HIJACKED HIGH STREETS

A plan to repair Britain's broken high streets

September 2026




CSJ The Centre for Social Justice

Contents

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Wates Family
ENTERPRISE TRUST

About the CSJ

Established in 2004, the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) is an independent think-tank that studies the root causes of Britain's social problems and addresses them by recommending practical, workable policy interventions.

The CSJ's vision is to give people in the United Kingdom (UK) who are experiencing the worst multiple disadvantages and injustice every possible opportunity to reach their full potential. The majority of the CSJ's work is organised around five 'pathways to poverty', first identified in our ground-breaking 2007 report, *Breakthrough Britain*. These are: educational failure; family breakdown; economic dependency and worklessness; addiction to drugs and alcohol; and severe personal debt.

Since its inception, the CSJ has changed the political landscape by putting social justice at the heart of British politics. This has led to a transformation in government thinking and policy. For instance, the CSJ provided the blueprint for the most significant reforms to welfare in a generation with the introduction of single working-age benefit, Universal Credit. Its research led to the introduction of the first ever Modern Slavery Act, as well as 'cuckooing' becoming a standalone statutory offence in 2026. Legislation in 2026 established the CSJ's Into Work Guarantee in law, allowing disabled people to try work without the fear of this triggering an automatic reassessment. And the CSJ's pioneering model of Family Hubs has grown into a major government programme, with hundreds today bringing family support services together in communities across England.

Our research is informed by experts including prominent academics, practitioners, and policymakers. We also draw upon our CSJ Alliance, a unique group of charities, social enterprises, and other grassroots organisations that have a proven track-record of reversing social breakdown across the UK.

The social challenges facing Britain remain serious. In 2026 and beyond, we will continue to advance the cause of social justice so that more people can continue to fulfil their potential.

Foreword

The Prime Minister (PM) has made clear that his premiership will mark a circuit-breaker for Britain, to bring forward the biggest and most hopeful changes to our political and economic model in over 40 years.

Nowhere is this needed more than on our high streets.

Long term economic challenges have given way to a crisis of insecurity, seen most emphatically in the proliferation of criminal high street businesses – Britain's 'dodgy shops'.

Years of neglect have created the conditions for the thousands of vape shops, mini-marts, and dodgy barbers that now occupy our town and city centres. In some areas, as many as half of vape shops are thought to be linked to organised crime.

Many of these shops have been found to sell illicit tobacco and vapes, traffic drugs, facilitate child sexual exploitation and enable organised immigration crime. Yet as the CSJ's report shows, enforcement is far too limited, with just under one in 10 shops shut down.

While one product of our broken economic settlement, these criminal shops further compound the decline of the high street, by pushing legitimate retailers out, and preventing new entrants from setting up a business.

Ending their grip on our communities must be at the forefront of the PM's new plan for Britain. There is no route to high street renewal without restoring security to our communities.

Over the last year, I have spearheaded a parliamentary campaign to shut down these criminal enterprises and revitalise Britain's high streets. This campaign has gained the backing of over 70 MPs, securing a commitment from the government to establish a new High Street Organised Crime Unit, as well as plans to extend the duration of closure orders from three months to 12.

These are welcome first steps, but the PM's ambition to make high streets the symbol of Britain's renaissance presents an opportunity to go further and faster.

I welcome this report by the CSJ, which outlines bold recommendations to turn this ambition into reality. These include a powerful on-the-spot closure order to shut down criminal shops for good, a clear veto for councils on new vape shops, and plans to build upon the slashing of business rates for pubs to give further support to the businesses that form the backbone of our high streets.

This government is determined to bring back hope to our communities. This report provides a path forward. Now is the time to act.

Melanie Onn MP
Labour MP for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes

Foreword

Every morning I wake up to an email outlining the incidents that have happened in M&S stores the day before. I read about colleagues being bitten and punched, threatened with bottles or knives, and seriously injured while trying to prevent shoplifting.

I'm not alone. People working in shops, banks, restaurants, and pubs across our high streets are facing the same wave of violence and theft. We are working closely with police forces across the UK and see every day the commitment of officers tackling organised retail crime and violence. There are some excellent examples of partnership working, but the scale of the issue means we all need to go further.

Crime on our high streets has become a significant challenge for businesses, colleagues, and local communities. It affects confidence to invest, the experience of customers and, most importantly, the safety of the people who work there every day. It deserves to be recognised as a core issue in the future of Britain's town centres, alongside tax, planning, and regulation.

Hijacked High Streets makes clear why so many people feel the problem persists. While charge rates for shoplifting are slowly increasing, just over one in five (23 per cent) offenders receive a court summons. And that's only from recorded theft offences, which topped half a million last year. Retailers estimate the true number of shoplifting incidents was closer to 5.5 million.

The Prime Minister has made clear his ambition to renew Britain's high streets. At M&S, we want to play our part. Safe, vibrant town centres benefit everyone – customers, businesses, and the communities they serve.

To achieve this, government must crack down on crime and take back our high streets from those shamelessly exploiting them. That means strengthening neighbourhood policing, building on the collaboration already taking place between retailers and police, giving businesses the confidence to invest in proven technologies such as facial recognition where it is deployed responsibly, and ensuring persistent offenders face timely consequences for their actions.

There is no single solution, but there is a clear direction. By government, policing, and businesses working together, we can make our high streets safer places to work, shop and spend time. That is fundamental to creating thriving town centres that communities can once again take pride in.

Thinus Keeve
Retail Director, Marks & Spencer

Executive Summary

Britain's high streets have been hijacked. Crime, disorder, and social breakdown are on the rise, undermining the foundations of stable community life. Across our high streets, organised crime groups (OCGs) are operating freely, crime is going unpunished, and the British public are in retreat – 79 per cent of Britons say they are concerned about the decline of the local high street.[1]

Repairing Britain's broken high streets requires a gear change in government policy. For too many, the high street has become a symbol of national decline, with shuttered shops and rising crime a sign of wider economic and social malaise.

The new PM has made reversing the decline of Britain's high streets a political priority, having set out his intention to make them a symbol of Britain's renaissance.[2] To achieve this, the PM must make restoring security a central pillar of his plan for the renewal of local places.

Political discussion on Britain's high streets has long focused on economic issues: vacancy rates, tax reform, and the rise of online shopping. But as this report finds, the core drivers of high street decline are no longer just economic, but social.

Crime on Britain's high streets is now endemic – visibly seen in the proliferation of criminal shops, shoplifting, and anti-social behaviour (ASB).

Data obtained by the CSJ reveals that over 4,000 'dodgy shops' were raided for illicit tobacco, cigarettes, and vapes in 2025, nearly 1,000 more than in 2024.[3] Yet our analysis indicates that fewer than one in 10 (eight per cent) of these shops were subsequently closed.[4] These are Britain's criminal high street businesses, the 'dodgy' vape shops, mini-marts, barbers, 'American' candy stores, and takeaways that have overrun shopfronts across communities.

In some areas, as many as half of mini-marts and vape shops are thought to have links to organised crime,[5] while investigations have now linked many to child sexual exploitation,[6] drugs trafficking,[7] and small boats smuggling.[8] Our inquiry heard evidence of criminal shops selling drug-laced vapes to children and accusations of sexual exploitation.

1 Ipsos, Ipsos reveals high prices and declining high streets key local concerns for Britons, November 2025. Accessed: https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/ipsos-reveals-high-prices-and-declining-high-streets-key-local-concerns-britons.

2 Manchester Evening News, Andy Burnham's speech in full as he promises to give UK 'new direction', July 2026. Accessed: https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/uk-news/andy-burnhams-speech-full-promises-34203926.

3 Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) analysis. FOI data from 181 local authorities with statutory responsibility for Trading Standards, submitted February 2026. Note: Totals may be artificially lower for 2023 and 2024 as four local authorities did not provide data for one or both of these periods. Please see Appendix A for full methodology.

4 CSJ analysis. FOI data from 120 local authorities with statutory responsibility for Trading Standards, submitted February 2026. Local authorities were only included if data was provided for temporary closures for three yearly periods. English county councils are removed from this data. Please see Appendix A for full methodology.

5 Chartered Trading Standards Institute (CTSI), Hidden in Plain Sight: Tackling Crime on the UK's High Streets, n.d., p. 19.

6 BBC News, Child-rape sentence reignites scrutiny of UK high street mini-marts, June 2026. Accessed: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cd6e0021vjjo.

7 BBC News, High Street mini-marts selling cocaine, cannabis and prescription drugs, BBC secret filming reveals, April 2026. Accessed: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c62l429w2pko.

8 BBC News, UK companies linked to payments for small boat crossings, BBC finds, May 2026. Accessed: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c626znvne0xo.

> *"Recent intelligence includes: a shop selling alcohol to mainly girls, and sometimes not allowing boys into the shop; a shop reportedly taking photos of children in the shop with vapes for social media; allegations of a city centre shop 'grooming' young children who are buying vapes from the shop; and a shop selling laced vapes to children, possibly with spice which led to two children being hospitalised."*
>
> **Trading Standards officer**

Criminal high street businesses pour petrol on local crime rates and shutting them down can transform the safety of communities. In one part of Manchester, the closing down of 206 offending shops led to a 45 per cent decline in public order offences, a 69 per cent decline in vehicle crime, a 62 per cent fall in violent crime, and a 58 per cent reduction in burglary.[9]

While on many high streets retail has become a criminal's game, legitimate traders are being battered by a shop theft epidemic that is becoming increasingly organised. Over half a million shoplifting incidents were reported to the police in 2025/26,[10] with retailers estimating a true total of nearly 5.5 million incidents.[11] The vast majority of criminals escape justice, with just 23 per cent of reported shoplifting incidents resulting in a charge in 2025/26.[12]

Outside the shops, ASB on the streets is worsening. Over two in five (41 per cent) Britons say they have personally experienced or witnessed ASB in 2025/26, a statistically significant increase from the year before (36 per cent).[13] From balaclava clad men riding modified e-bikes, to the scourge of rough sleeping, fly-tipping, littering, and visible drug use, Britain's high streets feel increasingly dangerous and unwelcome.

High street insecurity and community strength are deeply intertwined. New analysis for this report weaves together indicators of social breakdown – criminal high street businesses, vacancy rates, and police recorded crime – to produce a Social Breakdown Index (SBI). The SBI finds that people who live in areas suffering from social breakdown are less likely to say that their area is attractive, trust their neighbours, say people from different backgrounds get on, and say they are satisfied with their local area, as well as being more likely to report feeling lonely.[14]

Taking back control of Britain's high streets is therefore essential for building strong and cohesive communities in the decades ahead. At a time when 85 per cent of Britons feel that society is divided,[15] this mission cannot wait and should be at the forefront of the PM's 10-year plan for Britain.

In the short term, the forthcoming high streets strategy presents the PM with an immediate opportunity to signal his intent within 100 days of taking office. The strategy should be ambitious but include commitments which are deliverable within the remaining years of this Parliament.

9 Greater Manchester Police (GMP), Operation Vulcan: Greater Manchester Police-Operation Vulcan; Swooping in on the Counterfeit Capital of the UK, n.d., pp. 16–17.

10 Office for National Statistics (ONS), Crime in England and Wales: Appendix tables year ending March 2026, July 2026.

11 British Retail Consortium (BRC), BRC Crime Report 2026, n.d., p. 14.

12 Home Office, Police recorded crime and outcomes open data tables: Outcomes open data, year ending March 2026, July 2026.

13 ONS, Crime in England and Wales: Appendix tables year ending March 2026, July 2026.

14 Please see Chapter one and Appendix A for full methodology.

15 Ipsos, 85% of Britons continue to believe that Britain is divided as over half think differences in people's political views are so divisive that it is dangerous for society, October 2025. Accessed: https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/85-britons-continue-believe-britain-divided-over-half-think-differences-peoples-political-views-are.

In this report, we set out 32 proposals to restore security to Britain's high streets, and on that foundation, to drive forward the renewal of Britain's communities, by creating the conditions for thriving business and hospitality, the building of new homes, and the community ownership of local buildings and spaces.

Restoring security

Restoring security requires addressing the structural problems within Britain's law enforcement agencies, to ensure the state can better crack down on the growing spectre of organised crime responsible for much of the growth in high street criminality. It also entails a robust response to 'low-level' criminality and disorder which corrodes the foundations of strong community life. This is essential to restoring public confidence in law enforcement and the criminal justice system as a whole.

1. **The PM must follow through on Home Office plans to establish a National Police Service, alongside a complete restructuring of Trading Standards into an affiliated national enforcement agency.** The north star of these reforms should be the establishment of a 'British FBI', able to draw on the full spectrum of powers currently scattered across more than 100 departments and agencies,[16] with the purpose of tackling national crime priorities like serious organised criminality.
2. **The Home Office should introduce a powerful new closure order to shut down criminal shops for good, alongside a stringent licensing regime for tobacco and vape retailers.** New FOI data obtained by the CSJ reveals that just a minority of criminal high street businesses are ever shut. We are calling for:
    a. New powers which enable the on-the-spot closure of criminal shops for up to 12 months, with no requirement for magistrates' court approval unless an appeal is triggered, and a simple evidence threshold of demonstrating criminality.
    b. A stringent licensing regime for tobacco and vape retailers, which gives enforcement agencies the ability to strip offenders of their licences indefinitely, and local authorities the power of veto over new vape shops.
    c. The use of Respect Orders to ban those working in criminal enterprises from the high street and employment within specific retail settings, along with new penalties for landlords who willingly profit from organised crime, including liability for unpaid business rates.
3. **The Home Office should urgently review the use of ASB powers and consider where consequences for repeat offenders can be strengthened.** CSJ analysis reveals a postcode lottery in the use of ASB powers, with courts in Greater Manchester issuing 17 times more Criminal Behaviour Orders (CBOs) than comparable courts in the Thames Valley area.[17] The Home Office should revise statutory guidance requiring the full use of available sanctions, with the aim of scaling up consequences for repeat offenders, including:
    a. The loss of social housing tenancies for prolific ASB offenders and their households, including where the perpetrator is a child.
    b. Deducting unpaid ASB fines from benefit payments at the maximum deduction rate.
    c. Giving local authorities a fast-track power to ban face coverings, ending the menace of balaclava related ASB.

16 CTSI, Hidden in Plain Sight: Tackling Crime on the UK's High Streets, n.d., p. 14.
17 House of Commons, Criminal Behaviour Orders: Question for Ministry of Justice (MoJ) (UIN78737), October 2025.

4. **The Home Office and Ministry of Justice (MoJ) should launch a nationwide crackdown on shoplifting to increase reporting, charge rates, and escalate punishment for offenders.** CSJ analysis estimates that fewer than one in 10 shoplifting incidents are ever reported to the police,[18] with fewer than one in four reported ever facing court summons.[19] To end the shoplifting crisis, the Home Office should:
    a. Amend sentencing guidelines to presume mandatory GPS tagging, curfews, location restrictions, and addiction treatment for repeat shoplifters or those linked to organised crime.
    b. Exempt shop theft from the presumption to suspend jail sentences of 12 months and under, ensuring judges are able to sentence offenders to immediate custody where appropriate.
    c. Introduce new legal frameworks for the greater adoption of facial recognition technology in retail settings, and for licensed security guards to carry defensive equipment and use reasonable force to detain thieves and recover stolen produce.

Building connection and belonging

Only by restoring security can the government bring about the renewal of Britain's high streets. On this foundation, there is a historic opportunity to drive the positive transformation of local places. The government should achieve this by securing the future of the hospitality sector as the backbone of modern high streets, reforming the planning system to galvanise investment, and supercharging community ownership with new match-funding initiatives.

5. **HM Treasury should introduce a permanently lower rate of VAT for the hospitality sector set at a maximum of 15 per cent**. Britain's pubs and hospitality venues are facing a viability crisis, with CSJ analysis finding that seven pubs have been lost for every new vape shop since 2016.[20] A targeted VAT cut for the hospitality sector, costing around £5 billion,[21] would enable businesses to continue to invest in Britain's high streets. We propose funding this by reforms to welfare, outlined in the CSJ's *Wasted Youth* report, which would save £7.4 billion per year.[22] This could be supplemented by a new Online Sales Tax, which if set at two per cent of all internet sales could raise £2.7 billion in 2027/28.[23]
6. **The Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government (MHCLG) should roll out the use of design codes to fast-track planning applications.** Just 20 per cent of all major planning decisions in 2024/25 were decided during the 13-week statutory timescale.[24] To speed up development in town and city centres, MHCLG should roll out the use of design codes to fast-track development on brownfield sites, utilising a new Brownfield Passport power to create quasi-zonal planning systems in town and city centre locations. Design codes should also be used to make improvements to ugly and decaying shopfronts, paid for by new Pride in Place funds.

18 BRC, BRC Crime Report 2026, n.d., p. 14; ONS, Crime in England and Wales: Appendix tables year ending September 2025. The BRC estimate 5,451,000 customer theft incidents in 2024/25, the ONS reports that 519,381 incidents were reported to the police in the year ending September 2025. Note: BRC data covers the period September 2024 to August 2025, while ONS data covers the period October 2024 to September 2025. Due to two months sitting outside the overlapping data, figures should serve as notional estimates only.

19 Home Office, Police recorded crime and outcomes open data tables: Outcomes open data, year ending March 2026, July 2026.

20 CSJ, Seven pubs lost for every new vape shop over last decade, analysis reveals, March 2026. Accessed: https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/newsroom/seven-pubs-lost-for-every-new-vape-shop.

21 House of Commons, Public Houses: VAT (UIN 111571), February 2026.

22 CSJ, Wasted Youth: Helping Britain's young adults into work, August 2025, p. 8.

23 CSJ analysis. ONS, Retail Sales Index internet sales, June 2026. Percentage of average 12-month value for internet sales, based on last known year ending March data, linearly forecast forward to 2029/30. True amount raised may be lower than notional totals.

24 Home Builders Federation (HBF), Planning delays are holding back England's housing and infrastructure goals, September 2025. Accessed: https://www.hbf.co.uk/news/planning-delays-are-holding-back-englands-housing-and-infrastructure-goals/.

7. **MHCLG should use match-funding initiatives to increase the investment in the Community Right to Buy Fund to £500 million.** The existing funding pot of £61 million is far too small to meet total demand for community ownership.[25] Drawing on existing government spend identified in the CSJ's *Supercharging Philanthropy* report,[26] the government should grow the size of this pot with the aim of securing an additional £500 million of philanthropic investment.

25 Power to Change, The future use of the Community Right to Buy Fund: insights from community businesses, July 2026. Accessed: https://www.powertochange.org.uk/evidence-and-ideas/news-and-events/the-future-use-of-the-community-right-to-buy-fund-insights-from-community-businesses/.

26 CSJ, Supercharging Philanthropy: How Government and Givers can Unleash a New Wave of Philanthropic Funding, March 2025.

Introduction

This report addresses the social challenges facing Britain's high streets, towns, and city centres, and recommends 32 policy changes to shape the forthcoming high streets strategy and PM's 10-year plan for Britain.

This report comes amid a growing perception and experience of insecurity on Britain's high streets. While long-term economic challenges facing the high street - such as vacancy rates, business rates, and online shopping - are well discussed, there has been too little focus on the place of security in conversations on high street decline and renewal.

This report addresses that gap, drawing on the findings of the CSJ's 2021 report *Pillars of Community,* which recognised that security acts as the foundation of strong and stable community life and that, without it, there is no path towards high street renewal.[27]

There are three related issues which have caused high streets to become less safe and prosperous in recent years: the growth in criminal high street businesses (Britain's 'dodgy shops'), ASB, and retail crime. These three issues aren't an exhaustive list of all security challenges on the high street, but the recent increase of each warrants urgent action from policymakers.

To understand the scale of insecurity facing Britain's high streets, towns, and city centres, we have produced a SBI, which is a composite index of three indicators of social breakdown. These are: the number of shops that have had illicit tobacco, cigarettes, and vapes seized from them; police recorded incidents of public order, shoplifting, ASB, bicycle theft, theft from the person, and criminal damage and arson offences; and local authority retail vacancy rates. We compare these to indicators of community life from the 2024/25 Community Life Survey (CLS), published by the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS). These findings are outlined in Chapter One.

In Chapter Two, we address the insecurity crisis on Britain's high streets, and outline recommendations for the government to address these issues. In Chapter Three, we outline how upon the foundation of security, the government can nurture connection and belonging through high street renewal, by reducing the tax burden on the hospitality sector, reforming the planning system, and by better resourcing plans for community ownership.

To understand the challenges affecting Britain's high streets, towns, and city centres we undertook a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative analysis. The methodology for the SBI and the three indicators is outlined in Appendix A. Other data is fully referenced within the body of the report. We draw on qualitative evidence from expert interviews, charity visits, and focus groups. We also draw upon responses to our public call for evidence.

