

Working Together

Retail NI's Plan to Tackle Retail Crime



RetailNI

Standing up for
Independent Retailers

Introduction from the CEO

Crime against businesses is an issue which has been a top priority for my work throughout my time as CEO of Retail NI. It is concerning that criminals are becoming more sophisticated in how they go about it by increasingly utilising modern technology. However, most retailers are most impacted by crimes such as shoplifting, criminal damage, and most concernedly, threats and actual violence against staff and customers.

Our central message in this report is Partnership. We need to deepen the partnership between Business, Police, Department of Justice and the General Public to effectively tackle the ongoing challenge of crime against retailers.

We are increasingly conscious of varying rural and urban factors, and constantly remind stakeholders that their plans need to reflect these different challenges. A one-size-fits-all approach does not work, and there is a need for a greater effort to engage at a local level.

Increasingly, members highlight to me concerns over the impact of the use of illicit drugs in their communities. This is often in plain sight and the root cause of much criminal behaviour. It is not appropriate for us to comment on how we tackle the growing drugs issue, but we are entitled to highlight the increasingly damaging impact it is

having on both businesses and community spaces. We must urge government to consider innovative solutions to tackle it. Policing is only one element, and unfortunately, we are concerned that economic impact is overlooked.

This report is based upon extensive consultation with over 300 Retail NI members, as well as engagement with a range of stakeholders. Business crime is an ongoing priority, and we will continue to highlight it and the resulting effects on our members.

As the Prime Minister has announced that assault of shop workers will now be made a specific criminal offence in England and Wales (already applies in Scotland), Northern Ireland needs to be included in the new laws. Northern Ireland will be the only part of the UK not to have such laws to deter criminals and to protect shop staff.

This is top of our list of priorities.

Our shop staff deserve no less.

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Summary - Our Key Asks

The Northern Ireland Executive has a key role to play in addressing many of the issues identified in this report. In many ways it is not only about investing more money, but also being smarter with the resources currently at hand. Our local Ministers must base their decisions on best practice from other parts of the UK and Ireland, where bodies such as the National Business Crime Centre have led in developing action plans to tackle retail crime.

PSNI

- Strengthen the role of Neighbourhood Policing Team and review the policy of regular officer movement. This is currently undermining the ability to develop relationships.
- Create a new PSNI-led public awareness campaign, encouraging retailers to report every incident, no matter the perceived level of seriousness.
- Strengthen its cyber-crime team, with dedicated liaison officers assigned to engage with retailers who have been targeted.
- Ensure there is a regular, visible presence in areas recognised as crime 'hot spots'.
- Create a new PSNI-led task force to address Anti-Social Behaviour and graffiti issues in many communities.
- Appoint a senior officer, at ACC level to be a direct liaison with business representatives.

Department of Justice

- Introduce legislation to make the targeting of shop staff a standalone offence, with a minimum custodial sentence.
- Review of the current system of warnings and cautions for repeat offenders, to take into account the impact they are having on businesses and staff.
- Introduce specific retail crime Key Performance Indicators, to be overseen by the Northern Ireland Policing Board, as part of the annual policing plan.
- Instigate an overhaul of the role of PCSPs, introduce a new dedicated business crime engagement strategy and improve their interaction with businesses.
- Initiate an urgent, formal review of sentencing guidelines, to ensure they are consummate with the crime and in keeping with modern trends.
- Develop a new, cross-departmental strategy towards tackling crimes against retailers and anti-social behaviour.

Department of Finance

- Enhanced Rate Relief, linked to investment in staff training and investing in instore technology to tackle crime.
- Engage with HM Treasury to consider tax credit support for those who invest in the security of their premises.
- Use the current procurement system to develop new anti-crime solutions for businesses.
- Ensure sufficient and sustained funding is in place to support programmes such as 'Complex Lives' and the PCTF.
- Bring forward multi-agency proposals, to effectively tackle dereliction, which breeds crime and ASB, through fiscal incentives and penalties.

What Are Our Members Saying?

Responses

Can you describe the most common forms of crime and/or Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) which has impacted your business?

