Policy Liaison Group
Workplace Wellbeing

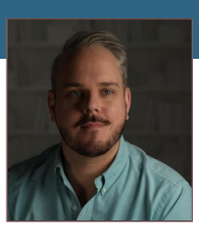
Thursday, 5 November 2026

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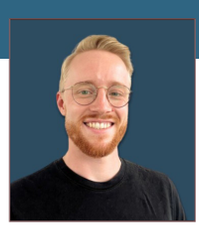
Tackling employee risks in retail

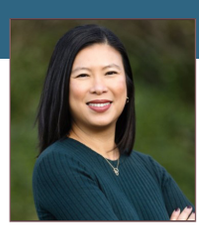
Gethin Nadin, Chair of the Policy Liaison Group on Workplace Wellbeing; David Liddle, The TCM Group; Clemens Moehring, Hastee; Kirsten Samuel, Kamell; and Ray Law, moneyappi

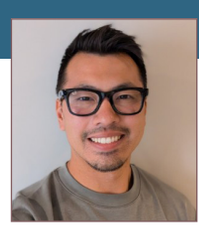
Wembley Stadium


Gethin Nadin


David Liddle


Clemens Moehring


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Introduction

Convened at Wembley Stadium as part of CX Vision Live 2035, the Policy Liaison Group (PLG) on Workplace Wellbeing brought together industry representatives and workplace wellbeing specialists to examine the growing risks facing customer-facing employees, and the responsibilities of employers and policymakers in protecting them.

The Crime and Policing Act 2026 and the introduction of new third-party harassment protections under the Employment Rights Act 2025, signal greater recognition of these risks. However, retail crime is an occupational health, job quality and economic productivity crisis, not just a narrow policing issue.

According to the British Retail Consortium's (BRC) 2026 Crime Report, retail workers experienced approximately 1,600 incidents of violence and abuse every day in 2024-25. Although this represents a reduction from 2,000 incidents the previous year, it remains more than three times the pre-pandemic level of 455. Research highlighted during the discussion from the Retail Trust and Alliance Manchester Business School found that 77% of retail workers had experienced abuse in the previous year, 43% experienced it weekly and almost a quarter had been physically assaulted. Little wonder that employee turnover in the sector is so high at 51% (BRC).

Chaired by Gethin Nadin, with opening contributions from PLG Advisory Board members, the roundtable explored the relationship between workplace safety, financial resilience, organisational culture and retention. Participants considered how employers could move beyond reacting to individual incidents towards creating working environments that prevent harm, support recovery and give employees greater influence over the decisions affecting their safety.

Key takeaways

A sector in crisis

- Customer-facing employees frequently bear the brunt of frustration over corporate decisions, including price increases and restrictive store policies, despite having little influence over them.
- According to NatWest Mentor, average employee turnover in the UK is 15%. The same study found that turnover across hospitality and retail ranged between 42% and 52%. “In any other industry, you’d think this was a crisis that we needed to solve.”
- 82% of those leaving retail exit the sector entirely (Indeed Hiring Lab). Entry-level roles in other sectors offer better progression, pensions, and healthcare.
- Some major retailers restrict internal staff communications during December and January to prioritise sales, potentially limiting access to support during one of the most demanding periods of the year.
- 71% of retail workers reported a deterioration in their mental health (Retail Trust).

Current retail crime and employee safety measures

- UK retailers have invested an estimated £5 billion over five years in security measures, including CCTV, body-worn cameras and additional security personnel. However, participants questioned whether these investments adequately protect employees from the psychological consequences of abuse.
- Technology provides evidence for post-incident prosecution but fails to deter aggressive offenders.
- Increased surveillance does not necessarily make employees feel safer. Additional cameras often leave workers feeling “more watched” rather than empowered to manage threatening situations.
- The recent strengthening of the Crime and Policing Act enforcement must be accompanied by greater preventative measures and post-incident employee support.
- Corporate policies can leave frontline workers choosing between their personal safety and job security. Workers often face “a choice between do I get fired or attacked?”
- Employers cannot control wider societal behaviour, but they can improve staffing arrangements, employee autonomy and recovery provisions.

Greater employee training and involvement

- Key question: "Designing for physical safety is a really well-trodden path. If you took the view of designing for psychological safety or mental health, how would you change the design of your organisation or the processes that you have in place?"
- David Liddle's RISE framework (Retailers Investing in a Safer Environment) proposes practical training in active listening, emotional regulation, negotiation and conflict de-escalation, supported by clear safeguarding procedures.
- Employees should never be expected to physically intervene or confront suspected offenders. Training must prioritise recognising risk, knowing when to disengage and accessing appropriate support.
- Employers should apply the same attention to psychological safety as physical safety, considering how workplace design, management practices and organisational policies can reduce employees' exposure to harm.
- Participants advocated greater employee involvement in corporate decision-making, including paid advisory councils, to ensure those directly affected by customer-facing policies and practices can help shape them.
- Employee feedback must lead to demonstrable action rather than simply informing annual engagement surveys.

