



Clerk to the Justice Committee
Northern Ireland Assembly
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont
BT4 3XX

Dear Committee Members,

Re: Sentencing Bill – Protection for Public Facing Workers

I am writing on behalf of the Northern Ireland Retail Consortium to welcome the introduction of the Sentencing Bill and, in particular, the inclusion of provisions intended to strengthen protections for public facing workers, including retail workers. The NIRC consists of the roughly 100 companies from the British Retail Consortium's 200 members who have a retail presence in Northern Ireland.

The membership includes all food retailers, many of the UK wide food to go providers and many other household names such as Boots, B&Q, etc. NIRC members employ tens of thousands of staff and account for the overwhelming majority of retail activity in Northern Ireland.

Retail workers provide an essential service in communities across Northern Ireland. They ensure the continued availability of food, medicines and other everyday necessities, often while dealing with difficult and challenging situations. Unfortunately, violence, abuse and intimidation directed at retail staff has become an increasingly serious issue across the UK.

We therefore strongly welcome the Committee's consideration of legislative measures which recognise the unique risks faced by customer-facing workers and provide a clear signal that assaults and abuse directed at them will not be tolerated.

The British Retail Consortium (BRC) has consistently supported similar legislative approaches elsewhere in the United Kingdom, including both the Protection of Workers (Retail and Age-restricted Goods and Services) (Scotland) Act 2021 and measures introduced at Westminster to strengthen protections for shopworkers.

The Scottish legislation, which came into effect on 24 August 2021, made it a specific offence for a person to assault, threaten or abuse a retail worker engaged in retail work at the time of the offence. Three new crime codes were subsequently established to record such offences: serious assault of a retail worker, common assault of a retail worker, and threatening and abusive behaviour of a retail worker.

The impact of the legislation in improving recognition and recording of offences is significant. In the year ending September 2022, Police Scotland recorded 3,277 crimes against retail workers under the Act. This included:

- 15 crimes of serious assault of a retail worker;
- 1,428 crimes of common assault of a retail worker; and
- 1,834 crimes of threatening and abusive behaviour towards a retail worker.



These figures demonstrate both the scale of abuse experienced by retail staff and the value of having a distinct legal framework to recognise and respond to such offending. Most importantly the Scottish legislation, being focused on retail has led to the reporting, recording and very often the prosecution

of those crimes committed against retail workers. This in turn has enabled the media, society and most importantly, the police in Scotland to devote resources accordingly

The Sentencing Bill's proposed provisions relating to offences against public facing workers are welcome, however, we would urge the Committee to ensure that the legislation includes the ability to break down the data on offending by sector e.g. health service and retail. This will enable my member, the PSNI and other relevant stakeholders to accurately gauge the true scale of the problem in retail and to respond accordingly.

Importantly, legislation of this kind sends a strong message to perpetrators, supports greater consistency in enforcement, and provides reassurance to retail workers that the justice system recognises the seriousness of these offences.

We believe the provisions contained within the Sentencing Bill represent a positive and proportionate step forward for Northern Ireland and will help improve protections for thousands of workers who interact with the public every day.

We would encourage the Committee to support these provisions as the Bill progresses through scrutiny and legislative stages.

Yours sincerely,

[Redacted signature]

[Redacted name] Northern Ireland Retail Consortium