- **91% Theft and shoplifting**

Do you call the PSNI to report issues whenever they occur? If yes, are you satisfied with their response and follow up actions?

- **72% Yes**
- **91% of those who responded are satisfied with police response, but disappointed with follow up action**

Do you use any technology-based means of tackling criminal behaviour?

- **95% CCTV**
- **25% Facial Recognition technology, but many more are considering investing in this technology**

Have you or your staff been impacted by physical violence or threats while working?

- **67% Yes**

What financial impact does crime/ASB have on your business?

- **Substantial additional investment in security measures**
- **Reluctance to invest to expand**

Have you ever had a situation when staff have left as a reaction to criminal or anti-social behaviour?

- **51% Yes**

Retail NI Member

“We work hard but it is incredibly frustrating. Drugs are responsible for the explosion in theft and it’s only a matter of time before someone gets hurt if action isn’t taken”.

How do you feel crime/ASB can be best tackled, beyond a policing response?

- **85% believe policing is the primary and only response necessary**
- **10% referenced restorative justice practices/community support**

Have you ever engaged with, or been contacted by, your local Police & Community Safety Partnerships (PCSP) in the last five years?

- **20% Yes**
- **80% No**
- **35% did not know what a PCSP was**

Has criminal activity impacted on your plans to develop your business in any way?

- **40% Yes**
- **45% No**

What would be the most effective fiscal measure which could encourage you to invest in further crime prevention tools for your business?

- **88% believe the rates system should be used to help businesses invest**

Have you ever accessed the nibusinessinfo.co.uk website for crime/ASB support?

- **27% Yes**
- **35% did not what this was**

Is graffiti a problem for your premises and/or the local community?

- **71% Yes**



Key Findings

- Retailers are extremely frustrated with the criminal justice system, and feel let down by the punishments, or lack of, for offenders. Confidence building measures are urgently needed and visible action taken against those who are found guilty of theft and intimidating staff.
- Most respondents appreciated the efforts of the PSNI but felt that their hands are tied by weak laws. There was a strong concern that Neighbourhood Policing Teams were always vulnerable to budget cuts and almost seen as a luxury within the policing system.
- The owners and staff of the vast majority of businesses interviewed have been subjected to some form of physical assault or verbal harassment in the course of their work. Many connect this to the drug problem.
- There is a need for to highlight crime against businesses and the impact it has on customers, staff, and the wider community. Many respondents believed that the media should play a more active role.
- The issue of theft by addicts seeking to fund their addiction is of growing concern right across Northern Ireland. Meat theft is also a particular growing problem. There was a unanimous belief that the explosion in drug use is fuelling this rise in theft and other criminals.
- Positively, facial recognition technology is having an impact and is being increasingly deployed successfully at self service checkouts, which attract opportunistic thieves. Businesses are willing to innovate if they receive the right support.
- Owners are willing to invest in their business and their local communities if they feel they will receive the appropriate support from government.
- Social media has an important role in highlighting crime and anti-social behaviour against businesses and staff. There is an opportunity to further develop this and better connect retailers and other stakeholders.
- Very few businesses currently actively engage with community-based networks such as Police and Community Safety Partnerships and restorative justice networks. The lack of awareness of what a PCSP is and does was surprisingly high. There is a perception that such networks are not really interested in engaging with the business community.

Considering these findings, four distinct issues emerge, which are addressed in this report:

- **Policing and Justice**
- **Supporting Staff and Businesses**
- **Tackling Anti-Social Behaviour**
- **The Technology Revolution**

Protecting Our Staff

Staff are a retailer's most important asset. Yet they are also the most vulnerable to harassment and attack. We want people to work in retail, but we also need the experience to be positive. Therefore, we urge the justice system to work with retailers to ensure that those who are responsible for crime and Anti Social Behaviour (ASB) are dealt with appropriately. We all have a duty to promote a safe environment.

To recognise this safe environment, we believe the following principles should exist:

- No employee should feel they have to leave their job due to intimidation.
- The default position must be to prosecute those who attack retail workers.
- Retailers must be encouraged to report every incident.
- The PSNI has a key role to play through visible, robust policing.

