committed to an amendment to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill if appropriate. As set out above, now to be debated in the House of Lords



Summary

Whilst it is clear that the Government has taken steps to address violence towards retail workers (such as introducing mask mandates and ensuring that the 2020/21 CVS includes motivations and impacts of crimes), there are very few commitments to work on the points raised in the HASC Report. The notable commitments they do make are reviewing resources for victims and employers, continuing to work with NABCP and NBCC to encourage BCRPs, and publishing a drugs strategy.

We have yet to see much move forward, although the Home Office and Crimestoppers have launched a #ShopKind initiative, which they say "urges the public to

be mindful of shop workers' essential role serving the public, and emphasises that workers should be treated with respect, kindness and gratitude."

What do retailers need to do?

It would appear that we are not much further on in terms of commitment to change despite the HASC inquiry. However the proposed amendment to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill is undoubtedly further acceptance that the Government understands the seriousness of the issues facing retail workers.

We will continue to track what changes are being made to tackle this.

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