Financial resilience

- Financial insecurity compounds the effects of workplace abuse – "the money worries and then the abuse" can contribute to exhaustion, reduced resilience and employee turnover.
- Limited savings and inadequate sick pay can force employees to return to work immediately following an incident. With one in ten UK adults having no savings, Statutory Sick Pay of £123.25 per week can represent a substantial loss of income.
- Workplace incidents can create unexpected costs, including taxi fares to avoid public transport or emergency childcare. Participants discussed flexible earned wage access and employer hardship funds as potential sources of immediate financial support.
- Financially vulnerable employees may be less likely to report incidents, particularly where they fear losing working hours or income. Financial stress can deplete cognitive capacity, increasing emotional exhaustion and reducing employees' ability to cope with customer aggression.
- Greater awareness of compensation available through the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority (CICA), alongside employer-funded financial assistance, could help reduce the financial consequences of workplace violence.

Issues raised

The disconnect between corporate policy and employee experience

There is a growing divide between senior corporate decision-makers and the customer-facing employees implementing their policies. Corporate teams remain largely insulated from hostile customers. Meanwhile, lower-paid workers frequently bear the consequences of unpopular decisions concerning pricing, restrictions and customer service. Senior executives should spend time in customer-facing roles to better understand the abuse they experience. Examples included directors working in stores at Christmas and executives taking 10 customer calls.

This disconnect can be compounded by inadequate employee feedback systems. Company surveys often conceal serious problems within individual branches, teams or shifts - “the company average often hides the extremities”. More localised data should be used to connect directly with employees, ensuring experiences on the ground inform corporate decisions about workplace safety and support. One major low-cost retailer was highlighted as an example of how competitive pricing can coexist with higher employee wages and clear career progression opportunities. Promoting store employees into management also helps ensure that operational decisions reflect the realities of working on the shop floor.

Removing barriers to reporting incidents

Understaffing can discourage employees from reporting incidents of abuse, as taking time off following an assault places additional pressure on colleagues already working with limited resources. Participants highlighted how guilt towards colleagues can lead employees to remain silent, while store managers often lack the resources to arrange immediate cover. Proposed solutions included ring-fenced emergency staffing budgets, enhanced overtime rates and regional pools of relief staff to allow employees to recover without disrupting operations. The Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX) campaign found that one in five workers were explicitly afraid of losing work or having their hours cut if they complained or reported workplace abuse or harassment, reinforcing the need for greater regional oversight of shift allocation and protections against retaliation.

Wider societal pressures and changing attitudes towards customer-facing work

The discussion also considered how wider societal changes may be contributing to increasingly difficult customer interactions. Younger employees entering the workforce after the pandemic may have less experience navigating spontaneous face-to-face conflict, potentially increasing their vulnerability to stressful encounters. However, the discussion also questioned how organisational culture and language shape perceptions of these roles. The use of ‘frontline’, a military term, to describe workers in retail, hospitality and public services was challenged as it positions employees as a defensive barrier between the business and customers, with the latter framed as antagonists. Participants emphasised that addressing workplace aggression requires not only stronger organisational safeguards but also a broader shift in how customer-facing work is valued and understood.

Recommendations

- Review how effectively existing workplace safety guidance is implemented, focusing on psychological wellbeing and incident support.
- Pilot conflict-management and de-escalation training based on the RISE framework with key partners.
- Ensure employees are not expected to physically intervene and can disengage without fear of disciplinary action.
- Establish dedicated emergency staffing arrangements so employees can report abuse and take recovery time.
- Strengthen protections against retaliation for reporting incidents, including reduced hours or shift penalties.
- Improve access to financial support post-incident, including enhanced sick pay and hardship funds.
- Establish employee advisory groups to give frontline staff a direct role in shaping safety policies.
- Monitor workplace violence and wellbeing at the store and shift level to identify high-risk areas.
- Encourage senior executives to regularly perform customer-facing duties to understand operational pressures.
- Promote accountability for retention by investing in career progression, fair pay, and support during peak periods.

Links

- British Retail Consortium's 2026 Crime Report
- Research from the Retail Trust and Alliance Manchester Business School
- Unite survey: Majority of airport workers abused at work
- Crime and Policing Act 2026
- Retail Trust, September 2026
- NatWest Mentor: Staff turnover rates by industry UK (2026 benchmark)
- Indeed Hiring Lab: Job switching in the UK - who stays put, and who moves on? (2026)
- Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX) written evidence (2023)

We would like to thank the members of our Advisory Board for their contributions and continuing support.

To get involved, please contact
secretariat@plgworkplacewellbeing.org