We fully support and endorse the USDAW Campaign to 'End Violence and Abuse against Retail Workers'. The campaign highlights how the Protection of Workers Act came into force in Scotland in August 2021. We want to see Northern Ireland follow this example, and with the Northern Ireland Executive now restored and functioning, the opportunity exists for us to renew confidence in the justice system by following this lead.



Policing and Justice

There is a general perception that crimes against retailers are really 'harmless' and 'victimless' crimes. Nothing is further from the truth. We are deeply concerned that during the cost-of-living crisis, some commentators have almost sought to legitimise this. Crimes against retailers are never justified in any circumstances. Businesses support many causes and those in need through a variety of ways, and going on to steal from them is a betrayal of their generosity.

The increase in crimes against retailers is being driven by the increase in illicit drug use in Northern Ireland. A significant proportion of retail crime is caused by those seeking to feed their drug habits and they feel immune to the fear of being caught and prosecuted for committing crime. It was uncomfortable but not surprising to us recently to read of the huge increase in attacks on retail workers across the UK. There can be no excuse for a single one of these attacks. Instead it should be a wakeup call for those in power to initiate consequences

Action Points

- Retail NI supports the *Protection of Workers (Retail and Age-restricted Goods and Services) (Scotland) Bill*, introduced to give greater protection in law to retail workers, particularly where they are providing goods and services that are age restricted. It makes it a specific, new criminal offence to assault, threaten or abuse staff, or obstruct or hinder them. Given the current situation with shoplifting and threats against staff in Northern Ireland, there is strong merit to introduce a similar law through the Northern Ireland Assembly.
- While recognising the pressures on the PSNI budget, priority must be given to supporting and growing Neighbourhood Policing Teams. They have a massive part to play in boosting community and business confidence as well as being at the forefront of building relationships which have lasting positive impacts. There is no substitute for visible policing in the community, to give confidence to businesses and their staff as well as deterring potential criminals by their presence.

Retail NI Member

“Our police are first class. But they are frustrated. We need to know that those who are stealing from us will be prosecuted and not given a slap on the wrist”.

- Focus must be on practical solutions on the ground. However, there should be a series of Key Performance Indicators, overseen by the Northern Ireland Policing Board, to monitor the direction of retail crime and determine the effectiveness of efforts to tackle it.
- The default position must be to prosecute those caught in the act of theft and shoplifting or receiving stolen goods. Too often businesses report crimes and hear of no further action. There must be stronger deterrents or the seemingly ever rising level of crime will continue and will cause some businesses to close.
- There should be a new relationship forged between local businesses and local restorative justice organisations. The PSNI should convene a joint working group with restorative justice practitioners and business representatives. The group would examine international business practice in this area to see how it may be relevant to Northern Ireland. It will also include businesses and programmes such as Street teams working closer together. This is not a substitute for policing solutions but instead maximising all avenues of potential support to combat crime.
- We do not want to criminalise individuals and that is why we want to strengthen the deterrent approach. However, there are those who will resist any positive steps and therefore we require that a robust justice system punishes perpetrators effectively to reassure businesses that they are being listened to. This should include minimum tariffs for repeat offenders, especially for those who use violence against shop workers.
- There is no need for any additional layers of governance but rather we must make better use of existing structures and programmes. For example, improved engagement with Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) to ensure crimes against businesses and staff are a core theme in their action plans. There are funding opportunities which would be open to local business associations/traders' groups to apply for if they have innovative ideas to tackle crime/ASB in their respective areas.
- We would support increased investment in offender rehabilitation programmes if they were proving effective towards deterring people from reoffending. In many instances offenders are well known and repeat offenders. It is this hard-core group which must be focused on if there is to be a reversal of the trends currently being suffered by retailers.
- The threat of organised crime seldom goes away and there must be a strengthening of measures to tackle organised crime which impacts businesses, often in many unseen ways, including illegal tobacco sales, counterfeit goods, and organised shoplifting gangs. There should be action to strengthen legislation to confiscate criminally acquired assets and wealth.
- A greater all island approach towards tackling shoplifting must be considered by both the PSNI and An Garda Síochána. Thieves do not respect borders and the Irish border is often used by organised gangs to escape detection.

