

WHITE PAPER:

Reframing Retail Safety: Protecting People, Performance and the High Street

Insights from a Retail Bulletin Private Leadership
Roundtable, in partnership with Peoplesafe



Executive summary

Retailers are facing a sharp escalation in safety challenges across the UK high street. Rising theft, increasingly volatile customer behaviour and reduced police response are combining with cost pressures and leaner store models to create a new operational reality.

At a recent private Retail Bulletin roundtable, senior leaders from organisations including Lush, JD Sports, The White Company, Angling Direct, Brewers, Bravissimo, Card Factory, Hotel Chocolat and Benson for Beds came together to share frontline insight.

The discussion, held under Chatham House rule and chaired by Liz Jewitt Cross, revealed a clear and urgent shift. Safety is no longer a standalone function or compliance requirement.

It is now a core operational priority tied directly to colleague retention, store performance, brand trust and the resilience of the retail operating model.

This paper captures the key themes, challenges and emerging approaches shaping retail safety strategy today, while highlighting where technology, better reporting and stronger implementation can help retailers move from concern to measurable action.



Contents

- 03 **The new reality:** safety as an operational pressure
- 04 **The perfect storm:** cost, staffing and risk
- 05 **The shift towards** prevention over response
- 06 **Peoplesafe Personal Safety Solutions**
- 07 **The legal and compliance landscape**
- 08 **Leadership, reporting and visibility**
- 09 **Training and real-time**
- 10 **Collaboration and external partnerships intervention**
- 11 **Conclusion: from safety as compliance to safety as strategy**



The new reality: safety as an operational pressure

The most consistent theme across the discussion was that frontline colleagues are feeling less safe than they were 12 to 24 months ago, even where incident figures appear stable or are moving in the right direction.

That gap between incident data and lived experience is the central issue. If retailers are relying only on formal reporting, they may be missing a significant part of the picture. A critical question is whether businesses are actively asking colleagues how safe they feel, how often they are checking in, and whether those insights are shaping operational decisions.

This point was brought into sharp focus through Peoplesafe's work with Tesco, where a staff survey revealed that colleagues were feeling unsafe and vulnerable outside the store, particularly on journeys to and from work.

It underlined an important reality: the safety experience of retail staff does not begin and end at the shop door, and perception data can uncover risks that incident logs alone never reveal.

This raises important questions for retail leaders:

- Are organisations measuring how safe colleagues feel, not just what gets reported
- How regularly are staff surveys or check-ins being used to surface concerns
- Do leaders have sufficient visibility of the moments and locations where colleagues feel most vulnerable.





The perfect storm: cost, staffing and risk

Retailers are navigating a difficult balancing act between cost control and colleague protection, particularly during predictable periods when staff may feel more exposed and less supported.

Several participants highlighted that reduced labour models and increased lone working are intensifying risk exposure, particularly in smaller store formats and during quieter trading periods when colleagues can feel isolated and more vulnerable.

Key pressures include:

- Rising wage costs forcing tighter staffing models
- Increased lone working across store estates
- Larger store footprints with fewer colleagues present
- Predictable quiet periods where colleagues may feel particularly exposed to targeted anti-social behaviour and intimidation.

This creates what one leader described as a “perfect storm”:

With fewer people on the shop floor, colleagues can feel more exposed during targeted time periods, with less immediate support if a situation escalates. The issue is not only operational risk, but the day-to-day sense of personal safety experienced by staff.

At the same time, businesses recognise that adding headcount is not always commercially viable. As a result, the focus is shifting towards smarter operational design rather than simple resource increases.





The shift towards prevention over response

A clear consensus emerged that the most effective safety strategies are preventative, not reactive.

Rather than focusing solely on incident handling, leading retailers are investing in:

In environments where colleagues are visible, proactive and present, theft and disruption are less likely to escalate.

Customer Engagement as a Deterrent

- Immediate acknowledgement of customers on entry
- Multiple touchpoints throughout the store journey
- Service-led engagement to reduce anonymity.

Store Environment and Culture

Different retail brands are taking distinct approaches aligned to their identity:

- Experience-led brands prioritise warmth and interaction as deterrence
- Value-led or high-risk categories focus more on security presence
- Some luxury environments actively avoid overt security measures to protect brand perception.

Retailers reported a strong correlation between:

- High customer engagement
- Lower shrinkage
- Fewer incidents.

This reinforces that there is no single solution. Safety strategy must align with brand, customer and store model.





Peoplesafe Personal Safety Solutions

There is growing momentum behind discreet, always-accessible safety technology that gives colleagues a direct line to help.

Peoplesafe solutions are designed to deliver exactly that, offering immediate support and escalation when needed.

- Wearable personal safety devices and app-based protection
- Discreet SOS alerts and panic alarms
- Dedicated Alarm Receiving Centre providing 24/7 response
- Real-time escalation to emergency services where appropriate
- Lone worker protection for higher-risk or isolated roles.

