

Retail NI
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April 2026

The Committee Chair,
Committee for Justice
Northern Ireland Assembly
Parliament Buildings
Belfast
BT4 3XX

Re: Retail NI response to Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill

Dear Paul,

Retail NI welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill. We would be delighted to have an opportunity to present to your Committee on this important Bill.

As the leading representative body for the independent retail sector in Northern Ireland, we welcome proposals to reform and update sentencing measures in Northern Ireland, to reflect the need to tackle, more effectively, the rise in crime against businesses right across the region, and ensure that local retail workers are afforded the same protections as other parts of the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland.

While we welcome the broader series of measures contained in this bill, in our formal response below we have focused on the specific issue which is faced by our membership, primarily on much needed legal protections for retail workers.

Background

In February 2025, Retail NI published its *plan to tackle crime against businesses*¹ which highlighted the major impact of crime has upon independent retailers, including those increasingly considered as 'low level' by statutory agencies. We stress, however, that no retailer accepts this approach, and that no such crime 'category' exists from the perspective of the retailer or their staff.

Within our report, 91% of respondents described theft and shoplifting as the most prolific crimes they faced, **while two-thirds of staff had been impacted by physical violence or threats while working.**

The report noted that *'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'*.

¹ <https://retailni.com/launch-of-action-plan-to-tackle-crime/>

It was also noted that *'the issue of theft by addicts seeking to fund their addiction is of growing concern right across Northern Ireland. Meat theft is a particular growing problem. There was a unanimous belief that the explosion in drug use is fuelling this rise in theft and other criminal activity'*. With this in mind there is a concern that some forms of punishment will be of no consequence to hardened offenders, and in many cases fines will go unpaid. This not only undermines the rule of law, but makes it increasingly difficult for businesses to trade and provide employment and services to local communities.

The report concluded by making a series of recommendations, those specifically relating to the Department of Justice are as follows:

- *Introduce legislation to make the targeting of shop staff a standalone offence, with a minimum custodial sentence*
- *Set up a 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 the role of PCSPs, introducing a new dedicated business crime engagement strategy and improving their interaction with businesses*
- *Initiate an urgent, formal review of sentencing guidelines, to ensure they are commensurate with the crime and in keeping with modern trends*
- *Develop a new, cross-departmental strategy towards tackling crimes against retailers and anti-social behaviour*

We continue to believe this range of proposals will begin to deal with the serious situation faced by the sector, however we stress that sentencing only works if supported by a properly resourced and proactive policing service.

Response to current proposals

We note that unfortunately in the bill as published there is no specific reference to a 'retail worker'. Instead, there is a much broader term 'public worker', and the immediate thought is that this refers to public sector workers, rightly or wrongly.

It is only on page 12 of the explanatory and financial memorandum that a single reference to 'retail' is made - that *'The Minister has agreed that... further consideration be given to the extension of any new sentencing provision to retail workers'*.

We feel that more urgency is required to rebuild the confidence to the retail sector in light of the current serious situation as reflected in both our own findings and wider coverage.

This frustration is exacerbated when we consider how other parts of the United Kingdom have progressed retail-specific legislation. In Scotland, the Protection of Workers (Retail and age restricted goods and services) (Scotland) Act 2021², and in England, people who attack

² Protection of Workers (Retail and Age-restricted Goods and Services) (Scotland) Act 2021

shopworkers are now facing tougher penalties thanks to new legislation as part of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts (PCSC) Act³.

In these examples, we welcome that provision that if retailers are a victim of crime, they are encouraged to make an *'Impact Statement for Business' (ISB)*, which is a written statement, intended to provide businesses that have been victims of crime, with a voice in the criminal justice process. Where they are considered appropriate, courts can take account of the ISB when deciding what sentence to impose on the offenders. Many businesses in Northern Ireland would welcome the opportunity to communicate their frustrations and hopefully make clear the daily impacts – financial, emotional, and physical.

In the Republic of Ireland, the Protection of Retail Workers Bill 2025⁴ is progressing, which is new legislation aiming to amend the Criminal Justice (Public Order) Act 1994 to create specific offences for assaulting, threatening, or harassing retail staff. We are currently following the progress of these proposals closely.

In short, we do not want Northern Ireland workers to be left behind.

Conclusion

We welcome the progress that has been made with regards the broader *'public worker'* designation but feel there is still work to be done to ensure the protections which other regions have accepted need to be *'retail specific'* are introduced in Northern Ireland.

It is our view that improvements will only be achieved via a cross departmental and agency approach, of which this bill is one element. For example, better *'on-the-ground'* policing including improved police response times, is essential - tougher sentencing only works if offenders are caught and charged appropriately.

Our most recent data shows we are enduring a spike in *'aggressive shoplifting,'* where theft is frequently accompanied by violence. Therefore, the bill is an urgent and necessary tool to combat the organized gangs and serial offenders driving these trends.

Finally, we welcome the assertion by the Justice Minister, Naomi Long MLA, that *"no one should face violence or abuse while simply doing their job."*

We look forward to engaging further with both the department and this committee to ensure that both businesses and retailers get the protection they need.

Yours sincerely,

Glyn Roberts
CEO

³ Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022

⁴ Protection of Retail Workers Bill 2025 – No. 17 of 2025 – Houses of the Oireachtas