The challenges facing high streets are broadly similar across all four nations of the UK. Where possible we use UK or Great Britain (GB) wide data, where that is unavailable, we fall back to England and Wales or England only data, reflecting the devolved nature of UK governance and the way statistics are collected

27 CSJ, Pillars of Community, June 2021, p. 7.

separately across it. Our recommendations are aimed primarily at HM Government but are also relevant to the devolved administrations.

Defining the high street

There are a variety of definitions for a high street. While the Ordnance Survey defines a high street as a cluster of 15 or more retail addresses within 150 metres of each other, it also states that a broader definition could include "a location that people visit to shop, eat, and drink."[28]

In this report we use a broad definition of the high street, modelled on the latter, and refer to the places within communities where there are a cluster of businesses which people choose to visit, shop, enjoy hospitality, and take part in leisure activities. We also refer to town and city centres in this report, as the prosperity of Britain's high streets is inseparable from the wider health of urban centres across the country.

28 Ordnance Survey, The geography of Britain's high streets, January 2023. Accessed: https://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/insights/the-geography-of-britains-high-streets.

Chapter One:

Britain's broken high streets

1.1 The Social Breakdown Index

To assess the extent of social breakdown across Britain's high streets, towns, and city centres we have constructed the SBI. The SBI measures the prevalence of social breakdown in English and Welsh local authorities. While it cannot provide data insights at the neighbourhood level, it shows local authority areas where proxies for high street decline are most concentrated.

The index is made up of three equally weighted variables which are local authority level proxies for the social challenges facing high streets, towns, and city centres. These are the number of shops that have had illicit tobacco, cigarettes, and vapes seized; vacancy rates; police recorded incidents of public order, shoplifting, ASB, bicycle theft, theft from the person; and criminal damage and arson offences. Higher SBI scores indicate greater social breakdown.[29]

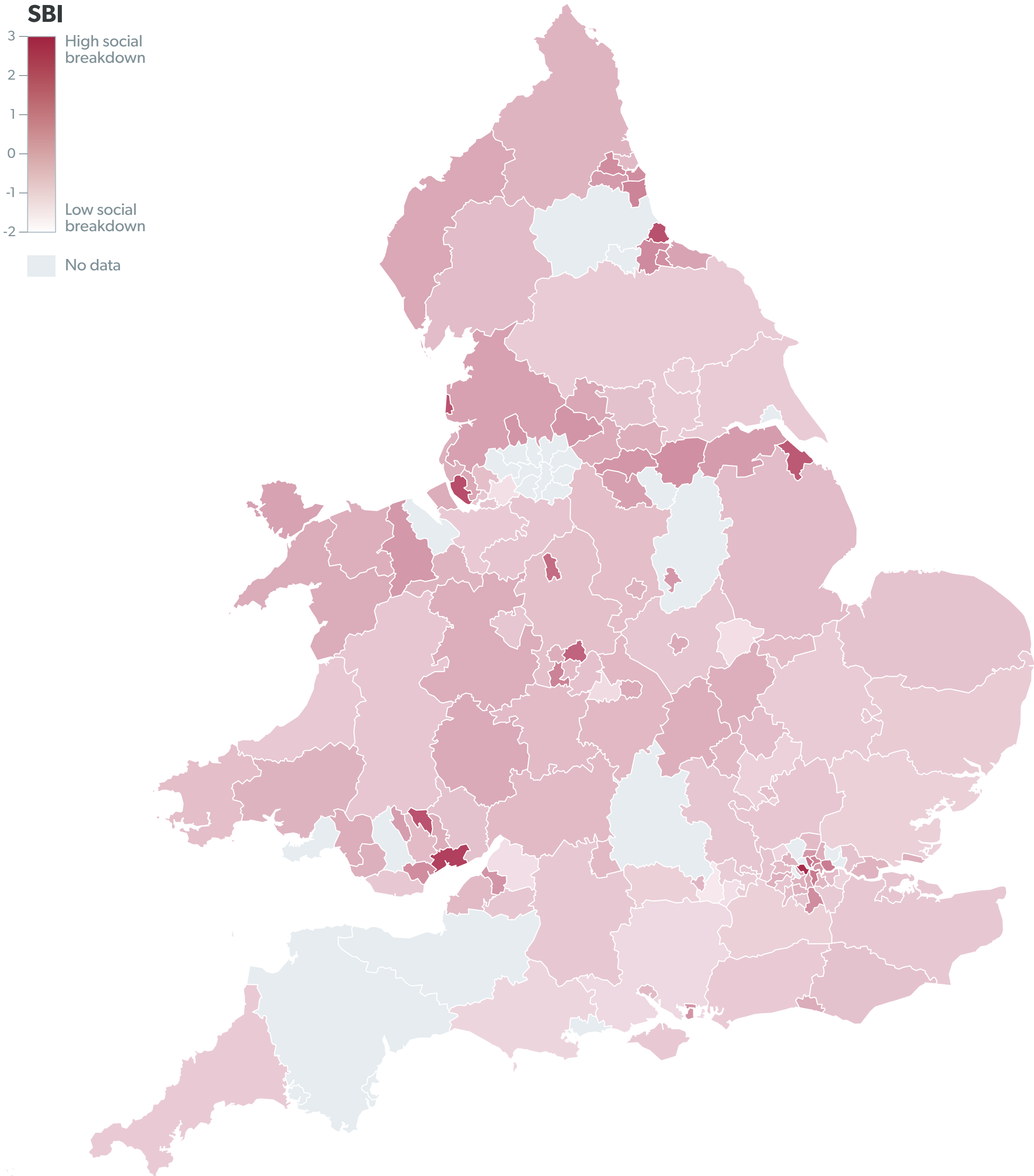
We have produced the SBI to demonstrate the relationship between high street insecurity and the nature of community life. Illicit trading, crime, and vacancy rates are often considered in isolation, and while recognised as problems which undermine community life, have not yet been analysed together in one index which can measure the aggregate impacts of social breakdown across a range of different variables on community life.

Therefore, the SBI is able to fill this gap, and contributes to the evidence base on how indicators of social breakdown are associated with aspects of strong or weak community life. It is able to quantitatively show how individuals living in areas which rank highly for social breakdown perceive community life, and build the evidence base for further action to tackle these problems.

The SBI finds that people who live in areas suffering from social breakdown are less likely to say that their area is attractive, trust their neighbours, say people from different backgrounds get on, and say they are satisfied with their local area, as well as being more likely to report feeling lonely. Across a host of metrics, social breakdown is associated with weaker community life.

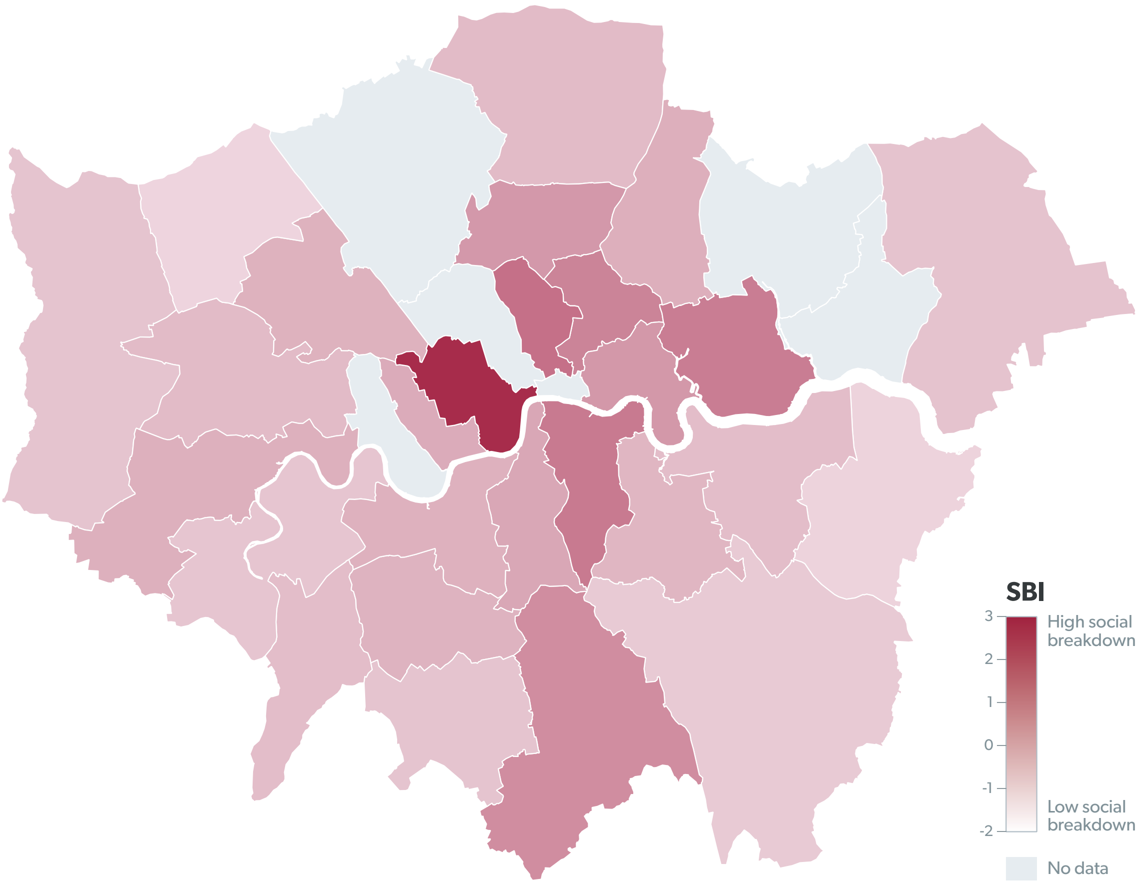
29 See Appendix A for a full methodology.

Figure 1: Social breakdown in England and Wales



Source: See Appendix A.

Figure 2: Social breakdown in London



Source: See Appendix A.

As shown in Figure 1 and Table 1, local authorities with the highest degree of social breakdown are evenly spread across England and Wales. The North West, West Midlands, London, and Wales each have two of the top 10 worst affected localities, with the remaining two in the North East and Yorkshire and the Humber.[30]

However, the least affected areas are less evenly distributed. Seven out of 10 are in the south of England.[31] On average, the North East scores the worst for social breakdown and the South East scores the best.[32]

Table 1: 10 worst and least affected local authorities by social breakdown

Local authority name	Region	Rank
Westminster	London	1
Newport	Wales	2
Liverpool	North West	3
Hartlepool	North East	4

30 Westminster stands out as a local authority not typically associated with social breakdown. Its high SBI score is due to extremely high crime rates.

31 See Appendix A for a full list of counties.

32 Order of average SBI score from high to low: North East, Wales, Yorkshire and the Humber, North West, West Midlands, London, East Midlands, South West, East of England, South East. London excludes and the City of London.

Local authority name	Region	Rank
Blaenau Gwent	Wales	5
Blackpool	North West	6
North East Lincolnshire	Yorkshire and the Humber	7
Walsall	West Midlands	8
Stoke-on-Trent	West Midlands	9
Islington	London	10
Bexley	London	135
Harrow	London	136
Dorset	South West	137
Hampshire	South East	138
Solihull	West Midlands	139
Rutland	East Midlands	140
South Gloucestershire	South West	141
Bracknell Forest	South East	142
Warrington	North West	143
Wokingham	South East	144

Source: See Appendix A.

The large geographic variation in the extent of social breakdown, even between nearby local authorities such as Solihull and Walsall, shows that its underlying causes have been received and handled differently by different areas. This has serious implications for the lives of local residents and, as we show in the following section, the health and wellbeing of entire communities.

1.2 Social breakdown and community life

To investigate how social breakdown impacts community life, strength, and wellbeing, we cross-tabulated SBI scores with responses from the CLS,[33] which provides useful information regarding individual's attitudes to their local community, aggregated at the local authority-level.[34] Our analysis reveals that local authorities with high SBI scores, indicating a higher degree of social breakdown, tend to observe more negative perceptions of community life.

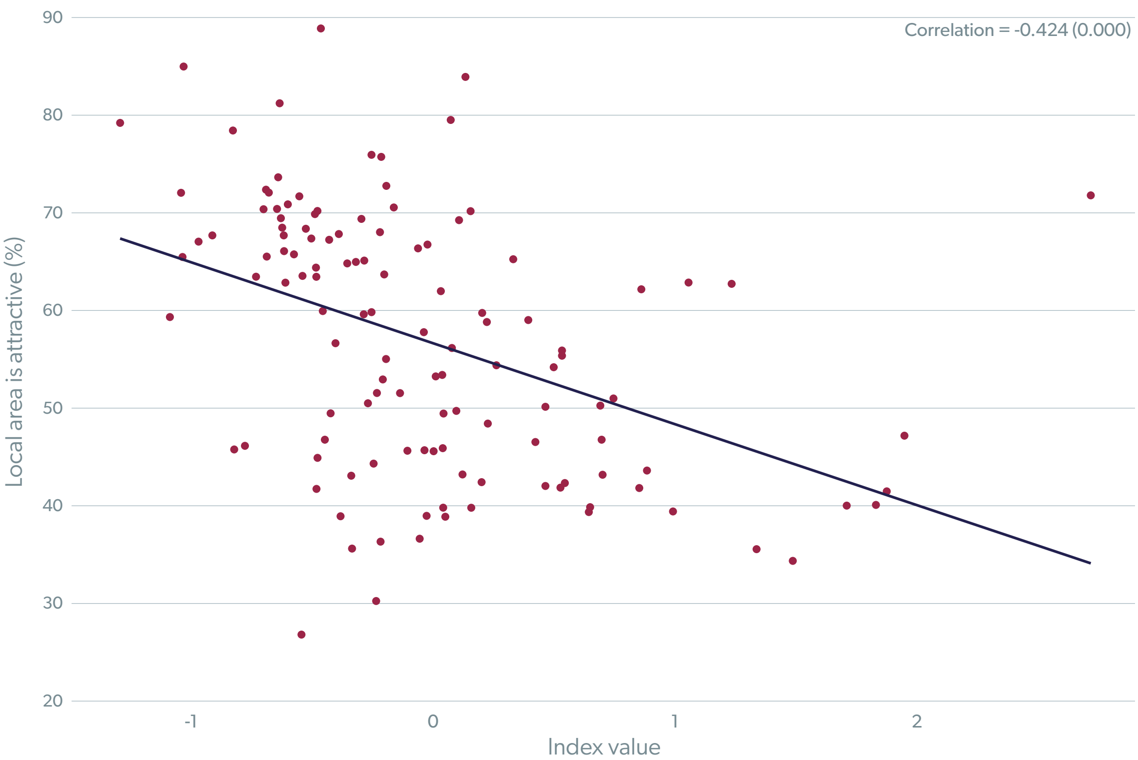
As shown in Figure 3, there is a moderately strong relationship between SBI score and opinions of the attractiveness of the local area, with a statistically significant correlation of -0.42. This means individuals in areas with a higher degree of social breakdown tend to have more negative opinions of the attractiveness of their local area.

Individuals in the top third of local authorities most affected by social breakdown, according to the SBI, are 12 percentage points less likely to agree that their local area is attractive. For example, in Sunderland, which ranks 15th in the SBI, only 42 per cent of individuals view their local area as attractive, compared to 72 per cent in Surrey, which ranks 132nd.

33 Department for Media, Culture, and Sport (DCMS), Community Life Survey 2024/25 annual publication, December 2025.

34 CLS data is provided at the local authority level, which are mapped to counties. Accessed: https://geoportal.statistics.gov.uk/datasets/ons::local-authority-district-to-county-and-unitary-authority-december-2024-lookup-in-ew/about.

Figure 3: Social breakdown and local attractiveness

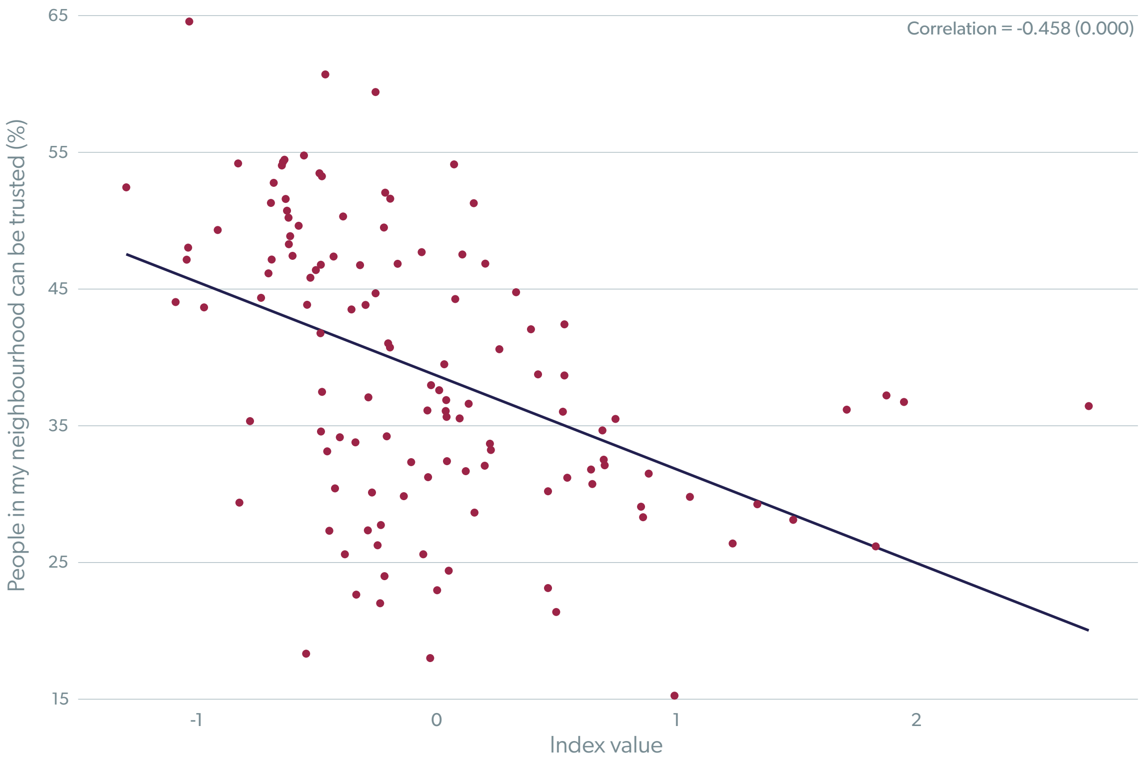


Source: CSJ analysis. DCMS, CLS 2024/25 annual publication, December 2025; Appendix A.

As illustrated by Figure 4, we also find a statistically significant correlation (-0.46) when examining the relationship between social breakdown and trust. Namely, areas with greater social breakdown observe lower levels of trust.

The large differences between local authorities are most apparent when analysing specific examples. For instance, over half (54 per cent) of individuals in Windsor and Maidenhead, which ranks 129th in the SBI, believe people in the neighbourhood can be trusted, whereas fewer than three in 10 (29 per cent) people in Stoke-on-Trent, which ranks ninth, believe so. Overall, individuals in the top third of local authorities most affected by social breakdown are 10 percentage points less likely to agree that people in the neighbourhood can be trusted.

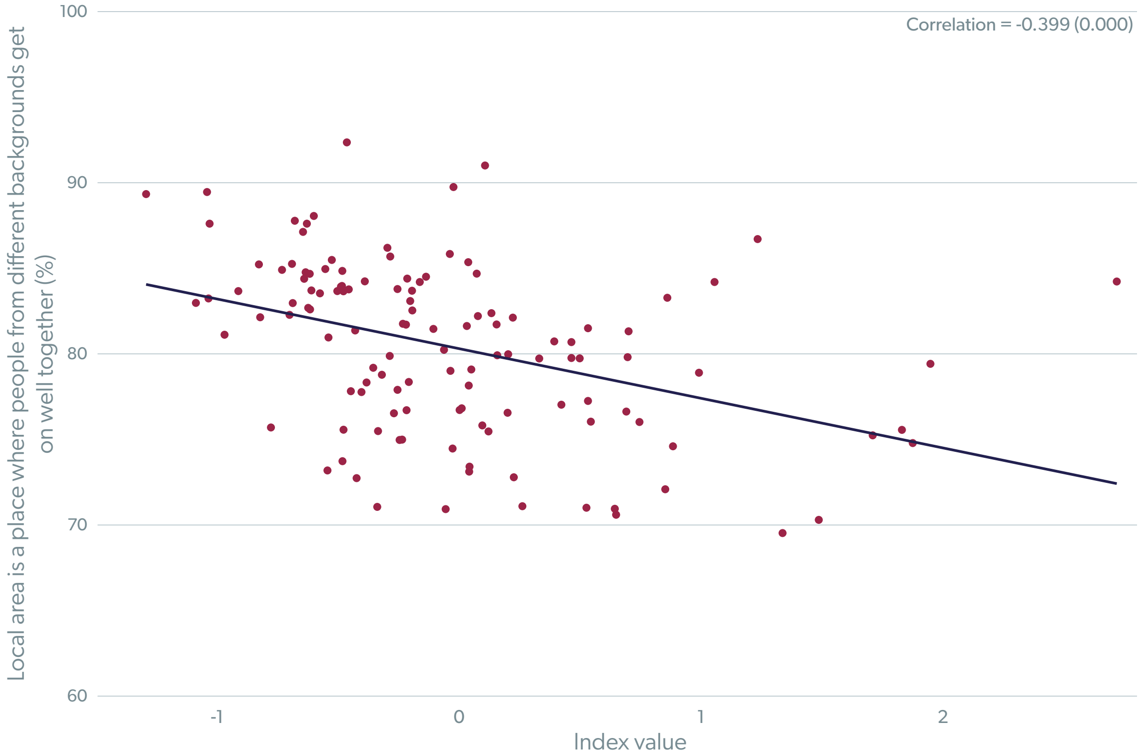
Figure 4: Social breakdown and trust



Source: CSJ analysis. DCMS, CLS 2024/25 annual publication, December 2025; Appendix A.

