



Protecting Retail Workers: Sharing Best Practice

Key Findings

Thanks to the responses to the survey, we have been able to identify a number of key areas where action can be taken to tackle abuse, threats and violence towards retail workers.

- Regular refreshment training on how employees are expected to react to common flashpoints, such as shoplifting and age-related sales.
- Drive up confidence in the effectiveness of reporting incidents.
- Review how recently-introduced technology can be used to drive up rates of reporting.
- Deliver consistently high rates of incidents reported to the police.
- Look at environmental measures in place to protect retail workers engaged on banks of self-service checkouts with little or no protective barriers.
- Ensure that all retail workers are covered by sick pay policies which provide additional support to colleagues who are absent from work as a result of physical or mental injury.
- In consultation with employee representatives, deliver more management support to retail workers.
- Share best practice on current programmes for management support.
- Continue to invest in campaigning, stakeholder engagement and community projects.
- Campaign politically for:
 - Nationwide initiatives that support the complete rehabilitation of offenders.
 - Investment in community-led policing initiatives, which recognise the invaluable role that retail workers play in our communities and deliver locally-led programmes to guarantee worker safety.
 - A properly-funded justice system to tackle the backlog and deliver victims of violence and abuse the justice they deserve.

General Secretary's Foreword



I would like to thank all of the retailers who responded to our survey looking at best practice across the sector.

Those responding employ nearly one million workers. This engagement, along with measures outlined in this report, clearly demonstrates the sector's commitment to tackling violence and abuse towards retail workers. As highlighted in the BRC's most recent Crime Survey, the sector spent £715 million on crime prevention last year.

This report looks at a whole range of areas where retailers can take positive steps. I believe it highlights a number of best practice ideas which can hopefully be adapted to each retailer's needs and individual business models. The aim of this project has been to bring the industry together and work collaboratively to tackle violence and abuse as quickly as possible.

We sincerely hope that all retailers will find the information contained in the report useful and that it will provide ideas on how to better tackle the issue.

At the same time, this is not just an industry issue or one which can be resolved by the sector alone. Despite the investment and engagement from so many within the sector, violence and abuse has continued to rise to previously unimaginable levels. The Association of Convenience Stores has estimated that there were over 35,000 violent incidents in the convenience sector last year alone.

If we are to truly tackle these issues, we must continue to engage with politicians and the police, to press for action on retail crime prevention, detection and access to justice.

Since August 2021, specific legislation has been introduced in Scotland as well as a statutory aggravating factor in England and Wales. However, Usdaw's Freedom From Fear survey shows that the overwhelming majority of retail workers do not have confidence that reporting issues will help.

Ensuring the correct policies are in place, driving up levels of reporting and instilling confidence in the system, as well as delivering justice for retail workers, are all key priorities. I hope that we can take this work forward together.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paddy Lillis". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Paddy Lillis
General Secretary

The Sector – Leading From The Front

Usdaw launched its Freedom From Fear Campaign in 2003. The campaign was a response to major concerns raised by members who were facing unacceptable levels of abuse, threats and violence as part of their daily work.

Unfortunately, the scale and scope of abuse faced by retail workers has grown significantly in recent years. In 2014-15, the British Retail Consortium found that there were 36 incidents of violence and abuse per 1,000 staff. By the start of the pandemic, this had increased by well over a quarter. Whilst data suggests that the scale of issues faced by retail workers has reduced – as Covid triggers such as face masks and social distancing have been removed – instances of abuse have not fallen back to pre-pandemic levels.

Tackling these incidents, and protecting the workforce, must be a priority for employers. It is therefore positive that all respondents to the survey have a clear, board level commitment to tackling the issues. Nearly all retailers also confirmed that a senior manager within their organisation has been given responsibility for delivering the commitment.

Over recent years, there has been a strong commitment from across the sector to invest time, money and resources into tackling the issue. As part of their Safer Colleagues, Safer Communities campaign, in 2019, the Co-op Group confirmed that they were investing £70 million over the following three years into equipment, training and innovation.

Alongside this, and as will be discussed later on in the document, a whole range of other retailers have made investments in new technology and delivered work programmes to assist in the reporting of incidents.

These work programmes have included significant investment in training, with all retailers' respondents confirming that induction training includes information on how to react to common flashpoints such as shoplifting and age-related sales. Furthermore, nearly all retailers confirmed that this training included an emphasis on the importance of personal safety of colleagues and other people.

Unfortunately, only around half of retailers responding confirmed that this training is regularly refreshed. In those retailers who do regularly refresh their training, this occurs either annually or every six months.

