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We should consider new legislation to tackle the scourge of shoplifting

With Waitrose head office based in my Bracknell constituency, it was perhaps inevitable that I would be part of a group of MPs asked to take a closer look at organised shoplifting.

Since the pandemic, retail crime has been on the rise and it remains a constant battle for supermarkets and other retail outlets, particularly as it costs a fortune to absorb.

Shopworkers are facing increased violence as organised gangs operate with impunity across the United Kingdom. Some preventative measures have been implemented by supermarkets, including additional security staff, CCTV, body-cams, metal detectors, protection of high-value items and improved check-out procedures, but it is clear that further statutory support may be needed.

Under current legislation, a range of sentencing options can be imposed for shoplifting, depending on the value of goods, emotional distress or level of harm inflicted, aggravating factors and culpability.

For goods worth less than £200, the current maximum custodial sentence is six months, while for goods worth over £200, it is seven years.

As for the full spectrum of anti-social behaviour, including abusive, disorderly and violent conduct, criminal sentencing can range from six months' imprisonment for common assault to life imprisonment for the most grievous offences. Contrary to popular perception, judges and magistrates have the power to impose significant sentences where appropriate, but some politicians believe that a more concerted effort is needed to deal with repeat offenders.

In the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, the government introduced a new statutory aggravating factor for offences committed against those providing a public service, performing

a public duty or providing a service to the public. This applies to assaults committed against a wide range of workers, including shopworkers, reinforcing in statute the seriousness with which the courts should treat these offences when sentencing.

The Criminal Justice Bill, which is now making its way through Parliament, offers a further opportunity to ensure that those serving the public can feel better protected. One interesting possibil-

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ity is for the government to look more closely at the Protection of Workers (Retail and Age-restricted Goods and Services) (Scotland) Act 2021, with a view to extending this to England. Indeed, the policing minister, Chris Philp, has already hosted a round-table with many of the UK's supermarket chains, and both the Home Office and Ministry of Justice continue to look at the options.

Lastly, with the government already meeting its target of 20,000 additional police officers across the UK, it should now be possible for operational decision making on the ground to focus more on tackling shoplifters. Where there is collective will for local stakeholders to adopt a zero-tolerance approach, it should be possible for a multi-layered strategy to bring shoplifting back under control, notably in terms of additional physical measures at supermarkets, intelligence-led policing, faster response times, a willingness by judges

to impose the heavier sentences available, custodial sentences for repeat offenders, and any new statutory provision. The scourge of organised shoplifting has become an epidemic and it is now time to give it due attention. ■