Local authorities recording a high degree of social breakdown are also less likely to agree that individuals from different backgrounds get on, with a significant correlation of -0.40. Individuals in the bottom third of local authorities in the SBI are five percentage points more likely to agree that individuals from different backgrounds get on, compared to individuals in the top third of localities.

Figure 5: Social breakdown and the extent to which people from different backgrounds get on

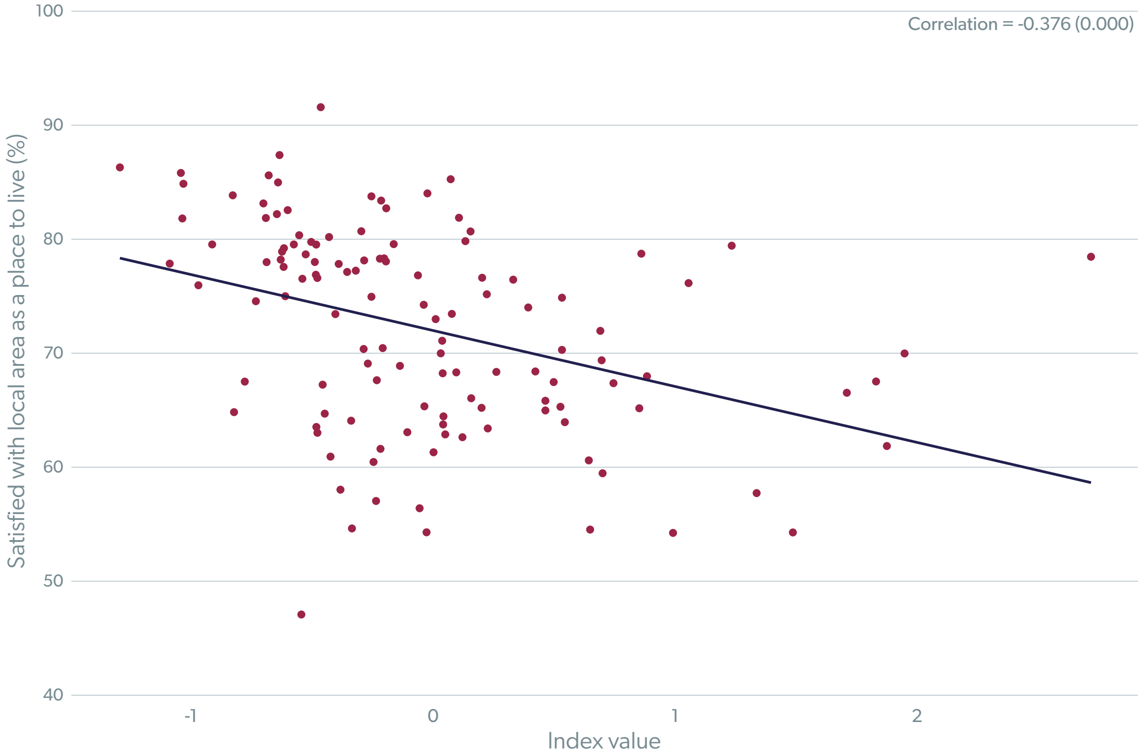


Source: CSJ analysis. DCMS, CLS 2024/25 annual publication, December 2025; Appendix A.

Local authorities performing poorly in the SBI also tend to observe lower levels of satisfaction with the local area. There was a significant correlation of -0.38 between the SBI and the proportion of individuals satisfied with the local area as a place to live.

In the top third of the SBI, 70 per cent of individuals reported being satisfied, compared to 78 per cent in the bottom third. Comparing individual local authorities reveals large differences. In Newham, which ranks 12th in the SBI, only 54 per cent of individuals are satisfied with their local area. In York, which ranks 130th, 86 per cent of respondents are satisfied.

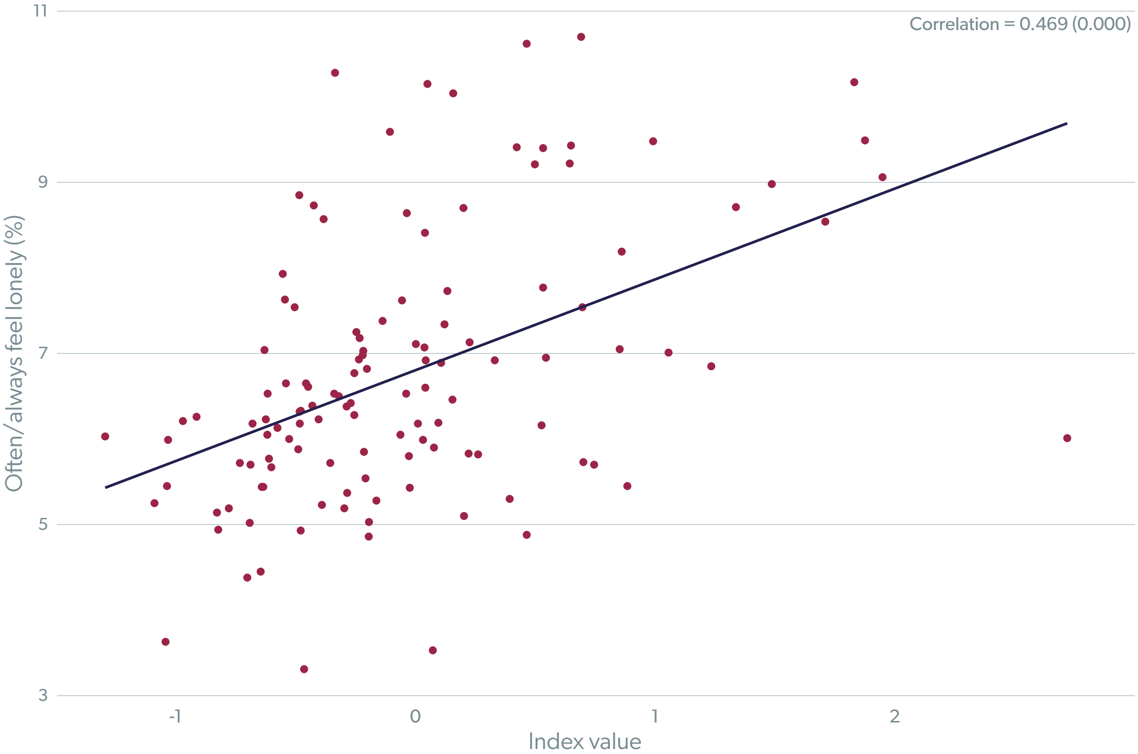
Figure 6: Social breakdown and local satisfaction



Source: CSJ analysis. DCMS, CLS 2024/25 annual publication, December 2025; Appendix A.

Loneliness and social breakdown display the strongest relationship. There was a significant correlation between the SBI and the proportion of individuals reporting feeling lonely 'often/always' of 0.47. Six per cent of individuals in the bottom third of local authorities reported feeling lonely, whereas eight per cent in the top third did so.

Figure 7: Social breakdown and loneliness



Source: CSJ analysis. DCMS, CLS 2024/25 annual publication, December 2025; Appendix A.

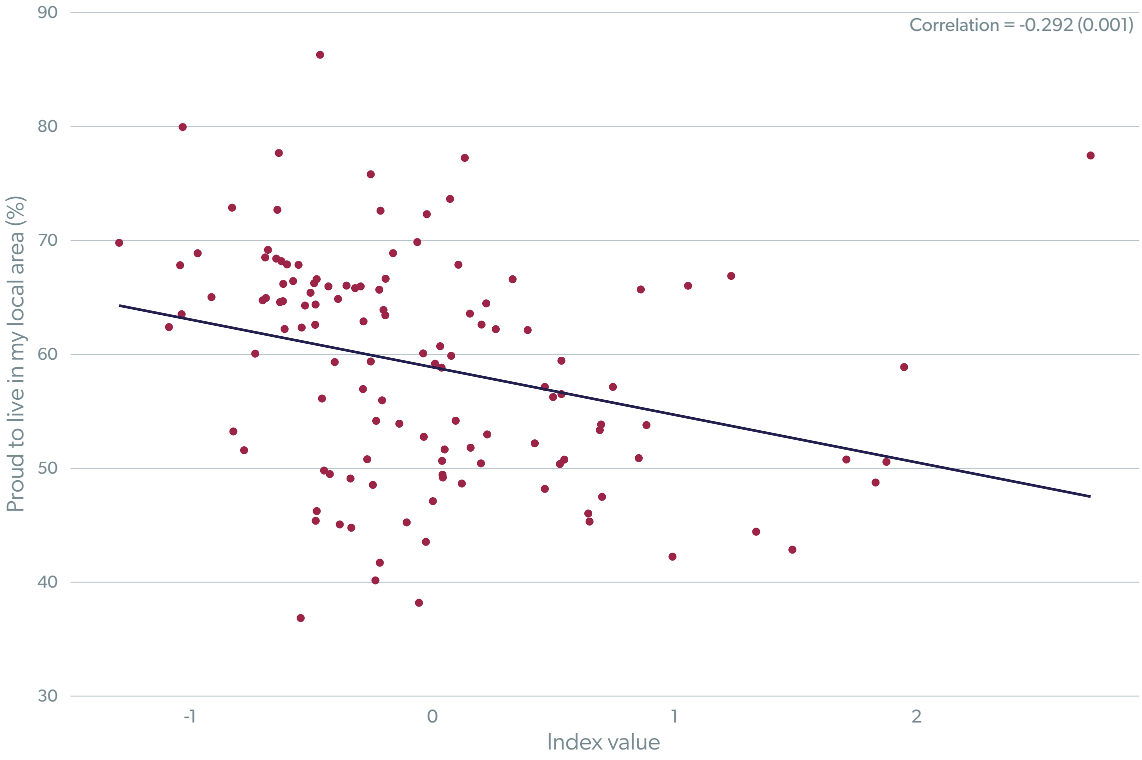
Figure 7 reflects findings from our *Lonely Nation Part 3: How to tackle loneliness through the built environment* report which found that the quality and design of the built environment is fundamentally related to issues like loneliness. People who said they felt lonely often were more likely to disagree that there are lots of social spaces available to meet people and that buildings are designed in a way that encourages a sense of community.[35]

> *"If you live in rubbish houses, if you can't get repairs done, if the alleyways are full of rubbish, if you don't feel safe going to the park, this all has an effect on community."*
>
> *"Definitely loneliness is linked with the built environment. One of the reasons people don't go to the park is that it's not safe, but also because of what they're going to see on the way to the park, so they tend to stay in. Then they're not engaging with other people. Especially not face to face."*
>
> **Charity leader in *Lonely Nation Part 3*[36]**

Social breakdown has a weaker relationship with pride in place and a sense of belonging. Of all the statistically significant correlations with the SBI, pride in place is the weakest with -0.29. Belonging is the only measure with a non-significant relationship with the SBI. Individuals in a local authority in the bottom third of the SBI are less than one percentage points more likely to feel that they 'very/fairly strongly' belong to their immediate neighbourhood.

35 CSJ, Lonely Nation Part 3: How to tackle loneliness through the built environment, November 2024, p. 30.
36 Ibid, p. 28.

Figure 8: Social breakdown and pride in place

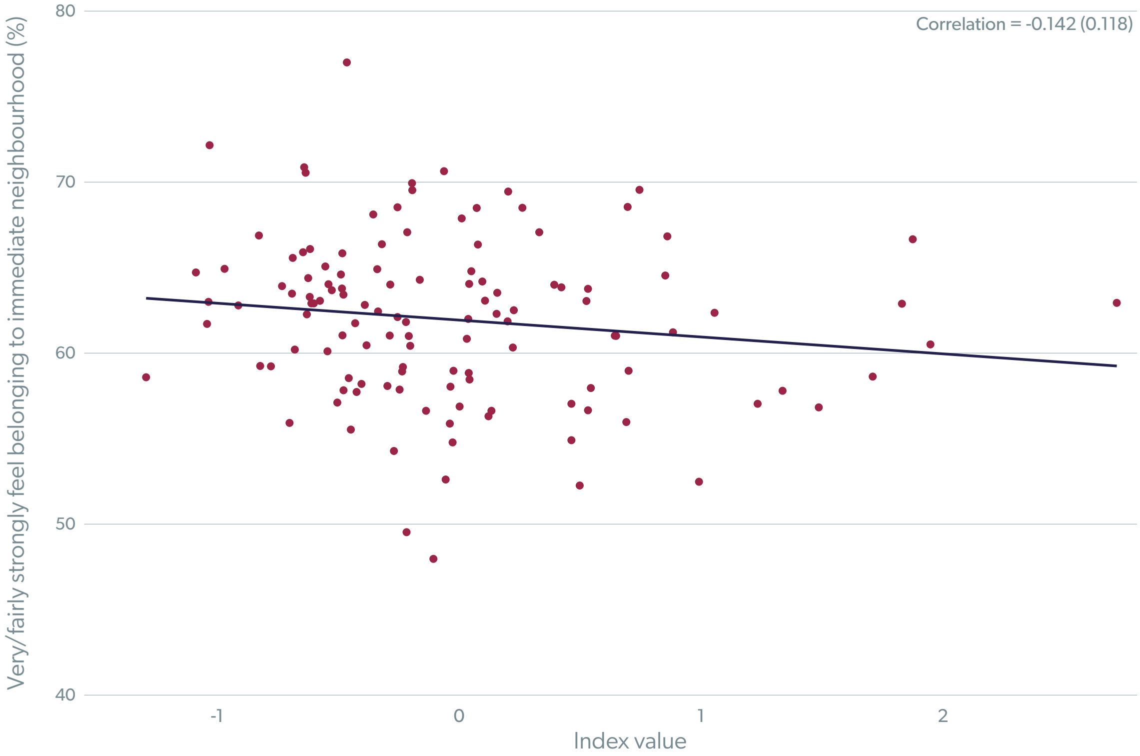


Source: CSJ analysis. DCMS, CLS 2024/25 annual publication, December 2025; Appendix A.

Belonging showed less of a relationship to high-ranking areas on our index, with only a slight relationship between areas ranking high for social breakdown and less belonging. There were just two local authorities where fewer than 50 per cent of people said they felt they belonged to their community. This reflects previous CSJ analysis from *Pillars of Community* that found that belonging and community strength is not a result of wealth, demonstrating the pride in place that many people feel across the country, despite security challenges.[37]

37 CSJ, Pillars of Community: Why communities matter and what matters to them, June 2021, p. 27.

Figure 9: Social breakdown and belonging



Source: CSJ analysis. DCMS, CLS 2024/25 annual publication, December 2025; Appendix A.

Repeated findings of a relationship between social breakdown and community life, strength, and wellbeing emphasises its importance in the lives of local people. Social breakdown, evident in the prevalence of criminal high street businesses, vacancy rates, and crime, is fundamentally related to how individuals see their neighbourhoods, think of their neighbours, and view the society in which they live. This means that tackling insecurity in towns, cities, and on the high street is an essential first step in building more cohesive and flourishing communities across the country as a whole.

Failure to tackle the underlying causes and resulting symptoms of social breakdown risks a corrosion of community life and social cohesion, as more people begin to distrust their neighbours, resent authorities for not tackling evident problems in their communities, and feel that the state is failing them.

Yet alongside these challenges, our findings also demonstrate the residual strength within British communities. Belonging, the sense that your place is yours, shows no statistically significant relationship with social breakdown. Only in two localities (Reading and Southampton) did fewer than 50 per cent of individuals say they felt they belonged to their neighbourhood. Similarly, in the top third of areas ranked by social breakdown, seven in 10 people remain satisfied with where they live.

Pride in place was reflected across several of our focus group discussions and interviews. In all areas that we travelled to, people expressed a pride in where they came from, despite evident social and economic challenges.

> *"You know, I came to Hull 20 odd years ago. Everybody made me feel so welcome. You know, I will not have a bad word to say about this place…If I go away, I can't wait to come back. You know, I think most people who live here will say something similar. It gets a lot of negative press, but we're all very very quick to defend the good. People make this town, salt of the earth, dependable. No airs and graces, no pretence…It is what it is. It's a no-nonsense town and that's what I love about it."*
>
> **Focus group participant, Yorkshire and the Humber.**

While these findings show that British communities retain a strong sense of belonging, they should not lead to complacency on the part of policymakers. Our analysis demonstrates that in nearly every metric of community strength and cohesion, areas with high levels of social breakdown score worse. To protect communities across the country and to repair the damage that has been wrought by high street decline, tackling social breakdown should be a core priority. This is not only relevant to high streets policy, but also efforts to improve social cohesion at a time of considerable concern over the success of integration, multiculturalism, and cross-cultural relations in the UK.

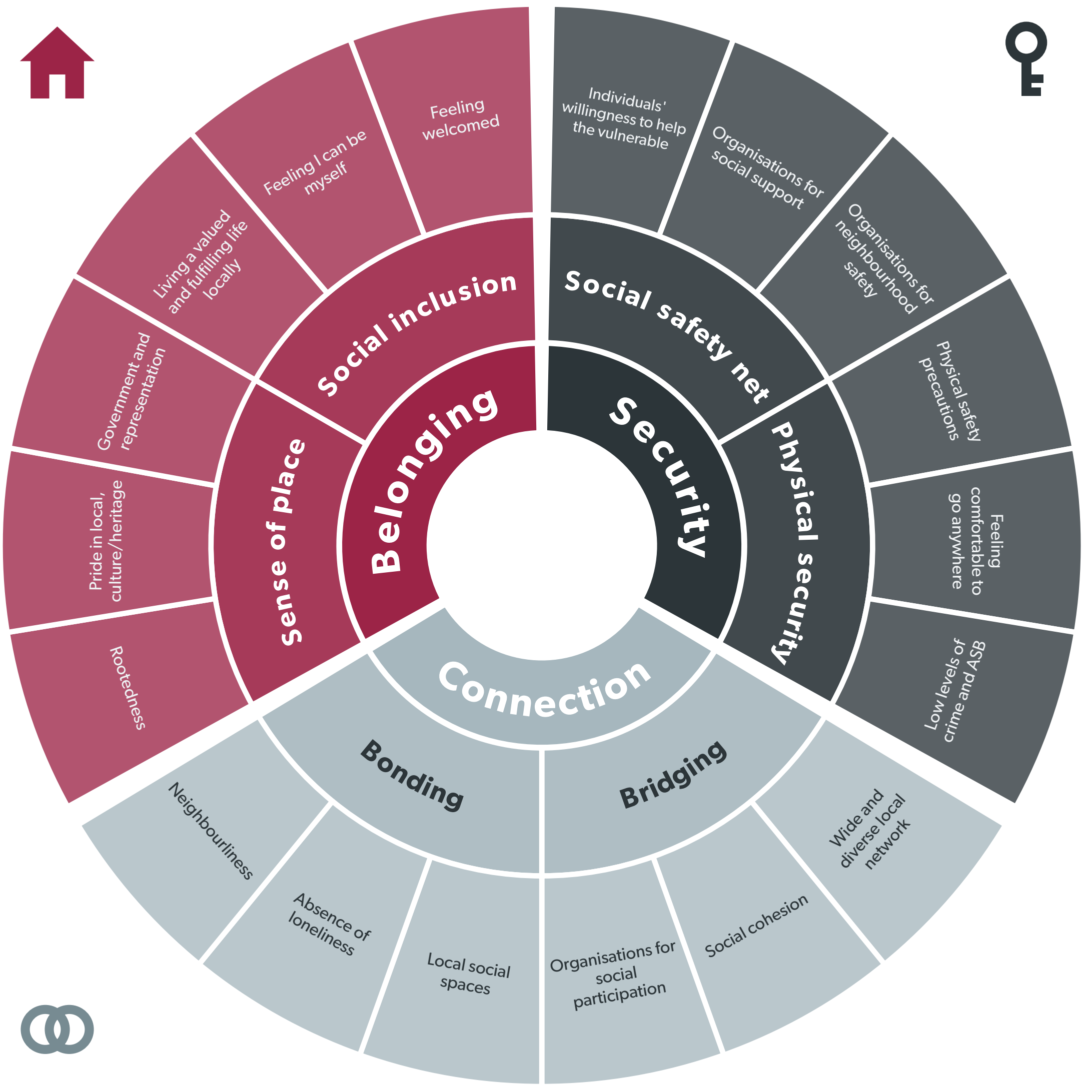
Chapter Two:

Restoring security

2.1 Security is the foundation of community life

In 2021, the CSJ polled 5,000 people to investigate views on what a thriving community means to them. In our report *Pillars of Community*, we identified that people tend to prioritise issues of security, then connection, then belonging, in their local communities.[38]

Figure 10: The pillars of community



Source: CSJ, *Pillars of Community: Why communities matter and what matters to them*, June 2021, p. 16.