All retailers confirmed that colleagues are advised on how to report incidents and all stress the importance to managers of ensuring that incidents are reported. However, there do remain major concerns around the reporting of incidents. Usdaw's latest Freedom From Fear survey shows that 45% are not confident that reporting abuse, threats and violence will make a difference. 20% of those who have been physically assaulted did not report the incident.

These statistics have been backed up by a Retail Trust survey of over 1,000 retail workers, which found that more than a quarter do not report difficult incidents to their employer or manager. Of these, 29% didn't think they would receive any help; others thought they might get into trouble (26%) or didn't know who to turn to (20%). These statistics suggest that many incidents are not being recorded and more work can be done to support retail workers in the reporting process and follow up.

There has been some really positive work undertaken to simplify reporting procedures in areas such as Sussex and Nottingham. As well as simplifying procedures these, programmes have developed joint forums to look at reducing crime and anti-social behaviour in specific areas. Similar initiatives are being looked at in areas such as Greater Manchester.



The Sector – Delivering on the Shop Floor

Usdaw’s survey of retailers asked respondents to detail successful examples of measures taken to address violence and abuse towards retail workers.

Environmental Design

All retailers were able to confirm that the risk of shoplifting and worker abuse was considered as part of a store’s environmental design. In particular, one convenience retailer confirmed that,

"Internal Policy is a policy that highlights security features such as external lighting, camera deployment and maintenance, cash holding and more, it has been designed to mitigate the risk of robbery or violent crime, protection screens installed and store lighting increased due to dark nights."

Asda also advised that they use police liaison at the planning stage of new store openings. Other retailers mentioned initiatives such as customer flow gates to deter would-be shoplifters and other forms of checkout barriers. Anecdotally, many Usdaw members have informed the Union of the benefits of protection screens installed during the pandemic, something which created an additional barrier at staffed tills.

There are also particular risks at self-service tills, particularly in larger stores, where there can be no physical barrier, or distance, between a customer and the retail worker. On these occasions, the retail worker will still have to deal with common flashpoints, such as age verification and shoplifting, but will be in a much more vulnerable position.



Issues relating to self-service tills were not picked up specifically in the survey. Usdaw is aware of some environmental measures already in place, such as gateways to exit the self-service area and body-worn cameras. However, we are particularly keen to work with retailers to look at what more can be done to protect retail workers in this situation.

Physical Security

The responses detailing physical security measures demonstrated the level of investment made by retailers over recent years. The following response from Sainsbury's featured the range of security assets now common across many retailers.

"CCTV, body-worn cameras, personal safety devices for online drivers, panic alarms, intruder alarms, keyholder overnight service to reduce how many colleagues have to attend a store overnight, Security Operations Centre to focus on prolific offender case files, security officers, store detectives, mobile disruption units, personalised store support from the Response Team for our stores with the highest risk and long term issues eg homelessness."

The 2022 Crime Report from the Association of Convenience Stores (ACS) stated that the convenience sector had spent £246 million on crime prevention, including technology, in the previous year. Usdaw believes that it would be worthwhile to look at how technology can be put to better use to drive up reporting rates.

Work Procedures

Looking at work procedures, Morrisons, Iceland, Co-op Group and Central England Co-op, amongst others, all proactively mentioned that store openings and closures were conducted with a minimum of two colleagues. Other retailers also mentioned the use of 'deter not detain' or 'run, hide, tell' policies and other measures to avoid conflict.

Training of retail workers was also a common theme in response to the survey, with the following quote from Tesco highlighting their approach.

"All colleagues are trained on protecting their personal safety and managing conflict. Success in these scenarios is 'Everyone, every-day home safely.' No colleagues put themselves in harm's way, and we continue to see a reduction in escalation of incidents."

This question was also linked to training, ensuring that retail workers are aware of the procedures designed to keep them safe. As previously noted, all respondents provide training for new starters which emphasises the importance of personal safety of colleagues and other people.

Reporting Procedures

As has already been highlighted, and reflected both through Usdaw's Freedom From Fear Survey and the Retail Trust's survey, there are significant concerns about the level of confidence retail workers have in reporting procedures.

Ushaw's survey of retailers asked six questions specifically on reporting. The first question looked at how long it took on average to complete the reporting process. Answers to this varied from a lowest time within individual employers of two minutes to a maximum of half an hour. The type of incident, as well whether incidents were reported to the police, will have an impact on time taken to report, with the Co-op Group noting that reporting an incident to the police online takes approximately 15 minutes to complete. Morrisons advised that timing could take between five minutes and half an hour, with many incidents reported through an online app, with a phone call for more serious incidents.