Supporting Staff and Businesses

Retailers need and deserve support from both government and the communities they serve. They provide employment and pay their rates and taxes.

There has been a growing problem across Northern Ireland with unacceptable behaviour towards retail staff. This is not only from younger people engaged in casual anti-social behaviour but by all age groups. Every respondent to this survey highlighted that their staff had faced some form of abuse during their work. This ranges from minor verbal abuse to serious violence. It is completely unacceptable, and a firm response must be considered to tackle the problem head on. Tackling all incidents is a priority for employers and must be taken seriously by relevant agencies. Our members give a strong commitment to invest time, money, and resources into tackling the issue but are often dismayed by the policing and judicial response.

Action Points

- Accredited management and staff training must become standard practice. All staff need to be trained on how to react to flashpoint situations such as shoplifting and age-related sales, as well as placing an emphasis on the importance of personal safety of colleagues and other people. It is particularly challenging, but equally important, for small businesses to provide this training therefore innovative ways should be developed to ensure it is accessible by all.
- There must be a renewed emphasis on reporting every incident by retailers. This will then provide data from which patterns can be identified and responses implemented. It also sends a message to offenders that any incident is unacceptable. The PSNI should work with retailers to encourage greater use of technology to make reporting simple and not time consuming.

Retail NI Member

“Our staff are fantastic, and we need to ensure they feel safe in their workplace. I have no business if I don’t have good staff”.

- The Department of Finance must consider how to provide rates incentives for those who are investing in security within their stores. This would encourage greater investment in crime prevention measures. Ultimately this investment benefits those investigating criminal activity as well as acting as a deterrent for the business.
- There must be greater support for technological innovation and data sharing between businesses and agencies that will enable crime prevention and detection. For example, linking facial recognition technology within clusters of retailers will ensure that they are collectively alerted to the presence of criminals in their area.
- There must be greater face-to-face engagement between key staff in local and central government and individual businesses, to share first-hand the issues faced on a day-by-day basis. To understand the scale and scope of challenges, 'boots on the ground' are needed. The lack of support from the justice system currently demonstrates the need to see urgent change.
- Programmes such as 'Go Succeed' must incorporate issues such as tackling crime and ASB as part of their events and information. Understanding the daily issues for retailers from the outset must be part of the support process throughout. It is a harsh reality that retailers need to learn fast how to deal with the challenges they face.



Tackling Anti-Social Behaviour

Anti-social behaviour has long been a scourge to retailers. We are seeing it rise without seemingly little action to fight back. We welcome the proactive approach recently taken by the PSNI to tackle those responsible for graffiti 'tagging' in Belfast city centre.

Some people forgot that this activity causes thousands of pounds of damage and disruption and we have seen very little in the way of effectively tackling this scourge in communities. It is criminal damage and should be regarded as such. Hopefully this new approach will continue, and we will be urging our members to report every instance impacting their business along with any other information which will help catch and prosecute those responsible.

Many respondents commented that there has been a substantial increase in the number of addicts engaging in thefts to feed their habits. Addicts are not concerned at receiving minimal sanctions when apprehended. We support strategies such as 'Complex Lives' which help the most vulnerable get off the streets and get access to housing, addiction support, mental health support and healthcare.

We accept there are often underlying reasons for many of those who require assistance, and agencies must work together swiftly to tackle this issue. However, we must also remember the impact their actions cause on wider communities. People who wish to work and live without fear deserve our support. We believe there is much work ongoing across the rest of the United Kingdom to tackle this issue, which we should be drawing upon.

The Anti-Social Behaviour Action Plan, launched by the government for England and Wales in March 2023, should be closely examined to determine if there are actions also applicable to Northern Ireland. There is a feeling locally that we are powerless and when offenders are apprehended, they are given a 'slap on the wrist', if even that. This perception must be changed.

Retail NI Member

“ASB drives customers away from my store, but too often it’s dismissed as ‘rowdy’ kids. It’s not and it should be tackled head on and with zero tolerance”.