38 Ibid, p. 7.

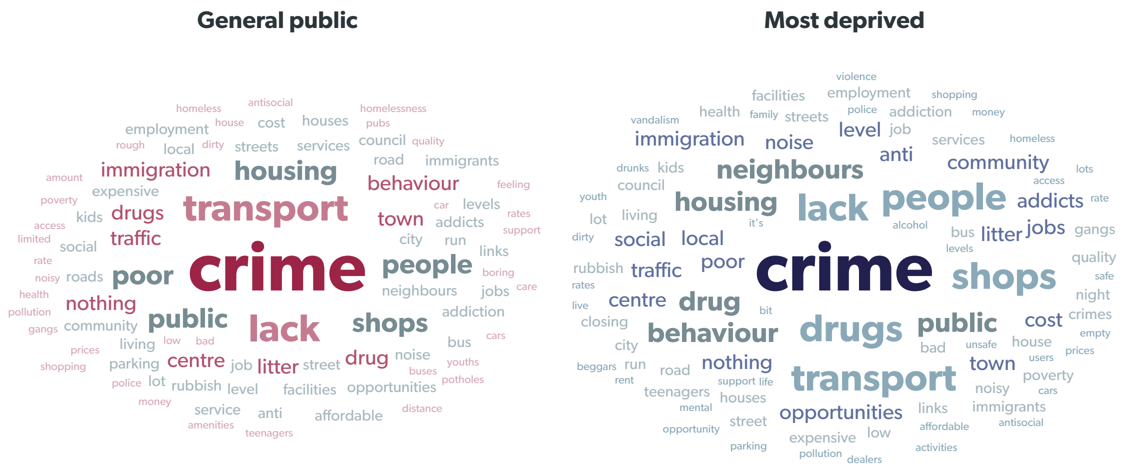
In *Pillars of Community*, CSJ polling asked people to choose between randomly selected pairs of 23 factors that make for strong communities. Almost all the factors relating to security came at the very top of the list, highlighted in bold below.[39]

The most important features of community life

1. Living in a low crime area
2. Feeling comfortable to be or go anywhere in the community
3. The absence of anti-social behaviour
4. People looking out for and helping each other, even if they don't know each other well
5. People being willing to help each other with different issues
6. The importance of safety precautions like well-lit streets
7. People checking in on their neighbours
8. Knowing and feeling welcomed in the local area
9. Feeling like people in my area would help me if I was going through a tough time
10. Not feeling lonely or isolated from local people

The importance of security for enabling community life was also identified in the CSJ's landmark *Two Nations* report from 2023. Polling conducted of 6,043 adults, of which 3,021 were the most deprived in the country, revealed that crime was the most significant concern among both groups. When asked what the worst thing was about living in their area, both the general public and most deprived overwhelmingly used the word 'crime' in response. 'Shops' also ranked highly.

Figure 11: What is the worst thing about living in your area?

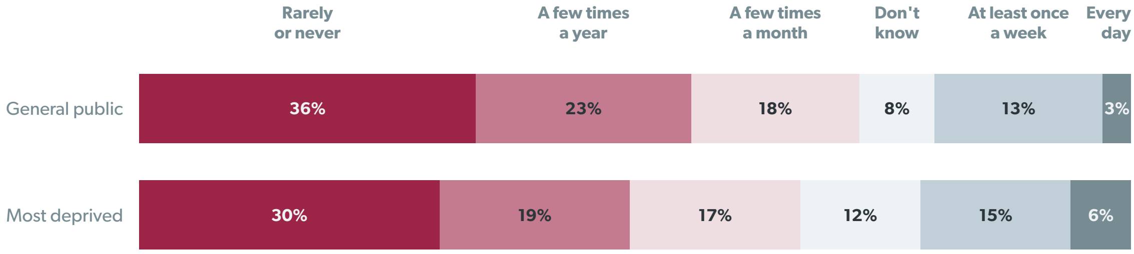


Source: CSJ, *Two Nations: The state of poverty in the UK*, December 2023, p. 114.

39 Ibid, p. 23.

The perception of high levels of crime and ASB are more concentrated among the most deprived in Britain. CSJ analysis found that the most deprived reported seeing crime and/or ASB twice as much per day compared with the general public, with six per cent of the most deprived reporting having witnessed crime and/or ASB every day. More broadly, 16 per cent of the general public said they had seen crime and/or ASB at least once a week.[40] When asked what would help get them ahead in life, 23 per cent of the general public said tackling crime.[41]

Figure 12: Perception of crime and ASB among the general public and most disadvantaged



Source: CSJ, *Two Nations: The state of poverty in the UK*, December 2023, p. 115.

These findings highlight that security acts as the foundational pillar of community life, on which connection and belonging can thrive. Without security, and importantly the perception of it, Britain's high streets will be unable to thrive.

Despite the importance of security, public debate on Britain's high streets has historically focused on economic and commercial issues. For example, in the 2011 landmark *Portas Review* into the future of Britain's high streets, just one out of 28 recommendations referenced improving safety.[42]

Economic considerations are critically important for successful high streets policy, but do not capture the full extent of the challenges they face. Official data shows that the primary reasons for adults not being proud to live in their local area are 'disrespectful or troublesome people', 'the area being run down', and 'safety concerns'.[43] These factors predominantly relate to security, mirroring the CSJ's analysis. For high streets policy to be a success, restoring safety and security to Britain's town and city centres must be a central priority.

In this chapter we outline how Britain's high streets are suffering from a crime emergency, particularly related to the growth in criminal high street businesses, ASB, and retail crime. We explore how these factors are undermining security across communities and signal to the public that their high streets, towns, and city centres are broken.

40 CSJ, Two Nations: The state of poverty in the UK, December 2023, p. 115.

41 Ibid, p. 16.

42 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), The Portas Review: an independent review into the future of our high streets, December 2011, pp. 5–6.

43 DCMS, Community Life Survey 2024/25: Neighbourhood and community, December 2025.

2.2 High street crime: the perception and reality

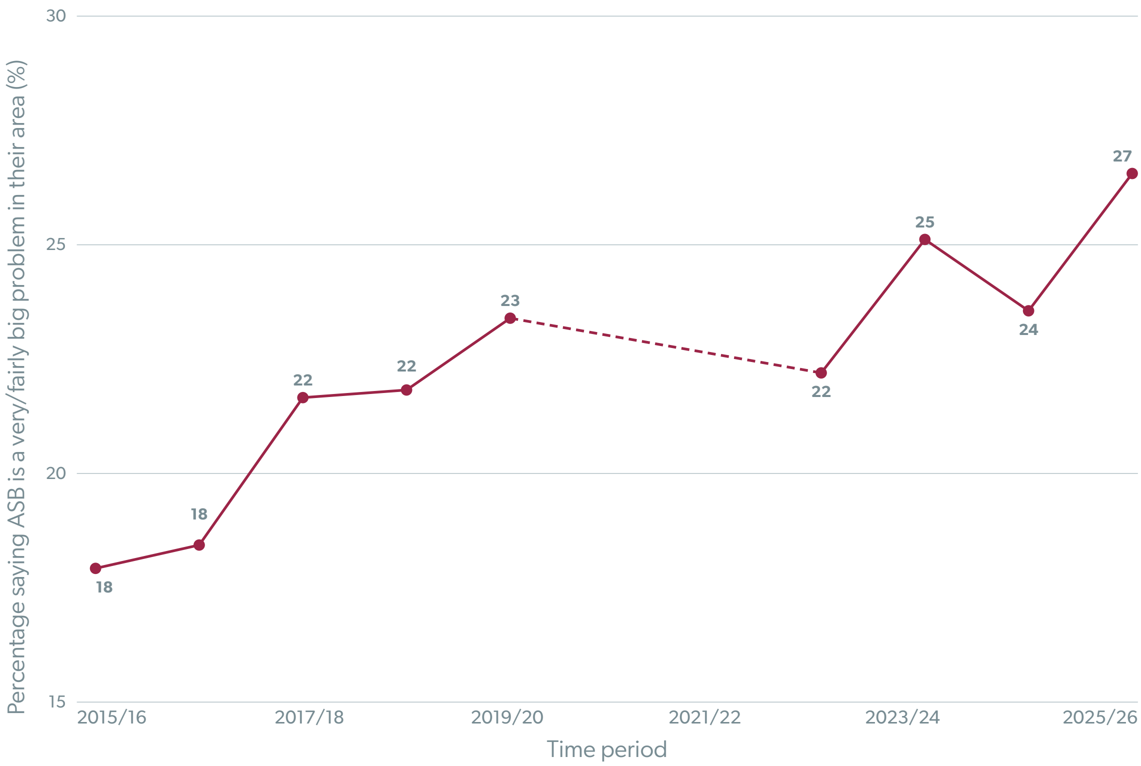
2.2.1 The perception of crime

There is a perception that crime and ASB are on the rise in Britain. Polling conducted by Ipsos in 2025 found that 87 per cent of people said crime and ASB was a big problem in the UK, with two in five reporting it being a big problem in their local area.[44] Nearly half (46 per cent) say they believe crime has gone up because they see more ASB in their local area.[45] Analysis by YouGov shows that across 11 crimes asked about, between 50 and 85 per cent of adults believe they have increased over the last 10 years.[46]

Official data tracking the perception of crime and ASB also reinforce growing public concerns. There has been a statistically significant increase in the number of people reporting ASB concerns in their local area, from 2024/25 to 2025/26. In 2024/25, over one in three (36 per cent) people said they had personally experienced/witnessed ASB in their local area, rising to over two in five (41 per cent) in 2025/26.[47]

There has also been a significant increase in the percentage of people saying ASB is a fairly or very big problem in their area over a longer period. There has been a nine-percentage point increase in the proportion of people who stated the latter from 2015/16 to 2025/26. From 2015/16, there has been a steady increase in the perception of ASB in England and Wales. The complete trend over time can be seen below in Figure 13.

Figure 13: Percentage saying ASB is a very/fairly big problem in their area



Source: CSJ analysis. ONS, Crime in England and Wales: Appendix tables year ending March 2026, July 2026.

Notes: Due to the suspension of the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) during the Covid-19 pandemic, data are not available for the years 2020/21 and 2021/22.

44 Ipsos, Ipsos reveals high prices and declining high streets key local concerns for Britons, November 2025. Accessed: https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/ipsos-reveals-high-prices-and-declining-high-streets-key-local-concerns-britons.

45 Ibid.

46 YouGov, Perceptions of crime, March 2026. Accessed: https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/54368-perceptions-of-crime.

47 ONS, Crime in England and Wales: Appendix tables year ending March 2026, July 2026.

Our qualitative research reinforces evidence of rising high street crime. This particularly related to feeling unsafe around certain individuals who are prominent in high street locations. This reflects findings from the 2024/25 CLS where 65 per cent of adults said that a reason for not feeling pride in their local area was due to disrespectful or troublesome people.[48]

> *"None of us will ever go into the town because there are no shops, because it's purely unsafe to be on your own there. You get people coming up to you, you're scared about getting your phone nicked. I wouldn't go into Middlesbrough on my own, I wouldn't go into Stockton on my own. I will go near Stockton if I'm running on the riverside with my dog because I'm safer than being on my own."*
>
> **Focus group participant, North East**

Concerns about troublesome people is related to visible mental health problems and drug addictions in the community. For many, these individuals are a living example of insecurity and a break in the social fabric that manifests itself in the heart of communities: the high street.

> *"Most people you see around you are just massively unwell…people who have mental health problems, [suffering from] drug abuse in a visible way [and] they're not being taken care of."*
>
> **Focus group participant, Yorkshire and the Humber**

Overall, what was clearly identified in our focus group discussions was a marked increase in low-level crime, a feeling that this was not being adequately prioritised by the police or local authorities.

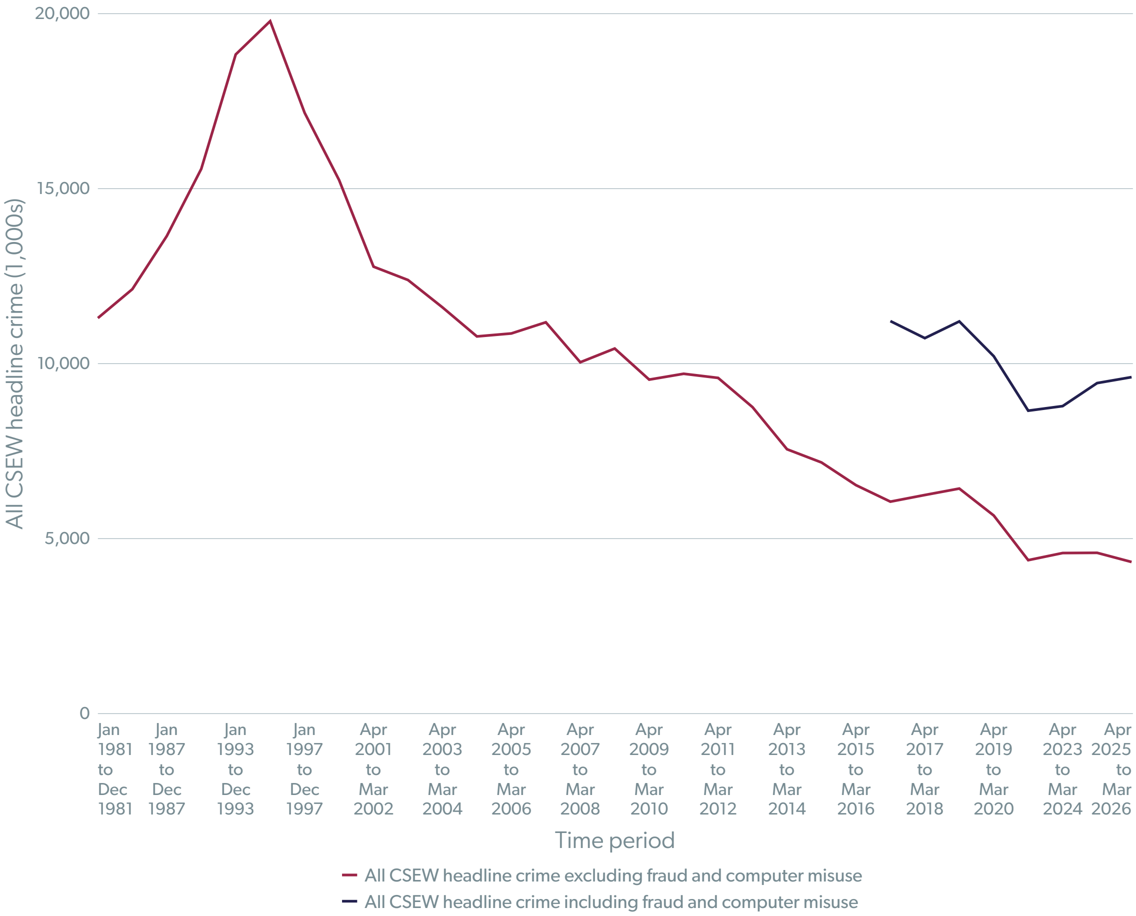
> *"All sorts of people get away with all sorts of things in this neighbourhood…people running shops selling illegal tobacco… people [dealing] drugs… But to be frank, it's also the local authority not doing its job because they [perpetrators] can get away with it."*
>
> **Focus group participant, Yorkshire and the Humber**

48 DCMS, Community Life Survey 2024/25: Neighbourhood and community, December 2025.

2.2.2 The reality of crime

Despite the perception of crime increasing, there has been a downward trend in crime estimates over successive decades. The Crime Survey of England and Wales (CSEW) record all types of crimes experienced by people in the last 12 months. There were an estimated 9.6 million incidents of headline crime in 2025/26, compared to 19.8 million in 1995/96.

Figure 14: Annual estimates of crime in England and Wales



Source: CSJ analysis. ONS, Crime in England and Wales: Appendix tables year ending March 2026, July 2026.

This reflects a wider disconnect between public attitudes and official data regarding crime. It begs the question: why do the public think that crime is getting worse despite falling headline rates?

Worsening public perceptions of crime can be explained by a perception and increase in low-level crime and disorder that appears to go unpoliced and unpunished. This type of crime is particularly visible on the high street and includes the growth in criminal high street businesses linked to the selling of illicit tobacco and vapes, shoplifting, theft from the person, and ASB – all of which have increased compared to before the Covid-19 pandemic. For example:

- There has been a 39 per cent increase from 2023 to 2025 in the number of shops where illegal tobacco, cigarettes, and vapes were seized.[49]

49 CSJ analysis. FOI data from 177 local authorities with statutory responsibility for Trading Standards, submitted February 2026. Note: Four local authorities which did not provide data for three yearly periods removed from calculation of percentage change. Please see Appendix A for full methodology.

- The number of police recorded shoplifting incidents were 41 per cent greater in 2025/26 than in 2019/20.[50]
- The number of police recorded theft from the person incidents were seven per cent greater in 2025/26, than in 2019/20.[51]
- Between 2024/25 and 2025/26 there was an increase in every type of ASB recorded by the CSEW, with vehicle related ASB (including the misuse of mopeds, e-bikes, and quad bikes) the most experienced type.[52]

Low-level crime and disorder are 'signal crimes', acting as indicators to the public that their local area is not safe. This reflects the 'broken windows' theory that visible signs of crime, ASB, and disorder can "create an environment which fosters more serious crimes."[53] Such signal crimes are also linked to high-priority areas, such as drug trafficking and immigration crime in the case of criminal high street businesses,[54] and child criminal exploitation in the case of retail crime and ASB.[55]

It is clear from public opinion and official data that individuals feel increasingly unsafe in their communities, despite overall crime following a general downward trend. This is not the result of public ignorance over the true scale of crime but reflects a sense that low-level disorder and crime is increasingly prevalent and unpunished. This is also related to the widespread belief, identified by the CSJ's Social Justice Commission, that the inhibitors of crime - strong families, respected community institutions, and crucially a present and active police service - have been gutted over many years.[56]

One participant in a focus group discussion spoke of their frustration that basic laws went unenforced across the community. They also articulated a frustration that some rules were heavily policed, for example speeding fines, but others were not, such as the sale of illicit tobacco.

> *"Why have a law if it's not going to be policed? You know, if I drive down the road at 70, and then go 75, I run the risk of getting a ticket. Some people still go in excess of 70, but the vast majority of people stick to the limit. It's just a free for all. It's like the Wild West."*
>
> **Focus group participant, Yorkshire and the Humber**

Without tackling the reality of 'low-level' crime and perceptions of lawlessness across Britain's neighbourhoods, the government will be unable to tackle the root causes of the high street decline it seeks to address.

50 ONS, Crime in England and Wales: Appendix tables year ending March 2026, July 2026.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
53 The University of Law, Broken Windows Theory, n.d. Accessed: https://www.law.ac.uk/resources/blog/broken-windows-theory/.
54 BBC News, New High Street crime unit to target gangs fronting shops after BBC investigation, May 2026. Accessed: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ce3p-zwx449no.
55 National Business Crime Centre, Identifying criminal exploitation in retail, n.d. Accessed: https://nbcc.police.uk/crime-prevention/shopworker-safety/identify-ing-criminal-exploitation-in-retail.
56 CSJ, A United Nation: How to Fix Broken Britain, September 2024, p. 25.

2.3 Criminal high street businesses – Britain's 'dodgy shops'

> *"The amount of criminality in [locality], and across the rest of the country, it's unprecedented. I've been in the service 34 years, it's quite a change in the high street…the tobacco business is completely run by OCGs, there is no doubt about it."*
>
> **Trading Standards officer**

> *"Crime pays very well. It's hard work that doesn't pay. That's the problem."*
>
> **Focus group participant, Yorkshire and the Humber**

2.3.1 Defining criminal high street businesses

We define criminal high street businesses as retail units operating in town and city centres which are run by or associated with OCGs and whose business operations involve illegal activity, such as the sale of illicit tobacco and vapes, counterfeit goods, money laundering, immigration crime, drug trafficking, and child criminal and sexual exploitation.

While these types of businesses have been classified as 'dodgy shops' in political discussion and media, we believe they warrant a more serious definition: criminal high street businesses. Evidence from multiple investigations and analysis in recent years have shown the clear association between certain types of business and serious organised crime.[57] These businesses include many of the mini markets, vape shops, 'American' sweet shops, takeaways, beauty parlours, and barber shops that have appeared on the high street and across town and city centres in recent years.