The presence of differing procedures for different levels of incidents appears to be common across the sector. All respondents advised that their internal systems automatically escalate assaults, incidents involving weapons and serious threats. A retailer advised that this automatic escalation would include counselling if necessary. There appears to be some variance on whether the automatic escalation process is automated, where certain options are selected as part of the report, or whether cases are reviewed, typically by Loss Prevention Teams.

There is even greater variety when asked 'What percentage of crime within your business is reported to the police?'. Figures reported by retailers varied significantly for this question, with most retailers reporting somewhere between 5% and 10%, however figures of 30% and 60% were also reported.

Looking at data more broadly, the ACS reports that only 38% of retail crime is reported by convenience retailers to the police, whilst the BRC reports a figure of 57% for the wider retail sector. It is clear that a number of responses to our survey are significantly below these levels. Some retailers have been working with police forces to improve their ability to report incidents, work which clearly must continue.

When asked what the key barriers are to police reporting, a number of themes came up repeatedly, which were summarised in the following quote from Tesco:

"Time taken to obtain a police response and crime reference number, the lack of response to incidents in store, the inconsistencies of response level between forces and a perception that retail crime will not be taken seriously or prioritised by Police forces. Lack of data sharing between forces and retailers on criminal activity across the country due to GDPR."



In the September 2019 report, 'It's not part of the job: Violence and verbal abuse towards shop workers', Dr Emmeline Taylor made the following recommendation to tackle this issue:

"Streamline reporting incidents to the police and improve accuracy of data. *Currently shop workers reporting a crime have to input all of their details for each offence resulting in a lot of repeated work. Typically, there will be many aspects of a crime report that could be pre-populated to relieve the burden on stores that experience volume crime. Better reporting will provide more accurate data regarding the frequency, nature and severity of verbal abuse, violence with injury, and violence without injury in a retail setting. This in turn can improve intelligence and evidence gathering, enabling industry and police resources to be effectively targeted where they are needed most. In addition, consistency in definitions and recording practices are needed across the 43 police forces of England and Wales. This could potentially be developed and coordinated by the National Business Crime Centre."*

Unfortunately, three years later, issues around reporting and confidence in police action still prevail, both in the views of retailers and retail workers. The simplification of reporting procedures, along with substantial Government investment in community led policing, are key pillars in addressing these issues.

Support for Colleagues

Usdaw has always been clear that abuse is not part of the job. However, when serious incidents do occur, support policies must be in place, and acted upon, in order to protect colleagues.

In Usdaw's most recent Freedom From Fear survey, we asked members about the impact that violence, threats and abuse has had on them. Over a third stated that the issue had caused them anxiety about work and just over a quarter had considered changing jobs as a result of the abuse they have faced at work. Tackling violence and abuse, as well supporting colleagues who have faced issues, is fundamental to a healthy and productive workforce.

Supportive Policies

The Union has been working with recognised employers for a number of years on how to tackle the issue and provide support for colleagues. These discussions have taken place through a variety of formats, including national consultation forums, health and safety committees and the invaluable daily work of our reps in the workplace. The Union's Respect Week and year-round Freedom From Fear Campaign have also highlighted to colleagues how the issue is being taken seriously.

As part of the survey of retailers, when asked what type of support was offered, a number of proactive steps were detailed in responses. A retailer, for example, stated that there is a clear instruction for colleagues to leave the floor immediately. Elsewhere, Store Management training to ensure appropriate support can be given after an incident is reported was mentioned, as well as access for all colleagues to Retail Trust counselling services, in addition to other measures.

Nearly all respondents mentioned that their company's sick pay policy provides additional support to colleagues who are off work as a result of physical injury or mental health problems. Morrisons, Central England Co-op, Asda and Tesco also detailed forms of employee assistance programmes which were available to colleagues following a serious incident.

While there is more work to do in this area, to ensure that no colleague is financially disadvantaged as a result of being assaulted at work, it is pleasing to see that many retailers have strong policies in place to support colleagues.

Supportive Managers

In Usdaw's 2021 Freedom From Fear survey, we asked retail workers what more their employer could do to support them. The calls for banning of offenders have continued to grow over recent years and the demand for more security guards is also increasingly common.

In an interesting development, the request for more management support was down to 26% from 38% in 2020. This figure suggests that progress has been made in this area. When looking deeper into the data, around one-in-five calling for more support complain that managers are too slow to respond when help is called for when dealing with an abusive customer, or that managers spend too much time away from the shop floor and are not visible enough to deal with incidents promptly.

The overwhelming majority, however, are calls for managers to back their staff and not to side automatically with the customer when they do intervene. A typical example might be the member of staff refusing a refund in line with company policy and, when the customer becomes abusive, the manager intervening and giving the refund.