The real value lies in removing barriers to action. With a single activation, colleagues can access trained responders who stay connected until the situation is resolved, providing both reassurance and practical support in the moment.

Embedding Confidence Through Everyday Use

The opportunity for retailers is to integrate Peoplesafe technology into daily operations so it becomes second nature.

- Colleagues understand when and how to use it
- Confidence builds through consistent visibility and training
- Safety becomes part of the culture, not just a policy.

Key Insight Takeaway:

Technology delivers the greatest impact when it sits within a broader safety culture. Peoplesafe strengthens that ecosystem by combining personal safety devices with immediate human response, clear escalation pathways and real-time reassurance, helping retailers move from reactive processes to proactive protection.



“ The most effective safety strategies are preventative, not reactive ”



The legal and compliance landscape

The tightening legislative environment is moving this issue further up the agenda and increasing the pressure on retailers to show that effective colleague safety measures are in place.

As new legislation comes into force, the implications for retailers will be significant. The expectation will not be limited to having policies on paper. Businesses will need to demonstrate that they have taken practical, effective steps to protect staff and respond appropriately when concerns are raised.

- Employer responsibility for colleague safety
- Prevention of third-party harassment
- Demonstrable implementation of effective safety measures.

This raises the bar for retail leaders. Once the new framework is in force, organisations will have far less room to rely on intent alone.

If effective measures are not in place, and cannot be evidenced, retailers will have little excuse. The challenge will move from policy ownership to operational proof, making consistent execution at store level more important than ever.

Key areas of focus include:

- Ensuring policies are understood and applied consistently
- Regular auditing and monitoring of implementation
- Documented evidence of training and action.

Additionally, retailers must carefully balance commercial priorities, safety obligations and legal accountability.



“ Workforce safety can’t be an afterthought. With new legislation on the horizon, businesses have a responsibility to go beyond compliance and create environments where people feel protected, valued and able to speak up before harm happens. ”

STUART LAWRENCE | SHOOSMITHS



Leadership, reporting and visibility

One of the most important enablers of effective safety strategy is visible leadership engagement.

Where senior leaders actively champion safety:

- Reporting increases
- Training completion improves significantly
- Colleagues feel supported and heard.

Retailers highlighted the importance of:

- Regular board-level reporting on incidents and trends
- Clear ownership across functions (HR, operations, finance, loss prevention)
- Leadership communicating expectations consistently.

At the same time, many organisations are still evolving their approach, with safety responsibilities often split across different teams.

This fragmentation can create tension between:

- Loss prevention priorities (financial impact)
- Health and safety obligations (people protection).

Aligning these agendas is increasingly critical.



“ Frontline colleagues are feeling less safe than they were 12 to 24 months ago, even where incident figures appear stable or are moving in the right direction ”



Training and real-time intervention

While policy frameworks are well established, the real challenge lies in what happens in the moment.

Retailers identified a clear need for more practical, scenario-based training, focusing on:

- De-escalation techniques
- Handling aggressive or intoxicated customers
- Safe intervention boundaries
- Supporting colleagues immediately post-incident.

Innovative approaches shared included:

- Bite-sized, mobile-first training content
- Scenario-based role play delivered in-store
- Simple intervention techniques such as 'safe words' or colleague interruption cues.

These approaches are proving more effective than traditional compliance training, particularly with younger, part-time workforces.





Collaboration and external partnerships

There is increasing recognition that retailers cannot solve this challenge alone.

Effective approaches include:

- Stronger engagement with local Business Crime Reduction Partnerships (BCRPs) and Business Improvement Districts (BIDs)
- Collaboration with charities and community organisations
- Collaboration with Police at local level

- Sharing intelligence across retail networks.
- Leveraging specialist providers such as Peoplesafe

Several leaders also called for improved alignment with law enforcement, although confidence levels remain mixed.



“ The most effective retailers are not simply reacting to incidents. They are re-engineering their operating models to embed safety into everyday decision-making ”



Conclusion: from safety as compliance to safety as strategy

The discussion made one thing clear. Retail safety is no longer a peripheral issue.

It now sits at the intersection of:

- Operational efficiency
- Margin protection
- Colleague retention
- Customer experience
- Brand reputation.

The most effective retailers are not simply reacting to incidents. They are **re-engineering their operating models to embed safety into everyday decision-making.**

This includes:

- Designing stores and labour models with safety in mind
- Prioritising prevention through engagement and visibility
- Investing in practical, real-world training
- Aligning leadership around a shared responsibility.

Ultimately, the future of the high street depends not just on commercial performance, but on creating environments where colleagues feel safe, supported and able to deliver their best.





The Retail Bulletin
1st Floor, 57b High Street
Bagshot, Surrey, GU19 5AH

© The Retail Bulletin 2002 - 2026

theretailbulletin.com | peoplesafe.co.uk