Across many communities, these shops are run by or associated with OCGs, many of which have been linked to Kurdish crime networks.[58] While it is evident to the public that many of these shops are fronts for criminality, official analysis has also confirmed this link. A 2024 report by the National Audit Office (NAO) explicitly referred to sweet and souvenir shops as particular 'risk' retailers for tax evasion and crime on the high street,[59] while the National Crime Agency (NCA) has highlighted high street businesses like "mini-marts, barber shops, vape shops, nail bars, and car washes" as high-risk for crime.[60]

One of the most important profit-making operations of criminal high street businesses is the sale of illicit tobacco, cigarettes, and vaping products, which can provide a low-risk, high-reward revenue stream to fund other criminal operations. Proceeds from the sale of illicit tobacco and vapes can be used to fund 'high priority' crime like child sexual exploitation, drug trafficking, and immigration crime.

57 House of Commons Library, Tackling illicit activity in high street shops, June 2026.

58 BBC News, Criminal network behind UK mini-marts enables migrants to work illegally – BBC investigation, November 2025. Accessed: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c0mx99ple17o.

59 National Audit Office (NAO), Tackling tax evasion in high street and online retail, September 2024, p. 5.

60 National Crime Agency (NCA), Operation Machinize 2: Thousands of businesses targeted in coordinated crackdown on high street crime, November 2025. Accessed: https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/news/operation-machinize-2-thousands-of-businesses-targeted-in-coordinated-crackdown-on-high-street-crime.

The defence and security think tank, the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), has outlined that high street criminal enterprises "play a centralising role for OCGs", acting as a foundation on which to sponsor and direct other criminality, as well as creating a physical base within communities.[61] RUSI states that "investigations into non-priority criminal enterprises are under-resourced, allowing OCGs to profit from street level crime with little risk of sanction, potentially providing them with resources that fuel the very high-harm crimes that police sought to stop in the first place."[62]

Under-resourcing of enforcement agencies is made worse by the fact that offences taking place within retail settings are most often considered a non-police responsibility, with primary responsibility held by Trading Standards, the consumer protection and enforcement body. With Trading Standards services stretched by years of budget cuts, alongside a range of statutory responsibilities,[63] and without police assistance, the result is an effectively lawless environment in which OCGs have been able to move onto the high street.

When enforcement agencies work together to remove criminal high street businesses, the impact on other crime is significant. Operation Vulcan, a major partnership in Greater Manchester, between the police, Trading Standards, and other enforcement agencies, saw a 45 per cent decline in public order offences, a 69 per cent decline in vehicle crime, a 62 per cent fall in violent crime, and a 58 per cent reduction in burglary following the closure of 206 criminal establishments.[64] The impact of closing criminal high street businesses on wider criminality was reinforced during interviews with senior Trading Standards officers. One officer told us that:

> *"The shops are often a focal point for crime and ASB in the community. Not only are these premises frequently staffed by people with no legal right to work in the UK, we also found from conducting test purchases that these shops are 14 times more likely to sell illegal cigarettes and vapes to kids."*
>
> **Trading Standards officer**

While some have questioned the seriousness of criminality taking place, or if complaints are led more by prejudice against certain types of business than concerns about crime,[65] the evidence is clear that these businesses are associated with serious and repeat crime.

2.3.2 Estimating the number of criminal high street businesses

Estimating the true number of criminal high street businesses is difficult. There is no publicly available database on the number of high street businesses that have been linked to criminal behaviour, nor are many legitimately registered, with 'ghost directors' obscuring true ownership, and 'phoenixing', a business practice where directors close down the company and re-register it under a different name, making it very hard to precisely count the number of criminal enterprises in operation.

61 Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), UK Cuts At High Street Money Laundering and Organised Crime, May 2025. Accessed: https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/uk-cuts-high-street-money-laundering-and-organised-crime.

62 Ibid.

63 Which?, Trading Standards resources and activities: Findings from freedom of information requests to local authority Trading Standards Services, August 2025.

64 Greater Manchester Police, Operation Vulcan: Greater Manchester Police-Operation Vulcan; Swooping in on the Counterfeit Capital of the UK, n.d., pp. 16–17.

65 The Guardian, Farage attack on high street Turkish barber shops is dog-whistle racism minister says, January 2026. Accessed: https://www.theguardian.com/society/2026/jan/29/farages-attack-on-turkish-barber-shops-is-dog-whistle-racism-minister-says.

Furthermore, defining when a business becomes 'criminal' is challenging, as qualitative insights shared with the CSJ indicate a significant grey area between full-scale criminality and enterprises that occasionally break the law. One shopkeeper told us that some legitimate businesses are even pressured or forced into selling illicit products by OCGs, while some are directly operated by or affiliated to criminal groups. Similar phenomena have been reported in London by the Metro newspaper. Their investigators found that a number of businesses in Southgate have been forced into giving money and even their premises to members of an Albanian mafia group.[66]

To estimate the scale of criminal high street businesses, and change over time, we conducted an FOI of every local authority in GB with a statutory responsibility for Trading Standards. We complement this analysis with UK Business Counts data, and secondary research which uses granular geographic data on business types, as well as new polling of Trading Standards officers conducted by the Chartered Trading Standards Institute (CTSI).

FOI data

Our FOI request asked how many business premises in local authorities with a statutory responsibility for Trading Standards had been subject to seizure of illicit tobacco, cigarettes, and vaping products in 2023, 2024, and 2025. We use this as a proxy for measuring the change over time in the number of criminal high street businesses operating across local authorities.

Our analysis shows that there has been a 39 per cent increase in the number of shops subject to the seizure of illicit tobacco, cigarettes, and vapes between 2023 and 2025.[67] While this could also indicate an increase in enforcement, rather than an increase in the total number of criminal enterprises, qualitative evidence and secondary research indicate that there has been a growth in the number of criminal high street businesses on the high street since 2020.

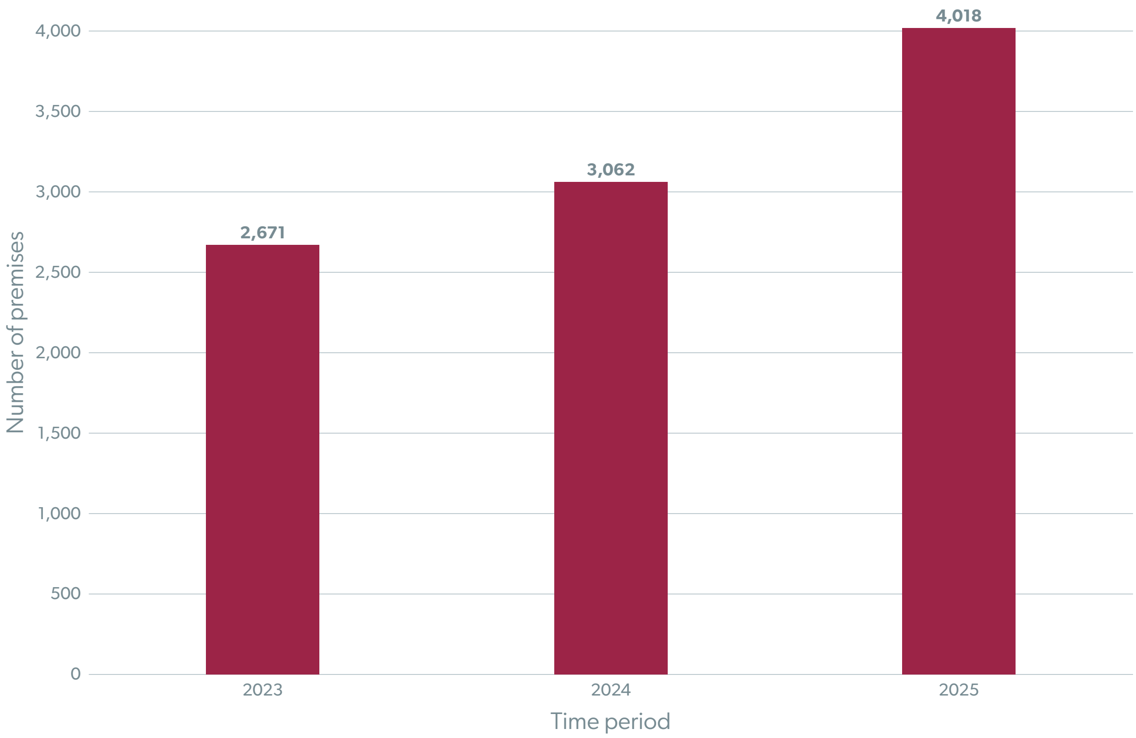
One Trading Standards officer spoke of the increase in the number of shops selling illicit tobacco and vapes, and the limited ability of Trading Standards officers to enforce the law against the backdrop of an overwhelming increase in crime.

> *"The sheer amount of tobacco and vapes now. It's not like it was a few years ago, people know where to go, up and down the high street. Even when we are out there [on patrol], people will still try to go in [to the shops] and get their cigarettes… In the last 10 years tobacco and vapes have increased exponentially and teams haven't caught up."*
>
> **Trading Standards officer**

66 Metro, Inside London's Albanian 'Mafia' who bring fear to community dubbed 'Little Tirana', March 2026. Accessed: https://metro.co.uk/2026/03/02/inside-londons-albanian-mafia-bring-fear-community-dubbed-little-tirana-27107760/.

67 CSJ analysis. FOI data from 177 local authorities with statutory responsibility for Trading Standards, submitted February 2026. Note: Four local authorities which did not provide data for three yearly periods removed from calculation of percentage change. Please see Appendix A for full methodology.

Figure 15: Estimated number of shops subject to seizure of illicit tobacco, cigarettes, and vapes



Source: CSJ analysis. FOI data from 181 local authorities in GB with statutory responsibility for Trading Standards, submitted February 2026.

Note: Totals may be artificially lower for 2023 and 2024 as four local authorities did not provide data for one or both of these periods. Please see Appendix A for full methodology.

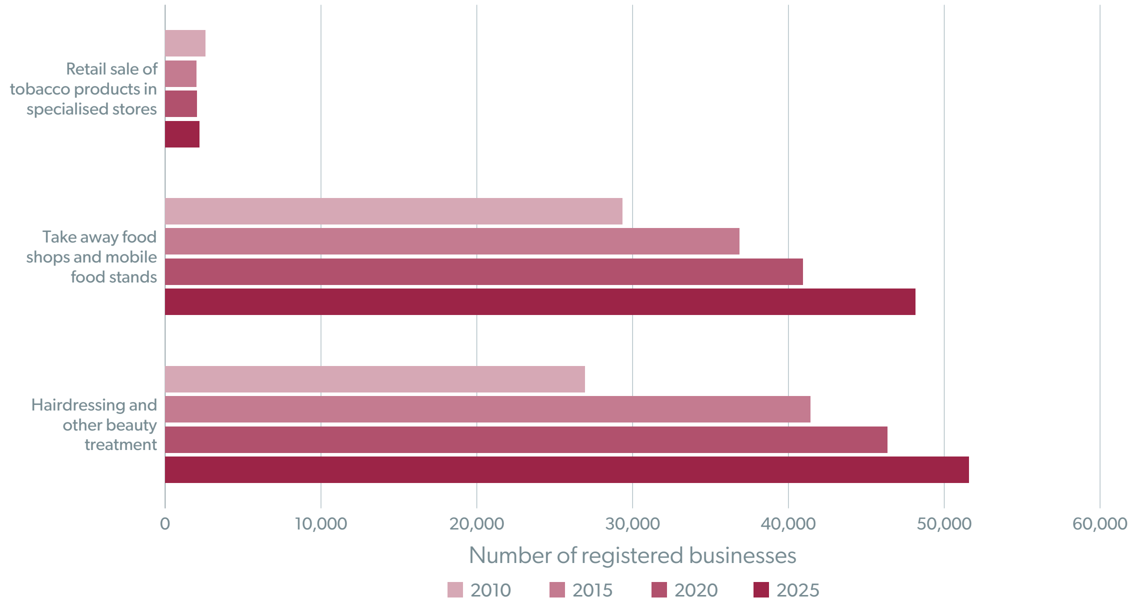
Official government data on UK businesses

In addition to our FOI data, we are able to track trends in the number of business types associated with criminal activity to understand if there has been an increase over time. Official data suggests that the business types most affiliated with high street crime have grown in recent decades.

For example, since 2010, there has been a 64 per cent increase in the number of take away shops and mobile food stands, while the number of pubs and bars has fallen by 15 per cent. In the same period, the number of hairdressing and other beauty treatment shops has increased by 91 per cent, while since 2020, the number of specialised tobacco shops has increased by seven per cent, reversing a decline present through the 2010s.[68]

68 CSJ analysis. ONS via Nomis, UK Business Counts – local units by industry and employment size band, September 2025.

Figure 16: Change in 'high-risk' business numbers over time



Source: CSJ analysis. ONS via Nomis, UK Business Counts – local units by industry and employment size band, September 2025.

While UK Business Counts data reveals an increase over time in business types more likely to be associated with criminality, it is an imperfect proxy. Evidently, the majority of registered businesses are law-abiding. The data does not include unregistered businesses (those under the VAT threshold or not registered with PAYE). Criminal high street businesses are more likely to fall into the unregistered category as many actively seek to evade tax and employment law.[69]

Furthermore, the data obscures the rise of certain retailers like vape shops, as these businesses will often register under the broad SIC code "retail sale in non-specialised stores with food, beverages, or tobacco predominating", which is the same SIC code under which many major supermarket chains and grocers register. This means that it is very challenging to estimate the increase in enterprises like vape shops across the UK.

Geographic mapping

While official data can provide only a limited picture of the growth in business types like vape shops, research using local geographic data is able to offer a more granular assessment. Analysis conducted by the Local Data Company, reported in 2024, found that there were 3,573 specialised vape shops in England, 1,388 more than the specialised tobacco shops counted in the UK Business Counts in 2025.[70] More recently, in 2025, research by Health Equity North and the Northern Health Science Alliance found a 1,200 per cent increase in the number of vape shops in England between 2014 and 2024, with over three times more vape shops in the most deprived areas of England compared to the least deprived.[71]

69 NAO, Tackling tax evasion in high street and online retail, September 2024, p. 5.

70 The Standard, Number of independent vape shops across UK jumps again, January 2024. Accessed: https://www.standard.co.uk/business/business-news/number-of-independent-vape-shops-across-uk-jumps-again-b1129827.html. Calculation: 3,573 – 2,185 = 1,388.

71 Health Equity North; Northern Health Science Alliance, Ghost Towns: The Decline of the High Street and Health Inequalities, May 2025, p. 4.

Polling of Trading Standards officers

Polling of officers working for local authority Trading Standards services reveals a widespread view that there has been a significant increase in criminal high street businesses since 2020. 99 per cent of Trading Standards officers said they have seen an increase in the number of cash-intensive businesses opening on their local high street since 2020,[72] 96 per cent said they had encountered OCGs within their duties, and 97 per cent were aware of suspected OCGs operating out of retail premises on their local high street.[73]

Officers also said that in some areas, as many as half of mini-mart/convenience stores and vape shops, up to a third of American candy stores, and one in four takeaways are estimated to have links with OCGs.[74] This perception was reinforced in our own interviews with Trading Standards officers. One individual remarked that in some areas, not a single legitimate cigarette is sold on the high street.

> *"We were getting small problems with illegal tobacco 15 years ago, but it's taken over now."*
>
> *"In [locality], the supply of cheap and illicit tobacco and illegal vapes is extremely prevalent. Reports have increased to 130 a month, and around 2,500 a year. We have evidence that around 800 premises in [locality] are selling illicit tobacco and vapes."*
>
> **Trading Standards officers**

Multiple sources of evidence suggest that the number of criminal high street businesses has increased significantly since the Covid-19 pandemic. Our research has identified four primary reasons which explain why this has occurred.

1. A growing demand for illicit tobacco, cigarettes, and vaping products.
2. The effects of mass-immigration.
3. The long-term economic decline of the high street, compounded by lockdown policies.
4. An under resourcing of Trading Standards and police forces, both financially and in the powers available to them.

72 CTSI, Hidden in Plain Sight: Tackling Crime on the UK's High Streets, n.d., p. 11.
73 Ibid, p. 4.
74 Ibid, p. 19.

2.3.3 Cause 1: Growing demand for illicit tobacco, cigarettes, and vaping products

The state of the illicit tobacco market

The sale of illicit tobacco, cigarettes, and vapes is the primary business model of many criminal high street businesses. The growth in demand for these products is an important reason for why criminal enterprises have proliferated in recent years. The NCA has said that the sale of illegal tobacco and vapes is the most visible symptom of criminality on the high street.[75]

Evidence from Trading Standards suggests that this market has increased in recent years, with tobacco being the top product investigated by Trading Standards in 2024/25,[76] and an FOI conducted by Which? in 2025 finding that 94 per cent of Trading Standards services ranked illegal tobacco, alcohol, and vapes as one of their top three priority areas, greater than any other product.[77]

OCGs seek to operate in this black market as the profits available are extremely lucrative, while enforcement is limited, particularly when compared to drugs trafficking. The sale of illicit tobacco and vapes has become low-risk and high-reward. In 2025/26, HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) and Border Force seized 1.9 billion cigarettes, a new record, worth around £1.1 billion, as well as over 157,000kg of hand-rolling tobacco, worth £89.4 million. [78] These figures represent just a fraction of the total illicit stock worldwide, and the potential profits available to OCGs willing to sell them to consumers.

Profits from selling illicit tobacco and vapes are so high because there is substantial demand for these products on the black market. This is partly a result of price differences between legitimate and taxed tobacco, cigarettes, and vapes, and their illegitimate pairs. A pack of illicit cigarettes can cost as little as £5 for 20 sticks,[79] compared to a legitimate pack which usually costs upwards of £15.

Despite qualitative insights which indicate that the tobacco black market has grown in recent years, HMRC data suggests that the tobacco duty gap, the proportion of total tax liabilities that should be collected but are not, has declined over the last two decades.

Figure 17 shows the tobacco illicit market as a percentage of total liabilities. In 2024/25, this equated to 14.2 per cent of the theoretical tobacco duty, an increase from 13.6 per cent in 2023/24, but a sharp decline from 25 per cent in 2000/01. In 2024/25, this was worth approximately £1.3 billion in lost revenue.[80]

75 Ibid, p. 22.

76 Intellectual Property Office, Trading Standards survey 2024 to 2025, June 2025.

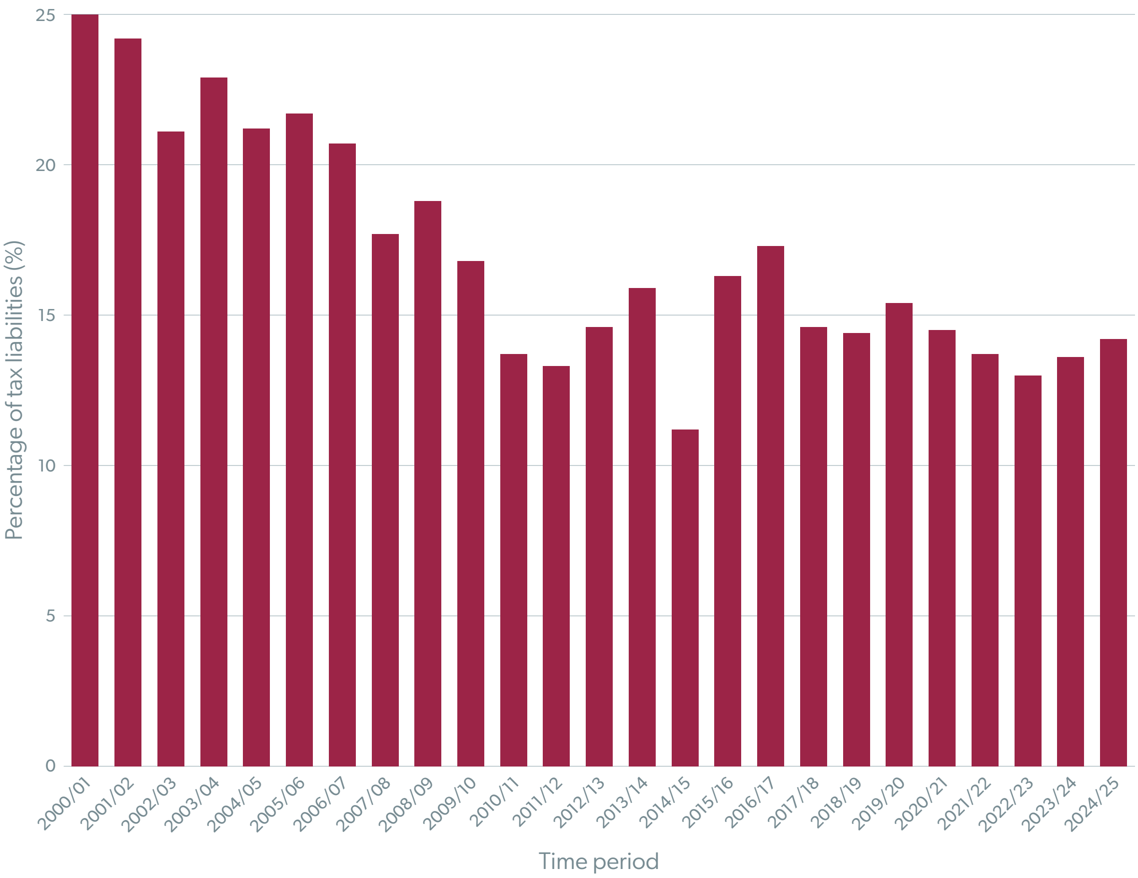
77 Which?, Trading Standards in Crisis: rebuilding an effective and accountable consumer enforcement system, August 2025, p. 12.

