

Retail Sector Council Meeting – 26 November 2024

Meeting Note

1. Attendees

Co-Chairs: Minister Gareth Thomas MP and Richard Pennycook.

Attendees: Kari Rodgers (Primark), Victoria Robertshaw (Green Street Pioneers Limited), Robbie Feather (The Very Group), Andrew Goodacre (British Independent Retailers Association), James Lowman (Association of Convenience Stores), Helen Dickinson (British Retail Consortium), John Boumphrey (Amazon), Dave McCarthy (Managing Director of McCarthy Hall Advisory, and Board Advisor and Head of Investor Relations at B&M Retail), Nick Beighton (Independent), Stephen Bethel (British Retail Consortium)

Apologies: Ian Filby (Joules), Sebastian James (Boots), John Rogers (Smith+Nephew), Simon Roberts (Sainsbury's), Paddy Lillis (USDAW)

Guests: Minister Johnson (Minister for Policing), Emma Ormond (RSC Delivery Group and workstream lead, Primark), David Leach (RSC Delivery Group, Boots), Sara Argent (RSC Delivery Group, Sainsbury's)

Officials in attendance: Rupert Daniels (Director Services and Skills Directorate), Rosa Estevez (Deputy Director for Creative Industries, Digital & E-Commerce and Consumer Goods, DBT)

2. Summary of actions

<u>Action</u>	<u>Owner</u>
Members to continue to flag concerns that affect investment and business growth.	RSC members
To pass on concerns from businesses to relevant Government Departments.	Minister Thomas/Retail policy officials
To share timelines around budget and back Council meetings accordingly.	Retail policy officials
Members to answer the Skills England consultation	RSC members

3. Note of Discussion

a) Welcome, introductions

The Minister welcomed attendees to the meeting.

b) Update on Retail Crime

Minister Johnson highlighted the importance of taking action on crime, and the need for shop workers to feel safe. Both the Home Secretary and Minister Johnson are very focused on tackling retail crime, and Minister Johnson will chair the Retail Crime Forum on 3rd December.

The Retail Action Plan published in 2023 by the previous administration is having good outcomes, but much more needs to be done as the most recent reports show a 29% increase in crime.

The Government made a manifesto commitment to reform the system with new offences being brought forward – details of this are being worked out, with new legislation expected in the next year. Further funding for this was announced at Budget.

Minister Johnson highlighted that reporting continues to be essential to build a more detailed picture of the situation and to ensure the police resources to investigate. She confirmed that 30,000 neighbourhood policing will be back to the streets to provide reassurance for communities and visible presence, and that new powers will be given to the police in this respect.

c) Views on Budget

Minister Thomas welcomed views about the impact of the Budget.

Members highlighted the cumulative impact on businesses and the pace as some of their main concerns, as those will have an impact on the ability of businesses to respond to the changes. The subsequent impact of Budget on employment and cash flow and risk appetite and was also noted, as well as the difficulties to find the links between Budget and business growth. These measures could benefit international competitors without representation on the High Streets.

Members recognised that there are still some questions around the details of these changes and questioned the current Government mechanisms to assess the impact of policies on businesses and the engagement with the industry. In addition to Budget, business rates and packaging reforms continue to be a concern.

Smaller businesses are also feeling the impact of Budget having to increase prices, stopping recruitment and thinning benefit margins – with a direct impact on investment and the growth. Some will be considering whether to continue trading.

Minister Thomas emphasised the importance of flagging concerns early on for the future of investment and the High Street.

Action: Members to continue to flag concerns that affect investment and business growth.

Action: Minister Thomas/retail policy officials to pass on concerns to relevant Government Departments.

d) Views on areas of work

Members reflected on the importance of using the group to support and feed into the work that is already happening in other areas of Government. Using the group strategically would make it more productive and efficient at getting outcomes. Bringing other Minister to the Council's session would be a way of supporting this approach.

The Retail-The Great Enabler report started to frame a vision of the retail sector, and this work should continue.

Members agreed that sector growth should be the driver of the overall council's work, with sustainability and circular economy, cumulative burdens on the sector, High Streets and international trading as the main areas of focus.

Members also discussed refreshing the Frictions in Retail report published a few years ago to include a view on tax and how to level the playfield with international online competitors. The e-commerce commission could also be part of this work.

The importance of working around budget timelines was also noted.

A reminder was also provided to members about the Skills England consultation that is currently live.

Action: Retail policy officials to share timelines around budget and back Council meetings accordingly.

Action: Members to answer the Skills England consultation.

e) AOB

Richard confirmed that he is standing down as co-chair of the Council. He will stay on past until a new co-chair is in place.

Dates for forthcoming meetings 2024 - TBC