Many others describe situations where managers give the aggressive customer a voucher or gift card to placate them. This not only leaves the workers feeling undermined, it also rewards bad behaviour.

"Actually ban customers who are abusive to staff. My employer also gives apologies and £50 gift cards to customers who complain even if these complaints have been found to be unsubstantiated. Would be great if they would ask for our side of the story and evidence before rewarding abusive customers and apologising to them when all we have done is politely ask if they have a mask they could wear or asked them to queue when our store is at capacity."

This year we saw an increase in the number of comments saying that management had done all that they could in the circumstances – removing the offender from the store, banning them where the offence was serious and showing care for the worker's welfare.

The training programmes and support systems, described by employers in response to the survey, are clearly having an impact on making colleagues feel more supported. However, with one-in-four retail workers still calling for more support, this area remains a key priority in tackling the issue. Furthermore, while significant improvements are being made, it is unlikely that these gains are being felt equally across the sector. This appears to be an area where there is significant best practice to be shared.

Community Engagement

As previously mentioned, retail crime and abuse against retail workers is not an issue that can be tackled by the retail sector alone.

There is a clear need for engagement with communities, other retailers and local police forces. Equally, politicians and the courts system must deliver a justice system which ensures victims of crime get the justice they deserve.

When asked whether colleagues and managers are encouraged to develop relationships with neighbourhood police teams, Business Improvement Districts or other local Business Crime Reduction Partnerships, all respondents said yes.

This work took different forms across the sector, with one practical example provided of offering free tea and coffee in store for the police, to encourage visits. Elsewhere, Central England Co-op listed their proud support of the West Midlands Police Forces' Offender to Rehab scheme, as well as their work to encourage roll-out to other police forces.

Other retailers cited the positive work that has been undertaken in Nottingham, where joint forums have come together to look at reducing crime and anti-social behaviour in specific areas.



We know that important work has been undertaken, particularly in Sussex, Nottingham and Greater Manchester, to tackle this issue. During the summer, the British Retail Consortium organised for over 100 retail leaders to co-sign a letter to all Police and Crime Commissioners. This work, alongside the work of Usdaw, the ACS, Co-op Group and other relevant stakeholders, has helped to highlight the issues of threats, violence and abuse to Police and Crime Commissioners.

At this year's Labour Party Conference, Usdaw submitted a motion titled, 'Public Services: Protecting Retail Workers'. This motion called for significant investment in public services to protect retail workers, to include:

- Delivering nationwide initiatives that support the complete rehabilitation of offenders.
- Investing in community-led policing initiatives, which recognise the invaluable role that retail workers play in our communities and deliver locally-led programmes to guarantee worker safety.
- A properly-funded justice system to tackle the backlog and deliver victims of violence and abuse the justice they deserve.

Over the past two years, through the introduction of specific legal protections for retail workers in England, Scotland and Wales, it has become clear that, when talking as one voice, the sector can deliver positive change to assist retail workers. This has also been proven at a more local level through engagement with police forces and other relevant bodies.

Whilst the economic and political outlook remains uncertain, this must not put into question the sector's determination to deliver positive change.



Conclusion

This report has highlighted a significant range of positive work underway, both by retailers and other stakeholders across the sector. It is pleasing to note that the focus from retailers on training appears to have supported a reduction in the number of retail workers calling for more management support.

As has already been accepted across the sector, there remains a need to simplify reporting processes and drive up the levels of, and confidence in, reporting procedures. Nearly half of respondents mentioned the issues around processes and responses, differing by police force.

In terms of support available to retail workers, Usdaw is clear that no retail worker should face a financial detriment as a result of being a victim of abuse or violence at work. We encourage the small number of retailers whose sick pay policy does not provide additional support in these circumstances to review those policies.

Furthermore, the responses to the survey, as well as work done elsewhere, highlighted the level of investment by the sector in tackling the issue. From the information Usdaw has collated, we believe there is an opportunity for best practice to be shared within the sector on what key areas prove to be most successful.

Equally, our conversations with members have shown that many are particularly anxious about abuse and violence when staffing banks of self-service checkouts. There is regularly a need to have close contact interactions with customers, for example with age-verification or removing security tags, resulting in additional risks for retail workers.

In addition to this particular risk, there was some variance over specific examples provided on environmental design, with this being a particular area for further discussion.

Finally, the sector has continually shown its commitment to campaigning and lobbying to tackle these issues. This area of work has always required significant investment, both in terms of time and resources. Throughout the current economic crisis, it is essential that this work does not fall down the list of priorities for the sector.



Freedom
From
Fear

USDAW'S CAMPAIGN TO PROTECT WORKERS FROM VIOLENCE AND ABUSE



FFF Report November 2022
Stock photography, posed by models

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