78 His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC), Annual outputs for tackling tobacco smuggling: Outputs for April 2025 to March 2026, July 2026.

79 Hackney Council, Illegal tobacco, n.d. Accessed: https://www.hackney.gov.uk/business-and-licensing/fair-and-safe-trading/illegal-tobacco.

80 HMRC, Measuring tax gaps 2026 edition: tax gap estimates for 2024 to 2025: 3. Tax gaps: Excise (including alcohol, tobacco and oils), June 2026.

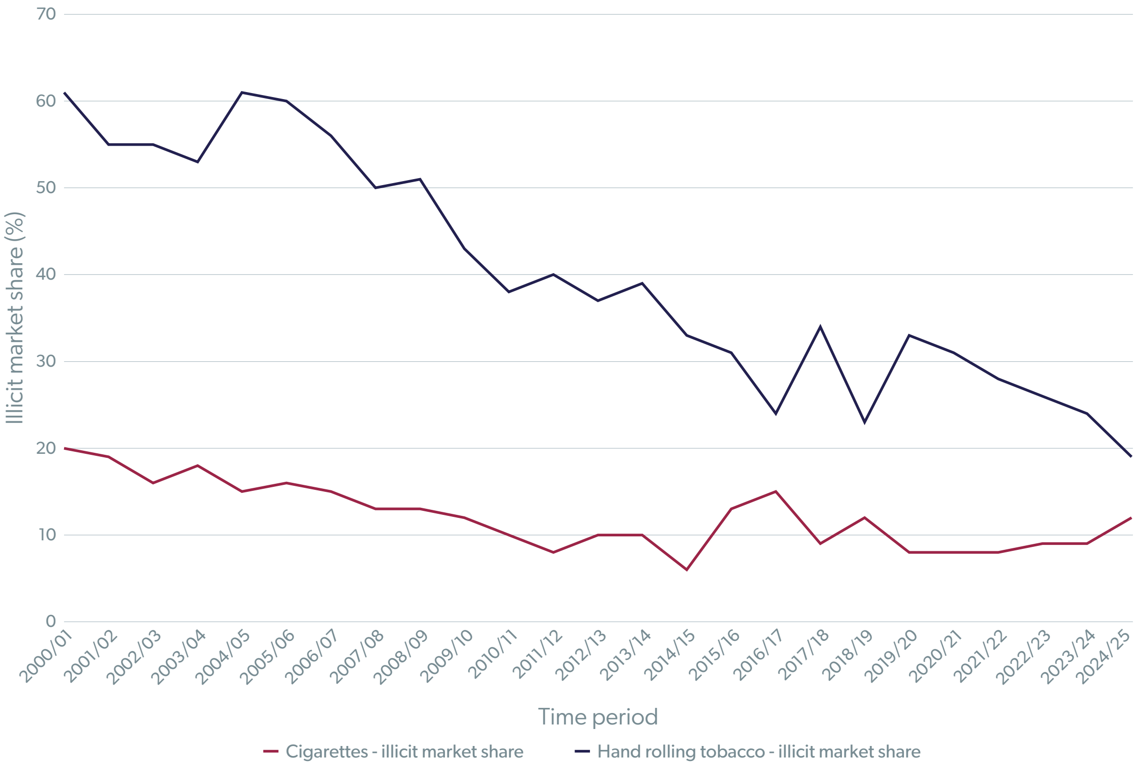
Figure 17: HMRC estimates of the UK tobacco illicit market



Source: CSJ analysis. HMRC, Measuring tax gap tables 2026, June 2026.

HMRC also estimate the size of the illicit market for cigarettes and hand-rolling tobacco. Figure 18 shows HMRC's estimate of the illicit market share for cigarettes and hand-rolling tobacco since 2000/01. While the illicit market share for hand-rolling tobacco has continued its long-term decline, falling to 21.0 per cent in 2024/25, the illicit cigarette market share has risen sharply, from 9.3 per cent in 2023/24 to 12.0 per cent in 2024/25, the largest year-on-year increase in over a decade.

Figure 18: Illicit market share for cigarettes and hand-rolling tobacco



Source: CSJ analysis. HMRC, Measuring tax gap tables 2026, June 2026.

While HMRC's estimates indicate that the illicit market in tobacco has shrunk over time, their figures are subject to high levels of uncertainty. Furthermore, data from recent years also indicate that progress is being undone.

HMRC's analysis is undermined by data quality issues, raising serious concerns about its accuracy. Data collection was paused during the Covid-19 pandemic, with figures for 2024/25 serving as projections rather than real figures, based on total consumption trends between 2022 and 2024 due to data availability and small sample sizes.[81]

Private analysis suggests that the illicit market share could be much greater than official estimates. In June 2026, the consultancy KPMG published analysis utilising cigarette sales, travel, smoking prevalence, and price data, as well as empty pack surveys. They found that in 2025, 7.3 billion counterfeit and contraband (C&C) cigarettes were consumed, nearly one third (32.3 per cent) of all consumption.[82]

This is the highest illicit share ever recorded in KPMG's analysis, and an increase from 18.1 per cent in 2021.[83] This indicates that the true scale of the illicit market in tobacco and cigarettes could be much greater than official HMRC estimates suggest. In addition, a 2026 study conducted by researchers from University College London found that the number of smokers reporting purchasing illicit tobacco had increased between 2023 and mid-2025, from 12.2 per cent to 23.1 per cent.[84]

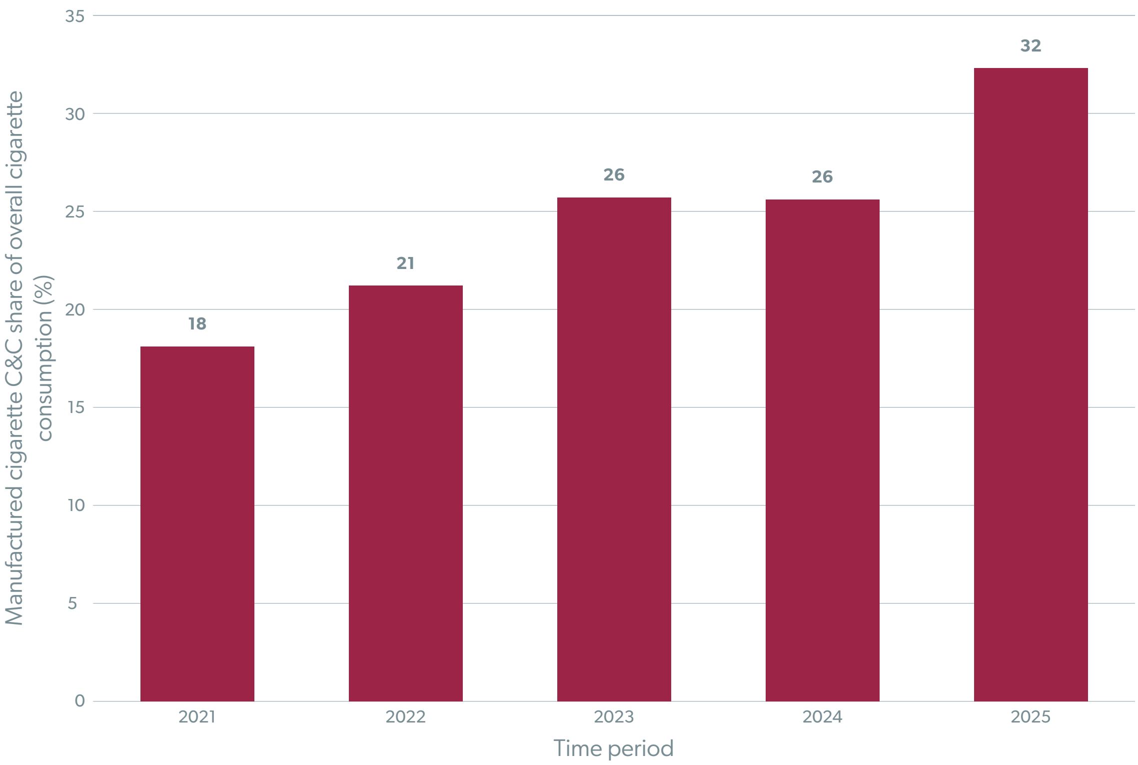
81 Ibid.

82 KPMG, Illicit cigarette and heated tobacco consumption, and oral nicotine share in Europe, June 2026, p. 225.

83 Ibid, p. 225.

84 Jackson, Sarah. E., et al., "Evolving cigarette and hand-rolling tobacco purchasing patterns ahead of smokefree generation legislation in Great Britain: a population study, 2020–2025", *Nicotine & Tobacco Research (ntag*133), July 2026.

Figure 19: Estimate of C&C cigarettes as a share of overall cigarette consumption in the UK



Source: CSJ re-creation. KPMG, Illicit cigarette and heated tobacco consumption, and oral nicotine share in Europe, June 2026, p. 225.

Despite significant variation in estimates of the size of the illicit tobacco market, it is undoubtedly costing HM Treasury billions of pounds. HMRC estimates indicate that illicit tobacco resulted in lost revenues to the Exchequer of £1.8 billion in 2023/24 in unpaid duty and VAT.[85] If the real illicit market share is greater than what HMRC estimates suggest, then these totals could be much higher.

The taxation of tobacco and the black market

There is broad consensus that tobacco taxes are effective in reducing smoking prevalence,[86] a critical aim of public health policy. However, a second order effect of high duty regimes has been to create demand for black market products, and to inadvertently fund the associated criminal activities of the OCGs willing to sell them.

Countries that have high tobacco duty regimes, like the UK, face particular challenges with organised criminality and the black market. For example, in Australia, official estimates indicate illicit tobacco accounted for 25 per cent of the market in 2023/24,[87] yet alternative estimates mirroring the disparity seen in the UK, suggest that this figure is much higher, with some venturing that as much as 60 per cent of all tobacco consumed in Australia across 2024/25 was illicit.[88]

85 HMRC, Measuring tax gaps 2026 edition: tax gap estimates for 2024 to 2025: 3. Tax gaps: Excise (including alcohol, tobacco and oils), June 2026.

86 Akter, Shamima., et al., "A systematic review and network meta-analysis of population-level interventions to tackle smoking behaviour", *Nature Human Behaviour* (8), October 2024, pp. 2367–2391.

87 Australian Taxation Office, Latest estimates and findings for the tobacco tax gap, October 2025. Accessed: https://www.ato.gov.au/about-ato/research-and-statistics/in-detail/tax-gap/q-z-tax-gaps/tobacco-tax-gap/latest-estimates-and-findings.

88 Australian Government, Illicit Tobacco and E-cigarette Commissioner Report 2024–25, n.d., p. 13.

At a closed-door hearing at the Australian Parliament, a tobacco industry spokesperson reportedly warned that legal cigarette sales in Australia could effectively disappear by 2030.[89] Indeed, executives reported fear for their own personal safety given the extent to which organised crime had become embedded in the tobacco market.[90]

Clearly, the tax incentives contributing to demand for illicit tobacco are interconnected with the proliferation of criminal high street businesses. Unfortunately, concerns over the accuracy and reliability of HMRC's estimates of the true scale of the illicit tobacco market in the UK means it is difficult to assess the true impact of tobacco prices and the real size of the black market. Analysis has shown that legal tobacco sales have fallen at a far greater rate than the number of smokers, indicating that the black market is growing and is potentially far greater in size than official estimates show.[91]

While there are important public health considerations in deciding the appropriate rate of tobacco duty, we are currently unable to accurately estimate the true scale of the illicit market, and how taxation decisions may contribute to its growth or decline. A first step for a government determined to remove organised crime from the high street must be to improve HMRC's methodology and estimates for assessing tax gaps, ensuring that official estimates are more accurate and up to date.

This requires an urgent review of HMRC's methodology and data quality for assessing tax gaps and the size of the illicit market in tobacco and cigarettes. This review should make recommendations on the most effective way to measure the illicit market. On the basis of a revised methodology, HM Treasury should assess whether further above-inflation duty increases would expand the black market more than they would reduce smoking prevalence. Where the evidence suggests the disbenefits outweigh the public health gains, HM Treasury should pause the tobacco duty escalator, currently set at RPI plus two percentage points,[92] in favour of an RPI-only uprating.

RECOMMENDATION 1

HMRC should launch an independent review of its methodology for measuring tax gaps and assess the reliability of estimates produced under its current approach. The review should make recommendations on the most effective methodology for measuring tax gaps and the size of the illicit market across all taxes and duties administered by HMRC.

On the basis of a revised methodology and a robust assessment of the true size of the illicit market for tobacco products, HM Treasury should assess whether further above-inflation duty increases to tobacco duty, and the proposed rate of the Vaping Products Duty, would expand the black market more than they would reduce smoking and vaping prevalence. Where the evidence suggests the disbenefits outweigh the public health gains, HM Treasury should pause the tobacco duty escalator in favour of an inflation-only increase in tobacco duty and should review the rate at which the Vaping Products Duty is set.

89 News.com.au, Tobacco giant pushes for lower excise to undercut booming illegal cigarette market in secret Senate hearing, May 2026. Accessed: https://www.news.com.au/national/politics/tobacco-giant-pushes-for-lower-excise-to-undercut-booming-illegal-cigarette-market-in-secret-senate-hearing/news-story/464fa239b84e1090c1c0f00522e8fecb?utm_campaign=EditorialSB&utm_source=News.com.au&utm_medium=Facebook&utm_content=SocialBakers.

90 Ibid.

91 Institute of Economic Affairs; Christopher Snowdon, Legal tobacco sales halve in four years as black market booms, March 2026. Accessed: https://economicaffairs.co.uk/p/legal-tobacco-sales-halve-in-four.

92 HMRC, Changes to tobacco duty rates from 26 November 2025 and 1 October 2026, December 2025.

In addition, to better understanding the interaction between tax policy and the tobacco black market, it is important to address demand by improving consumer understanding and awareness of the crime associated with illicit products, as well as the harms of consuming them.

Consumers of these products are often unaware, or choose to ignore, the other high-priority crime that is affiliated with the OCGs behind the illicit tobacco black market. This is made more complex by the fact that nicotine is an addictive substance, and consumers will often be feeding an active addiction.

The CTSI has highlighted how consumers often perceive buying counterfeit goods as a 'victimless crime' and a 'good deal'.[93] Their polling identified that while one in four (25 per cent) consumers thought buying counterfeit or illegal products was a victimless crime, almost three in four (72 per cent) said they would be less likely to buy counterfeit goods if they knew the groups selling those products used the profits to commit other offences.[94]

We echo the CTSI in calling for a major consumer awareness campaign, led centrally by the Department for Business, Innovation, Science, and Trade (DBIST), to raise awareness of the crime connected to the purchasing of illicit goods, including tobacco. This campaign should utilise data collected by Trading Standards services and police operations like Operation Vulcan, to clearly explain the major crime that is funded through profits from the sale of illicit tobacco and vapes.

RECOMMENDATION 2

DBIST should lead on the creation of a nationwide consumer awareness campaign to raise awareness of the link between illicit and counterfeit goods and wider criminality, as well as the harms of consuming them. This campaign should utilise data collected by Trading Standards services and police forces which clearly explains how wider crime is funded through the purchasing of illicit tobacco.

2.3.4 Cause 2: Mass immigration

Mass immigration since 2022 has been an important factor in the growth of criminal high street businesses, enabling foreign nationals connected to OCGs and those seeking to work in the black economy to easily enter the UK.

The BBC's investigation into criminal high street businesses exposed the deep relationship between such enterprises and the asylum system. The BBC identified one asylum seeker who was trying to sell a mini-mart to their undercover reporter, despite having no right to work.[95] Another case included a man called Surchi, who assured a BBC journalist that "you don't need anything" to own and run a mini-mart as an asylum seeker.[96] This is particularly related to Kurdish OCGs, which the BBC highlighted as having a significant stake in mini-mart networks across the UK.[97]

93 CTSI, Hidden in Plain Sight: Tackling Crime on the UK's High Streets, n.d., p. 7.

94 CTSI, Hidden in Plain Sight: Tackling Crime on the UK's High Streets, n.d., p.23.

95 BBC News, Criminal network behind UK mini-marts enables migrants to work illegally – BBC investigation, November 2025. Accessed: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c0mx99ple17o.

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid.

The asylum system is being used by those who would exploit asylum seekers by employing them illegally and in conditions which resemble modern slavery, as well as being exploited by some asylum seekers who are content to break the law and profit from criminal activity on the high street.

The interconnected relationship between immigration crime and criminal high street businesses was also reflected in interviews with Trading Standards officers. One said that during inspections they see "a lot of people with no right to work", explaining that working in 'dodgy shops' was a result of not having much to lose, particularly if those people had already had their asylum claim refused.

In May 2026, the CSJ submitted an FOI request to HMRC, asking about the number of individuals issued a civil penalty under Operation CeCe (a joint HMRC and National Trading Standards operation which has been working to seize illicit tobacco since January 2021) broken down by nationality and ethnicity, to better understand the relationship between both of these factors and the trade in illicit tobacco. HMRC refused to answer our FOI request, stating that providing an answer to the query would exceed the FOI cost limit.[98]

There has long been a recognition that the UK's illegal economy, and the ease at which individuals can work within it, operates as a significant pull factor to the UK.[99] With just half of refused asylum seekers who applied between 2010 and 2022 being returned by December 2025, the perceived risk of deportation is low, making the UK an attractive destination for many would-be asylum seekers or economic migrants.[100]

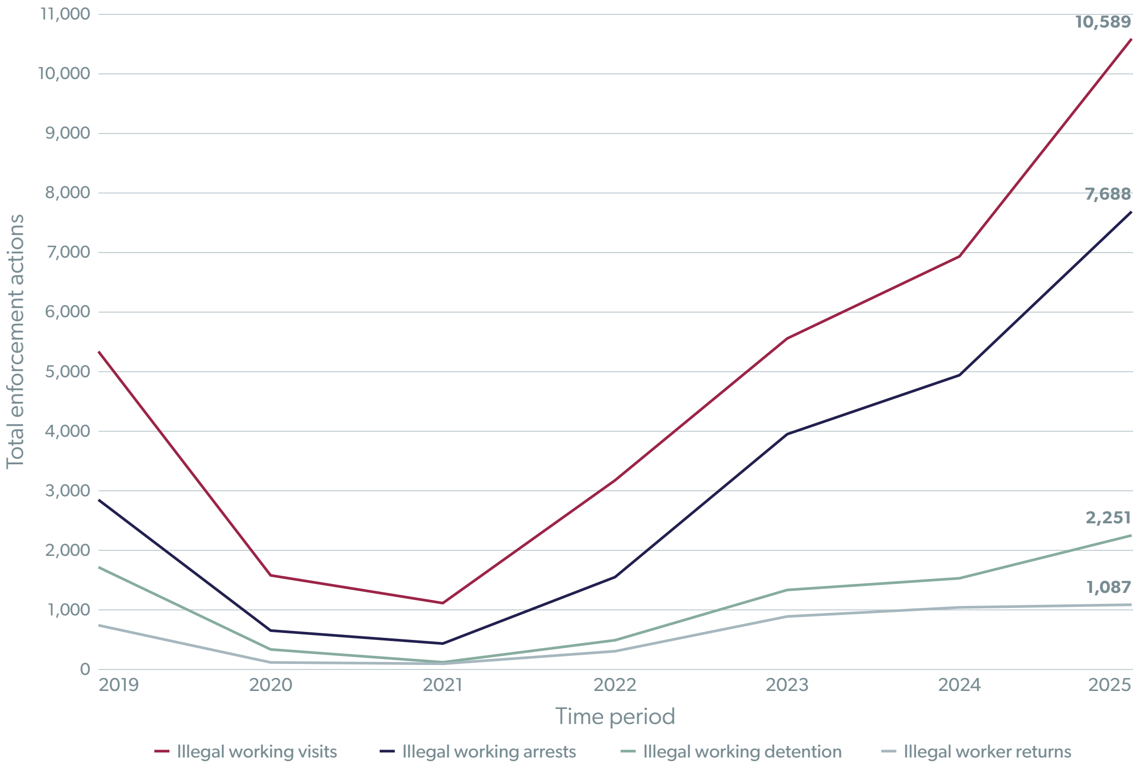
The interaction between the high street, illegal working, and organised immigration crime has been recognised by the Home Secretary, Shabana Mahmood MP, who has overseen an increase in the number of illegal working visits, arrests, and detentions.