Action Points

- Northern Ireland should have a dedicated Retail Crime Action Plan to combat shoplifting, similar to other parts of the UK. Its implementation will hopefully see Anti Social Behaviour (ASB) being better recognised as a serious problem and provide clear guidelines for police officers on issues such as prioritising attendance at the scene of violent crimes, how retailers should report crimes, and identifying “hot spot” locations where additional patrols would be beneficial. A local plan should have local characteristics and be based on extensive engagement with the sector.
- We support increased investment in programmes such as ‘Complex Lives’. By working with those facing issues such as addiction and homelessness the long-term benefit will be to both them and those who are currently the victims of their criminal behaviour. Areas which become synonymous with such crime also see reductions in footfall numbers as people feel unsafe and vulnerable. Therefore, there are benefits to be gained from tackling the problem at source.
- A zero-tolerance approach to graffiti must be instigated. Working with landowners, the artist community and community representatives, we can create attractive alternatives to those who are simply engaging in criminal damage. Those caught should be subject to automatic prosecution.
- There is a need for a greater role in the education system to engage young people about the negatives of participating in criminal and anti-social behaviour. There is also a role for ex-offenders in such education if there is to be a change in attitudes. There is a need to revamp the youth centre network and strengthen local sports opportunities and programmes such as midnight soccer. There is also a need for greater business engagement with programmes such as T: Buc. Most engaged in ASB are not hardened criminals, therefore challenging their behaviour and offering alternatives can have very positive effects.
- Greater use of existing tools such as Anti-Social Behaviour Orders should be made, especially against the core group of offenders who are responsible for a considerable number of crimes against retailers. Ignoring these would then give grounds to have offenders prosecuted and imprisoned.



The Technology Revolution

Technology is a key factor in improving security and tackling the day-to-day threats to businesses and staff. We live in a digital world and crime prevention must utilise the latest technologies, just as those who threaten harm are doing. It is encouraging that many businesses are investing in and seeing the benefits of facial recognition technology. This is not without considerable cost to retailers, and investments should be supported by government.

We are still in the early stages of the technological development, and we have some way to go to maximise its use:

Action Points

- The Small Business Research Initiative (SBRI) programme could be utilised better by the Department of Justice and other relevant agencies to consider some of the challenges that affect businesses in Northern Ireland.
- An easily accessible, modern, electronic version of the old telephone hotline should be developed between the PSNI and businesses. This will enable registered retailers to submit ongoing anti-social behaviour in real time, and allow police to develop a picture of hot spots. It is not a substitute for the expectation that police would attend the scene of criminal behaviour but would strengthen the ability to deal with situations quickly and identify offenders.
- The cyber security industry in Northern Ireland is rapidly growing and there is an opportunity to test and R&D the latest advancements in security and deterrent technologies. Greater networking between sectors can create new opportunities and lead to the early adoption of the latest technology.
- There should be early adoption of Artificial Intelligence as a positive tool to tackle retail crime. We are seeing this already with many businesses investing in facial recognition technology and this will continually advance. For example, AI may be able to identify offenders and patterns more efficiently, and ultimately help to manage resources more efficiently of both businesses and law enforcement.

Retail NI Member

“Northern Ireland is incredibly innovative, and retailers need to benefit from the latest technology. But we also need the support from our government to enable us to invest in it”.

Research Methodology

Between December and March 2023/24, extensive research was undertaken for this report, utilising a number of different tools:

- A total of 301 retailers completed a questionnaire.
- Desktop research, reviewing Northern Ireland, Great Britain, and Republic of Ireland material.
- Retail NI emailed a series of questions to their current membership database.
- A SurveyMonkey survey was launched and responded to by retailers across Northern Ireland.
- Several shops across Northern Ireland were visited and face-to-face interviews undertaken.
- Several retailers followed up with observations and recommendations.

Retail NI would like to thank all those who participated in this research.

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RetailNI

Standing up for
Independent Retailers

Retail NI represents the Retail Industry in Northern Ireland, advocating for independent retailers, suppliers and wholesalers and driving tangible change in critical policy areas such as planning, rate reform and High Street Regeneration.