98 Correspondence from HMRC dated 5th June 2026. HMRC reference: FOI2026/47099.

99 House of Commons, Illegal Migrants: Pull Factors (Volume 780), February 2026.

100 The Migration Observatory, Deportation and returns of unauthorised migrants from the UK, March 2026. Accessed: https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/returns-of-unauthorised-migrants-from-the-uk/.

Figure 20: Illegal working in England



Source: CSJ analysis. Home Office, Illegal working and enforcement data to the end of December 2025: by region, June 2026.

While the uptick in enforcement is welcome, these efforts still only capture a small minority of total offending. Returns accounted for just 48 per cent of detentions in 2025, meaning less than half of illegal workers detained were likely removed. With just over 1,000 returns in 2025, and estimates placing the number of illegal immigrants residing in the UK as high as 745,000, [101] returns likely only capture a fraction of total offenders.

The relationship between immigration and criminal high street businesses is also evident in modern slavery statistics. The number of potential victims referred to the Home Office in 2025 was the highest in any year since the national referral mechanism (NRM) began.[102]

> *"We'd ripped everything off the shelf, and then behind the shelf there was a door... and then behind the door was a man. It was just loads of tobacco and cigarettes... the police had arrested them a week previously for doing something similar in a different [shop]... obviously it's modern-day slavery, moved around regionally or nationally by the OCG."*
>
> **Trading Standards officer**

101 The Migration Observatory, Unauthorised migration in the UK, January 2025. Accessed: https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/unauthorised-migration-in-the-uk/.

102 Home Office, Modern slavery: National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify statistics UK, quarter 4 2025 – October to December, February 2026. Note: The NRM is the framework used to identify and support victims of modern slavery.

Tackling the growth in criminal high street businesses requires accelerating the government's reforms to the immigration and asylum system and, in particular, ensuring a greater number of people working or residing in the UK illegally are returned. Increasing the rate of return is dependent, as the government has recognised in *Restoring Order and Control*, on legal reform, in particular the application of the European Convention on Human Rights and Refugee Convention.[103]

2.3.5 Cause 3: Long term economic decline

Long term economic decline in certain regions of the UK has resulted in the hollowing out of many of the country's high streets, town, and city centres. CSJ analysis finds that nine per cent of all retail locations across England and Wales are vacant.[104] Vacancy rates rise to 22 per cent in Blaenau Gwent, 18 per cent in Hartlepool, and 16 per cent in Newport, the top three local authorities for vacancy rates.[105]

Empty retail units, and demand for cheaper illicit goods, have created the conditions for OCGs to take over shops across town and city centres. This is particularly prevalent in more deprived parts of the country. Research shows that there are over three times more vape shops in the most deprived areas of England compared to the least deprived areas, while there are twice as many vape shops in the north of England compared to the south.[106]

The economic challenges that face the high street are not new but were compounded by the shock of Covid-19 lockdown policies. One example of this was the sudden increase in online shopping, compared to in-person consumption.

While internet sales as a percentage of total retail sales have been rising for many years, the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated these changes, with 30.7 per cent of all sales taking place online in 2021, compared to 19.2 per cent in 2019.

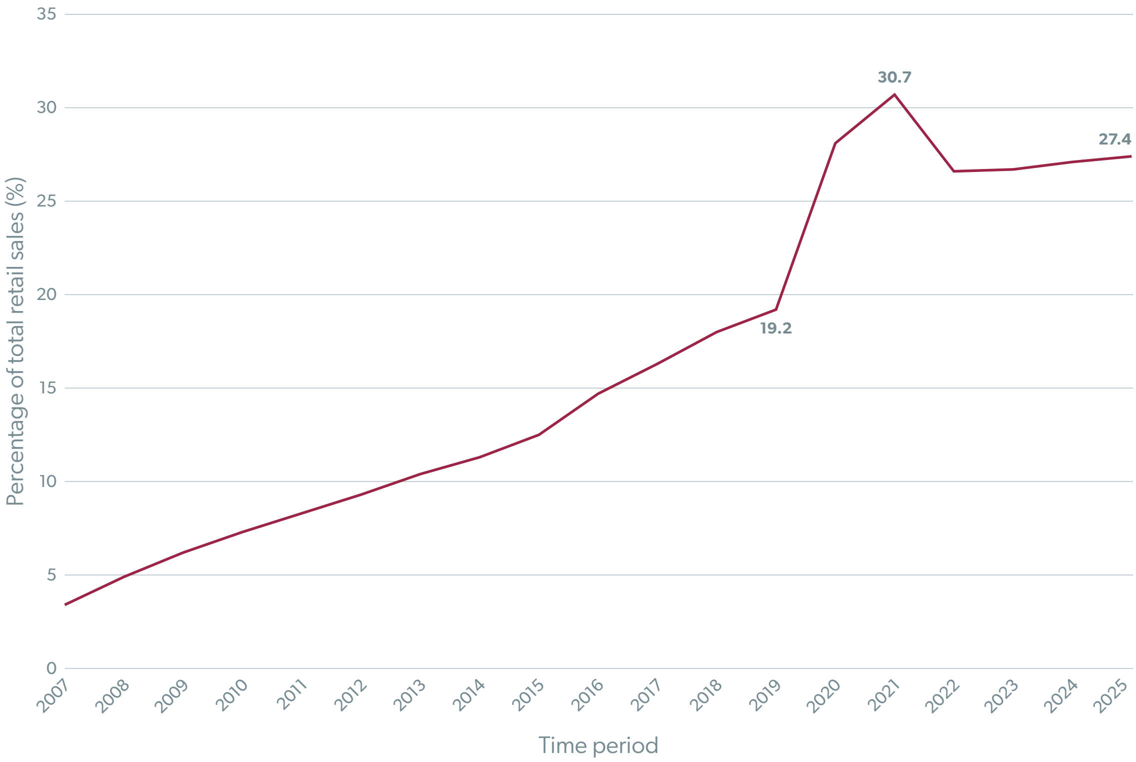
103 Home Office, *Restoring Order and Control: A statement on the government's asylum and returns policy*, November 2025, pp. 24-26.

104 CSJ analysis. Geographic Data Service, Retail Type, Vacancy and Address Data, n.d. Accessed: https://data.geods.ac.uk/dataset/local-data-company-retail-type-vacancy-and-address-data.

105 Ibid.

106 Health Equity North; Northern Health Science Alliance, Ghost Towns: The Decline of the High Street and Health Inequalities, May 2025, pp. 4–5.

Figure 21: Online retail sales as a percentage of total retail sales



Source: CSJ analysis. ONS, Internet sales as a percentage of total retail sales (ratio) (%), June 2026.

While online retail's share of total sales has since converged back towards the pre-pandemic trend, the temporary shock of the Covid-19 pandemic left many high street units vacant,[107] creating opportunities that OCGs have exploited to establish a presence in certain town and city centre locations.[108]

While economic decline and high vacancy rates create the conditions for criminal high street businesses to appear, once they gain a foothold, they accelerate and compound existing challenges and prevent much needed regeneration from taking place. This occurs in three ways:

1. Criminal high street businesses take over retail premises and prevent a market led rent correction.
2. Criminal high street businesses introduce unfair competition.
3. Criminal high street businesses sponsor and facilitate other crime in the community, undermining security.

107 Knight Frank, Retail: Two Years on from COVID, May 2022. Accessed: https://www.knightfrank.co.uk/research/article/2022/4/retail-two-years-on-from-covid.
108 CTSI, Hidden in Plain Sight: Tackling Crime on the UK's High Streets, n.d., p. 8.

Criminal high street businesses prevent a market correction

Businesses that fund their operating costs through the proceeds of crime stop the market correcting itself. This is seen most emphatically in the rent that criminal high street businesses are able to pay to landlords. Profiting from criminal activities like the sale of illicit tobacco can be extremely lucrative for criminals and provide an attractive revenue stream for landlords.

Furthermore, one industry trade body told the CSJ that concerns had been raised by some legitimate traders that criminal high street businesses were regularly outbidding legitimate traders for high street retail space.

This creates a vicious cycle: while criminal businesses often emerge as a symptom of economic decline, their presence actively undermines legitimate business growth. They also prevent a legitimate market adjustment in areas with less demand for retail space, blocking price adjustments that would otherwise create opportunities for new entrants. Without removing these criminal high street businesses, genuine economic regeneration is not possible.

Criminal high street businesses undercut legitimate retailers

Criminal high street businesses have the potential to make much higher profits than legitimate retailers. Through a combination of tax avoidance, illegal employment, and selling of counterfeit goods, criminal enterprises can achieve a profit margin much higher than legitimate retailers. This has been recognised by the NAO, which states that high street tax evasion prevents "a level playing field between businesses, by giving evaders an unfair competitive advantage."[109]

These frustrations were reflected in conversation with beneficiaries of CSJ Alliance charity, Giroscope, as well as other local residents and retailers during a focus group discussion. There was a sense that demand existed for vacant premises in the area, but that criminal enterprises were able to obtain them with greater ease than legitimate traders due to the proceeds available from criminal activity.

> *"There was an old cobbler key cutting shop on the corner. The shop was there for a long time; I used to go there regularly. After about 30 years he had decided he'd had enough and called it a day. Within no time the letting board went up, a new tenant moved in, and lo and behold a vape shop right on the corner… there's no shortage of these properties, whether it be vapes, barbers, beauty shops, or takeaways. These guys are in a position where they can pay top dollar because it's a front for illegal trading and money laundering."*
>
> *"They're willing to pay a premium to the point where the fruit and veg guy can't pay the rent… Because if you're engaging in criminal activity, you can pay higher. That is, for me, the root of the problem."*
>
> **Focus group participants, Yorkshire and the Humber**

Data from small retailers reinforce the economic impact on legitimate traders caused by criminal high street businesses. A survey by the Association of Convenience Stores (ACS) found that the number one

109 NAO, Tackling tax evasion in high street and online retail, September 2024, p. 5.

impact of illicit trade in the community, from the perspective of retailers, was a reduction in legitimate sales, with the most frequently sold items being tobacco and vapes.[110] One small retailer told the CSJ that they had seen examples of legitimate traders being forced into selling illicit goods by OCGs operating in the local area.

Criminal high street businesses sponsor and facilitate other crime in the community

The OCGs responsible for the growth in criminal high street businesses do not stop at illicit tobacco. They sponsor and facilitate wider criminality in the surrounding community. This creates a vicious cycle: illicit traders exploit the economic vulnerability of a high street to establish a foothold, then accelerate its decline by generating the crime and disorder that drives away the legitimate customers and businesses that might otherwise have reversed it. ACS survey of retailers found that the second greatest impact of illicit trading was the safety of the community at risk.[111] Other crime can include vehicle theft, shoplifting, theft from the person, money laundering, and tax evasion.

2.3.6 Cause 4: Lack of resources and powers for enforcement agencies

Local authority Trading Standards services hold the primary responsibility for tackling illicit trade. As a result, they have borne the burden of much of the increase in organised crime on the high street. While in localities like Newport and Lincolnshire, Trading Standards have been able to seriously disrupt the operations of criminal high street businesses by using closure orders, across most of the country, services have not been able to utilise the full breadth of powers to respond to the increase in crime.

Trading Standards services are extremely stretched. They are required to enforce nearly 300 pieces of legislation, a vast remit, with limited numbers of staff.[112] Which?, the consumer advice service, found that across GB, services were under severe strain, with one council (the London Borough of Enfield) employing just one full-time equivalent Trading Standards officer, responsible for all the work needed in that locality.[113]

A lack of staff is the result of funding cuts. The CTSI report that between 2014 and 2024, Trading Standards services were cut by over 50 per cent, with staffing levels declining between 30 per cent and 50 per cent.[114] The NAO also found that Trading Standards services saw a 39 per cent real-terms reduction in total spend between 2010/11 and 2019/20.[115]

> *"We [Trading Standards services] were absolutely annihilated across the country... we just haven't come back from it really."*
>
> **Trading Standards officer**

110 Association of Convenience Stores (ACS), Retail Crime: Turning Point, 2026, p. 8.
111 Ibid, p. 8.
112 CTSI, Annual Impact and Outcomes Report: April 2022-March 2023, n.d., p. 6.
113 Which?, Trading Standards in Crisis: rebuilding an effective and accountable consumer enforcement system, August 2025, p. 10.
114 CTSI, CTSI Manifesto: Helping Local Communities and Businesses to Prosper, n.d., p. 9.
115 NAO, Protecting consumers from unsafe products, June 2021, p. 4.

Qualitative research undertaken by the CSJ reinforced these findings, indicating that Trading Standards services are stretched far beyond their capacity and lack the resources and powers to be able to meaningfully tackle high street criminality. One service told the CSJ that some work "simply did not get done", as capacity limited their ability to enforce legislation they are responsible for. Another said:

> *"Trading Standards in our authority went down to a team of four over 10 years ago. In the last decade tobacco and vapes has increased exponentially and teams haven't caught up…even now [there are] only six of us to cover all of the Trading Standards subject areas [and] one project officer."*
>
> **Trading Standards officer**

Which's FOI data also identified that, on average, Trading Standards services have just 7.5 FTE professionally qualified staff per service, with 63 per cent having six or fewer.[116] 64 per cent of Trading Standards services also said that insufficient staff hours were a reason for not pursuing referrals, with nearly one in three (31 per cent) services saying this was often or always the case.[117]

The ability of Trading Standards to tackle high street criminality is also hampered by limited police support. We were repeatedly told that, while in some areas engagement with the police was productive, in other areas, there was a lack of effective partnership with the police considering certain crime in retail settings to not be "proper police work".

> *"We have massive support from the police... I've worked in a couple of local authorities, and trying to get the police out to do anything with you is usually quite difficult... We are really, really lucky here."*
>
> **Trading Standards officer**

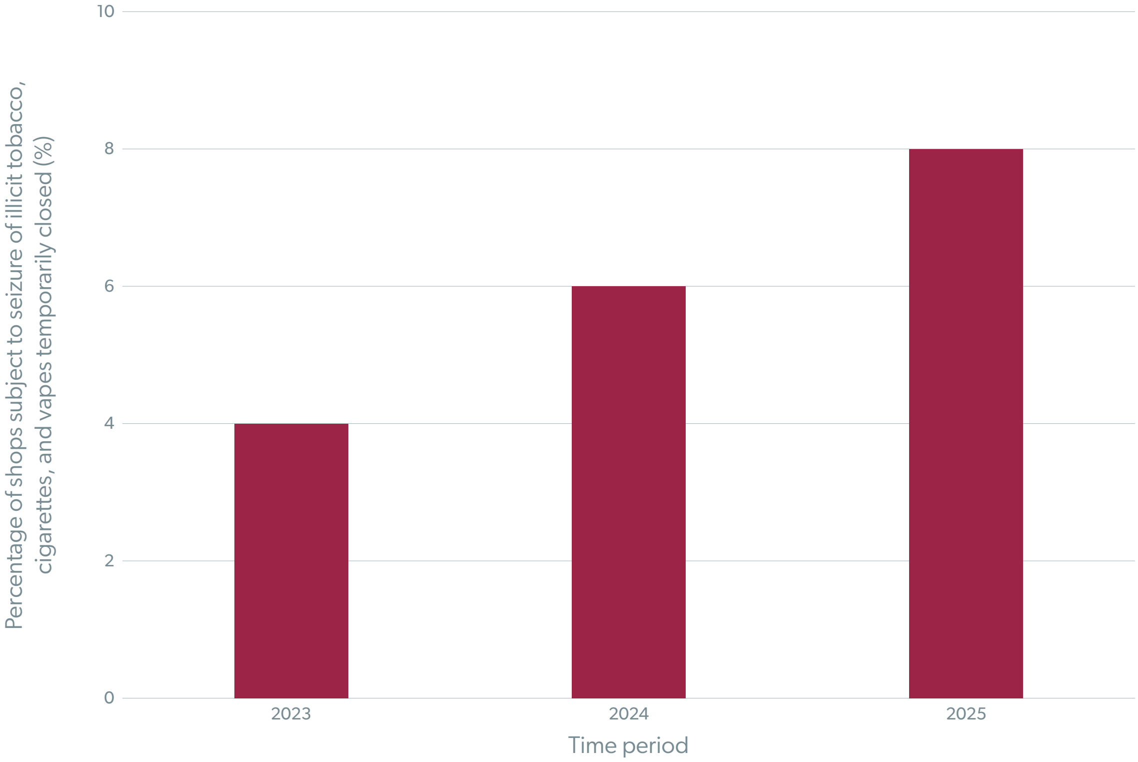
The collapse in Trading Standards capacity and limited police support have created consequence-free zones on Britain's high streets. Our analysis finds that local authorities' enforcement is extremely limited, with councils unequipped to turn the tide on high street organised crime on their own.

To gauge the scale of enforcement against criminal high street businesses, we asked local authorities with a statutory responsibility for Trading Standards about the number of businesses subject to seizure of illicit tobacco, cigarettes, and vaping products that had been temporarily closed in 2023, 2024, and 2025. Closure order powers are one of the most effective tools available to clamp down on criminal high street businesses, which we explore in full in section 2.3.10.

Our FOI revealed that approximately only eight per cent of shops subject to seizure of illicit tobacco, cigarettes, and vapes were temporarily closed in 2025, rising from six per cent in 2024, and four per cent in 2023.

116 Which?, Trading Standards resources and activities: Findings from freedom of information requests to local authority Trading Standards Services, August 2025, p. 18.
117 Ibid, p. 34.

Figure 22: Temporary closures of shops subject to seizure of illicit tobacco, cigarettes, and vapes



Source: CSJ analysis. FOI data from 119 local authorities in England and Wales with statutory responsibility for Trading Standards, submitted February 2026.

Note: Local authorities were only included if data was provided for temporary closures for three yearly periods and if seizures could be verified as referring to individual businesses where both illicit tobacco and vapes had been seized. Only English and Welsh local authorities were included as closure powers differ in Scotland. County councils were also removed, as despite having statutory responsibility for trading standards, they are unable to unilaterally apply for closure orders under existing legislation. Please see Appendix A for full methodology.

While the data also shows that the use of closures has increased over time, although beginning from a very low base, enforcement remains limited, with fewer than one in 10 'dodgy shops' subject to closure.

This reinforces our central finding from interviews with Trading Standards officers and experts, that criminal high street businesses perceive they operate in a 'lawless' environment, and that trading illicit tobacco is a low-risk, high-reward criminal activity.

Trading Standards' use of closure orders is limited because of the time they take to discharge. Collecting evidence, navigating local courts, enforcing closures, and the cost of legal action disincentivise the greater use of closure orders. This explains why many Trading Standards services limit enforcement actions to seizing illicit goods, which does little to nothing to tackle the problem.

However, despite resource challenges, some local authority Trading Standards services have proven much more effective than others. In Newport, the council has a closure rate of 78 per cent, having issued temporary closure orders against 46 premises in 2025, more than any other local authority who replied with verifiable data to our FOI. The top 10 local authorities for the number of closure orders issued in 2025 can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Local authorities with the greatest number of temporary closures in 2025

Local authority	Number of shops that had goods seized	Number of temporary closures	Closure rate (%)
Newport Council	59	46	78
Lincolnshire County Council	28	23	82
City of Stoke-on-Trent	38	13	34
Wrexham County Borough Council	11	10	91
Staffordshire County Council	43	10	23
Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council	13	9	69
Lancashire County Council	136	9	7
Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council	26	8	31
Central Bedfordshire Council	10	7	70
Herefordshire County Council	15	7	47

Source: CSJ analysis. FOI data from 140 local authorities with statutory responsibility for Trading Standards, submitted February 2026. Note: Local authorities were only included if data was provided for temporary closures for three yearly periods and if seizures could be verified as referring to individual businesses where both illicit tobacco and vapes had been seized. County councils included if given verifiable data on closure orders. Please see Appendix A for full methodology.

The success of these local authorities at using temporary closure powers shows that it is possible to take meaningful action against criminal high street businesses, rather than just seize illicit product, which one expert told us was, "simply performative."

The limitations of seizure powers in enforcement are reinforced through KPMG's findings into the state of the illicit tobacco trade across Europe. Their extensive engagement with law enforcement agencies found a consensus that point-of-sale interventions, like product seizure, are limited compared to a whole supply chain response that works internationally to tackle the entire business model and supply chain of OCGs.[118]

Despite this, a number of local authorities persist in just using seizure powers against criminal high street businesses. For example, Newham said they had seized illicit product from 94 shops in 2025 but made zero closures.[119]

It is evident that enforcement must improve to meaningfully tackle organised crime on the high street. Below, we make recommendations on how the government can improve the UK's enforcement approach to criminal high street businesses.

118 KPMG, Illicit cigarette and heated tobacco consumption, and oral nicotine share in Europe, June 2026, p. 11.

119 CSJ analysis. FOI data from local authorities with statutory responsibility for Trading Standards, submitted February 2026. Note: Local authorities were only included if data was provided for temporary closures for three yearly periods. Please see Appendix A for full methodology.

2.3.7 Strengthening powers to crack down on criminal high street businesses

The government has made a welcome commitment to improving enforcement against criminal high street businesses. In May 2026, the Home Office announced the launch of a new High Street Organised Crime Unit,[120] and in June proposed plans to extend the duration of closure orders to 12 months.[121]

However, to meet its ambition to tackle organised crime on the high street, the government must go further and faster, significantly extending the ability of enforcement agencies to close down criminal businesses as quickly as possible. Extending the duration of closure orders to 12 months is a welcome first step, but not sufficient in and of itself to meet the moment and respond to the enormity of crime taking place across Britain's town and city centres.

Tackling the proliferation of criminal high street businesses requires a response that is forceful and creates the most hostile environment possible for organised crime. It requires a willingness to make short-term trade-offs. This includes tolerating, in the short term, vacant premises on the high street in place of criminal high street businesses.

This response should be guided by three core aims to significantly scale up:

1. Powers to close down criminal high street businesses as quickly as possible, for as long as possible, with as little work required of enforcement agencies.
2. Enforcement action against offenders associated with criminal high street businesses, including immigration solutions.
3. Surveillance of the entire tobacco supply chain, including at the UK border, to stop illicit goods reaching the high street.

These principles are aspirational, ambitious, and challenging for a government that begins scaling-up enforcement from a low base. However, they are critical goals to work towards and reflect the basic principle that the government should be able to enforce its own laws and protect its citizens.

Operationalising these principles must begin with structural reform to enforcement agencies, including the police and Trading Standards, as well as greater powers for Companies House to identify criminal businesses. We consider both of these in turn below.

2.3.8 Structural reforms to enforcement agencies

Trading Standards operating at the local authority level have proven unable to tackle organised criminality on the high street. This is a result of both structural and resourcing problems. The former in that Trading Standards services set up at the local authority level are not able to respond appropriately to nationwide issues. The latter in that they have been repeatedly underfunded and cut within local authorities, limiting their ability to scale up enforcement rapidly.

Structural reform to Trading Standards is necessary to ensure that the state can respond to the evolution in illicit trade and retail criminality outlined in this report. While existing services in local authorities benefit from local knowledge and insight, they do not reflect the operating principles of OCGs which move money, assets, and people across the UK and internationally.

120 House of Commons, Launching the High Streets Organised Crime Unit (Statement UIN HCWS32), May 2026.

121 Home Office, Premises closure orders, June 2026.

Analysis by Which?, has highlighted how the current makeup of Trading Standards leads to a lack of coherent cross-boundary and nationwide working. Their research found that data collection and sharing is limited across services, with little standardisation, meaning national insights are difficult to collect and analyse.[122]

Quickly scaling-up enforcement against criminal high street businesses will require bolstering Trading Standards resources and staff capacity. Additional Home Office funding of £6 million for local services is welcome,[123] but falls far short of the £100 million over four years that the CTSI say is necessary.[124]

To tackle high street crime, Trading Standards need immediate operational support from other law enforcement agencies, particularly the police, to clamp down on criminal high street businesses. The government's new High Street Organised Crime Unit recognises this need and was established with the explicit intention of bringing together the multiple services and agencies that need to work together to tackle this problem.[125]

While the Unit fills a gap at the central government level, more must be done to embed cross-agency working at a local level. We recommend that the Home Office require every police force region to establish a cross-agency Regional High Street Organised Crime Unit, which should report directly to the national Unit.

These regional Units should agree a strategy for tackling organised high street crime in their jurisdiction, ensuring that each enforcement agency holds a clear stake in delivery and tackling the problem. They should include representatives from all relevant agencies, including police forces, Trading Standards, Immigration Enforcement, HMRC, modern slavery teams, and the NCA. Regional High Street Organised Crime Units could be operationalised using existing Regional Organised Crime Units.

RECOMMENDATION 3

The Home Office should establish regional High Street Organised Crime Units which include representatives from all relevant agencies, including the police, Trading Standards, Immigration Enforcement, HMRC, modern slavery teams, and the NCA. These Units should report into the national High Street Organised Crime Unit and be responsible for developing and implementing a regional strategy to tackle organised criminality on the high street. Police forces and other agencies should be instructed to make tackling criminal high street businesses a priority. Regional High Street Organised Crime Units should be expected to utilise all existing powers to tackle high street criminality.

In the longer term, the government should restructure Trading Standards services to create a national enforcement body alongside regional and local teams. While National Trading Standards exists as an arm's length body sponsored by the DBIST, it usually funds existing local authority teams to lead on national priorities, rather than having a permanent team at a national level with statutory powers.[126]

122 Which?, Trading Standards in Crisis: rebuilding an effective and accountable consumer enforcement system, August 2025, p. 9.

123 Home Office, New high street unit set up in nationwide blitz on dodgy shops, May 2026. Accessed: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-high-street-unit-set-up-in-nationwide-blitz-on-dodgy-shops.

124 CTSI, Hidden in Plain Sight: Tackling Crime on the UK's High Streets, n.d, p. 26.

125 Home Office, New high street unit set up in nationwide blitz on dodgy shops, May 2026. Accessed: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-high-street-unit-set-up-in-nationwide-blitz-on-dodgy-shops.

126 Which?, Trading Standards in Crisis: rebuilding an effective and accountable consumer enforcement system, August 2025, p. 15.

We recommend that the government restructure National Trading Standards into a national enforcement agency, with statutory powers and responsibilities to lead on national trading standards priorities. Locally, Trading Standards should be restructured underneath this new body with regional and local hubs that can deliver strategic priorities with powers to match. This restructuring should be aligned with plans to establish a new National Police Service, with Trading Standards teams integrated as far as possible with police forces at a national and regional levels.

RECOMMENDATION 4

DBIST, MHCLG, and the Home Office should lead on a national restructuring of local authority Trading Standards services and include the restructuring of National Trading Standards into a formal enforcement agency with statutory responsibilities and powers. Trading Standards should be re-structured as a tiered service, with national, regional, and local hubs that can deliver on priorities at the right level and allow for escalation and deescalation. This restructuring should be aligned with plans to establish a new National Police Service, with Trading Standards teams integrated as far as possible with police forces at a national and regional level. To save costs on office space to facilitate better partnership working, local Trading Standards should be based within local police force offices, ideally sat with neighbourhood teams.

2.3.9 Strengthening the powers of Companies House

In addition to structural reform to enforcement agencies, further changes are needed to ensure Companies House can verify 'high-risk' enterprises at the point of registration, to prevent phoenixing and tax evasion. The NAO identified that weaknesses in company registration requirements and tax processes left the UK open to tax evasion, which has been reflected by the considerable sums of unpaid tax by criminal enterprises. HMRC estimate that phoenixism cost the taxpayer £750 million in tax losses in 2023/24.[127]

While the *Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023* considerably expanded the powers available to Companies House to crack down on fraudulent companies, including by striking off false information and verifying company directors' identities, the government should go further to ensure that criminals are prevented from exploiting the UK's generous corporate environment.

Both the NAO[128] and Committee of Public Accounts[129] have raised concerns that the inability of Companies House to verify address data of companies limits the potential of reforms to tackle fraud; despite recognising that it would help to reduce evasion.[130] To give Companies House the best possible foundation on which to tackle criminal high street businesses, DBIST should introduce legislation which gives Companies House the power to verify the address and place of business of company directors and their enterprise at the point of registration.

127 HMRC, Annual Report and Accounts: 2025 to 2026, July 2026, p. 23.
128 NAO, Tackling tax evasion in high street and online retail, September 2024, p. 10.
129 Committee of Public Accounts, Tax evasion in the retail sector, February 2025, p. 16.
130 Ibid, p. 1.

RECOMMENDATION 5

DBIST should introduce legislation which grants Companies House the power to verify the address and place of business of company directors and their enterprise at point of registration.

2.3.10 Extending powers to close down criminal high street businesses

The *Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014* provides a mechanism for enforcement agencies to close a retail or personal premises for up to three months, with the option of a further three-month extension, preventing all access to the respective premises.[131] This tool was designed to address persistent ASB associated with a premises and is the primary mechanism available to Trading Standards and police forces to close down criminal high street businesses.

This process operates in two stages. First, the local authority or police issue a closure notice, barring access to the premises for up to 48 hours. The application must then be heard no later than 48 hours after the service of the closure notice within the magistrates' court. At this point, the magistrate can issue a closure order for a period of up to three months, with the potential to extend by an additional three months.

Evidence from Trading Standards services and other experts highlighted that closure orders are one of the most effective powers available to enforcement agencies working to tackle organised crime on the high street. One officer said:

> *"The best type of deterrence is closure orders… prosecution in most circumstances is completely ineffective."*
>
> **Trading Standards officer**

While a powerful tool in principle, closure orders are not used sufficiently, as shown by our FOI analysis which revealed that fewer than one in ten offending shops are closed.[132] One reason for this is that the process requires sustained staff time and legal resource to pursue, which is why many Trading Standards services default to only seizing illicit product. Other problems include a mismatch between what the powers were designed for (addressing ASB) and what they are currently being used for by Trading Standards services, which is to tackle persistent criminality in retail settings.

Our research has identified four problems with existing closure order powers.

1. While Home Office guidance states that closure order powers can be used where criminal behaviour is taking place on the premises,[133] we heard that because these powers originate from ASB legislation, enforcement agencies must meet an evidential burden of proving ASB, rather than the underlying criminality they actually wish to tackle, which is often multiple criminal offences, including illicit trading, tax evasion, illegal working, and money laundering.

131 Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014. Accessed: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/12/part/4/chapter/3/crossheading/closure-orders.
132 See Figure 22.
133 Home Office, Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014: Anti-social behaviour powers, p. 83.

2. Closure order powers are unavailable to county councils, meaning that Trading Standards services in upper tier authorities are hamstrung in their enforcement activities.
3. Closure order powers only last for three-month periods, which Trading Standards services and experts told us was not long enough to provide a serious enough deterrent, despite the possibility of extension.
4. Needing to obtain prior approval from the magistrates' court before obtaining a closure order prohibits the scale of action needed to close down the hundreds of criminal high street businesses that operate across town and city centres in Britain.

Alongside the targeting of the criminals behind OCGs and preventing the import of illicit goods to the UK, strengthening closure order powers must be a vital part of any programme to restore security to Britain's high streets.

A new closure power

In the short term we recommend that the government follow through on its plans to extend the duration of closure orders to 12 months and make this change by the end of the year. However, a more powerful closure order power should be introduced that is easier for multiple enforcement agencies to use. This closure order should include the following, and be available to all local authority Trading Standards services and the police:

1. A power to issue an on-the-spot closure for up to 12 months, modelled on existing Fire Service powers under Article 31 (prohibition notices). This should allow for entering and closing commercial premises and require no approval from the magistrates' court unless an appeal is launched.
2. A power to issue an indefinite closure order, via the magistrates' court, up until the point a persistently sanctioned offender is evicted.
3. A lower evidential burden, with demonstrating criminality sufficient criteria to justify a closure order, for example, the stocking and sale of illicit tobacco on more than one occasion after warning.

RECOMMENDATION 6

The Home Office, working jointly with the MoJ, should introduce a strengthened closure order power available to all local authority Trading Standards services, as well as county councils and the police, to tackle criminal high street businesses. The Home Office should expect that wherever possible, police forces support with enforcing these powers to enhance the safety and effectiveness of Trading Standards officers. The new closure order power should include the following:

- **On the spot closures**. Enforcement agencies should be able to serve a closure order immediately when there is clear evidence of criminality taking place. This would operate similarly to a closure notice, but transition automatically into a closure order after 48 hours unless an appeal is triggered by the business. At this point, the magistrates' court would hear the application within a set period of time. As with Article 31 powers, the premises should remain closed during the appeal period.

- **Extended closure order durations**. The duration of a closure order should be set at 12 months, with the option of a further 12-month extension to prevent further criminality, subject to any appeal process. If a closure order is violated, it should result in a default extension of 12 months.
- **Permanent closure for repeat offenders.** Where criminality continues after a closure order has expired, enforcement agencies should be able to apply to the court for a permanent closure order. A permanent closure order should remain in force until the responsible business has been evicted or vacates the premises. The landlord should also be subject to investigation under the *Proceeds of Crime Act 2002*. Before a landlord is able to re-let a permanently closed premises, they should be required to notify the local authority and agency which issued the permanent closure. Both should have the power to object to a new letting within a specified period where it has reasonable grounds to believe the premises poses an ongoing risk of criminal activity.
- **Simple evidence thresholds**. Demonstrating criminality on more than one occasion should be a sufficient basis to issue a closure order. For example, if a premises continues to stock illicit tobacco or vaping products after a warning, this threshold should be clearly met. Furthermore, as per CTSI recommendations, the government should provide certainty that retaining samples of illegal goods from seizures, rather than entire consignments, is sufficient for judicial purposes.
- **Civil penalties**. Closure orders should be accompanied by a civil penalty fine, issuable by Trading Standards or the police at the point a closure order is made. The penalty should be set at a minimum of £10,000 per premises on the first offence, rising progressively with each additional offence with no upper cap. A penalty notice should not preclude prosecution and 50 per cent of the revenue should be ringfenced for Trading Standards services.

Re-opening closed premises

Meaningfully tackling organised crime on the high street will require, in the short term, tolerating vacant premises over criminal high street businesses. While we consider this trade off inexplicably preferable to organised crime and its impact on community life, bringing empty units back into use by legitimate businesses should be a long-term aim of government policy in this area.

To achieve the legitimate re-opening of premises subject to closure orders, we recommend that the government create a fast-track High Streets Rental Auction process for when a premises has been issued a closure order.

High Street Rental Auctions are a power introduced under the *Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023* that allow local authorities to compel the rental of persistently vacant commercial properties. A property usually needs to have been empty for at least one year, with the local authority then able to require the landlord to let it through an auction process.[134]

We recommend that where a closure order has taken place and a tenant has been evicted, a landlord is able to apply for a discharge of a closure order if they agree to enter into the High Street Rental Auction process, subject to agreement from the enforcement agency who issued the closure order. For premises

134 MHCLG, High Street Rental Auctions: Non-statutory guidance, June 2025.

subject to a closure order that have entered the High Street Rental Auction process, the vacancy condition of 12 months should be waived, meaning that a premises could be subject to the process if it has been vacant for less than 12 months. At this point the usual conditions of the High Street Rental Auction process should take place, giving a landlord eight weeks to enter a tenancy subject to approval of the local authority.

RECOMMENDATION 7

MHCLG should create a fast-track high street rental auction process for premises subject to a closure order, disapplying the standard vacancy requirement. A landlord should become eligible to have a closure order lifted if they have evicted an offending tenant and agree to enter into the High Street Rental Auction process. The full discharge of the closure order should not become effective until the day a new tenant enters the premises.

Stringent licensing for tobacco and vape retailers

The relationship between criminal high street businesses and the sale of illicit tobacco, cigarettes, and vapes, means that to be most effective, new closure order powers should be tied to a stringent new licensing regime for retailers selling tobacco, cigarettes, and vapes.

The *Tobacco and Vapes Act 2026* requires the government to make regulations to introduce a licensing scheme for the retail sale of such products. This presents an opportunity to streamline enforcement and evidence criminality.

For example, if a retailer sells illicit tobacco, cigarettes, and vaping products without the required licence, or in breach of licence conditions, this should meet the threshold for a closure order, by satisfying the criteria of demonstrating criminality. Penalties for trading without a licence, or in breach of licence conditions, should allow for the scaling up of sanctions, beginning with a fine, and escalating to a 12-month closure order and prosecution.

Put simply: a retailer selling tobacco or vapes without a licence should face prosecution, and the premises should be closed down. A licensed retailer selling illicit tobacco or vapes in breach of that licence should face prosecution, and the premises should be closed down. These two principles should be at the heart of enforcement policy for the new licensing framework.

Importantly, licensing should also give local authorities the ability to say no to new shops selling tobacco or vaping products. Unlike the *Gambling Act 2005*, the licensing regime should include no 'aim to permit', which sets a preference in favour of approving new sites.[135] Local authorities should retain discretion in how many local units are able to hold a premises licence for the sale of tobacco and vapes and hold a clear veto power.

135 Gambling Commission, Guidance to licensing authorities, April 2023. Accessed: https://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/guidance/guidance-to-licensing-authorities/part-1-statutory-aim-to-permit-gambling.

RECOMMENDATION 8

As required by the *Tobacco and Vapes Act 2026*, the Department of Health and Social Care and the Home Office should introduce a stringent licensing regime for the sale of tobacco and vaping products, tied to clear penalties and escalating enforcement action. The licensing regime should include the following provisions:

- **Licence fees and penalties.** Penalty fines for trading without a licence, or in violation of licence conditions, should be set significantly higher than the cost of obtaining a licence, ensuring that compliance is always the more rational commercial choice for retailers. Licence fee revenue should be ringfenced for Trading Standards services, along with a proportion of penalty fees.
- **Fit and proper person checks**. A mandatory background check should be required before a licence is granted. This should be cross-referenced with police and Trading Standards data to establish whether an applicant has previously violated licence conditions, sold illicit tobacco or vapes, or has relevant criminal convictions.
- **Relationship with wholesaler**. A business owner should have to demonstrate an active relationship with a legitimate tobacco or vape wholesaler to obtain a licence.
- **Trading without a licence.** Trading without a licence on three or more occasions should result in a permanent bar on that individual ever holding a personal licence for the sale of tobacco and vape products.
- **Violation of licence conditions.** Violating licence conditions should result in escalating sanctions, beginning with fines and leading to licence suspension. A third violation should result in a lifetime personal licence ban and a minimum one-year premises licence ban. Selling illicit tobacco or vaping products should trigger an immediate review into a premises and personal licence, with a presumption that the licence is suspended for a set period.
- **Civil financial penalties.** Fines should be straightforward for enforcement agencies to issue, operating as civil penalties to reduce the evidential burden on Trading Standards. Fines should be calculated on a progressive scale for repeat offenders, with no upper cap, to ensure they remain proportionate to the scale and persistence of the offending.
- **Criminal sanction for organised and persistent offenders.** The organised and purposeful sale of tobacco and vape products, including illicit products, without a licence or in deliberate and repeated breach of licence conditions should constitute an either-way criminal offence.

2.3.11 Prosecuting, charging, and deporting offenders

In addition to strengthening closure orders, the government should scale up enforcement through the criminal justice and immigration systems to tackle organised crime on the high street. This should include action to disrupt and dismantle OCGs at a senior level, efforts to prosecute and sanction those operating and working within criminal high street businesses, and a more robust approach to landlords who are complicit in crime.

Disrupting and dismantling OCGs

Prosecuting and charging offenders who are visibly operating criminal high street businesses is an important part of an effective response to organised crime on the high street. However, this approach is limited unless it is accompanied by efforts at a national level to disrupt and dismantle the OCGs responsible for sponsoring, supplying, and operating criminal high street businesses.

This is one reason why we have recommended a restructuring of Trading Standards into a national enforcement body, alongside a National Police Service. This would allow for national and international enforcement approaches to target the senior criminals responsible for the growth in organised crime on the high street.

Examples of such work already taking place include Operation Machinize and Operation CeCe, led by the NCA and National Trading Standards and HMRC, respectively. These are national level operations to join-up enforcement and tackle organised crime on the high street and, under our proposals, would be folded into the National Police Service and new National Trading Standards authority. The new High Street Organised Crime Unit is also a welcome step forward to creating a long-term cross-agency response to organised criminality.

Prosecuting and sanctioning those operating criminal high street businesses

Enforcement agencies should have access to a range of enforcement responses to organised criminal activity on the high street, escalating from verbal and written warnings, through civil penalties and Respect Orders, to criminal prosecution in the courts, as well as immigration enforcement action where illegal working or residence is identified.

Prosecution plays an important role, but Trading Standards repeatedly told us that problems within the criminal justice system undermine its effectiveness, with court proceedings sometimes taking over a year to progress to completion. Scaling-up enforcement requires addressing these problems at a structural level, specifically delays in the magistrates' court and crown court, as well as increasing prison capacity to ensure that the most prolific offenders are taken off the streets for good.

In addition to long-term reform and investment in the criminal justice system, there are short-term steps the government can take to increase deterrence and criminal sanctions, particularly through the implementation of Respect Orders. These are new civil behavioural orders which can compel certain behaviours and restrict access to certain locations like the high street, the breach of which is a criminal offence.[136]

The Home Office and MoJ should amend the scope of Respect Orders to ensure they are available to be used to apply to individuals who are associated with criminal high street businesses subject to a closure order. Being the business owner, employed by, or seen operating or selling illicit products in a shop subject to a closure order should be classified as an offence that meets the threshold for a Respect Order. Specifically, we recommend that Respect Orders are used to enforce the following sanctions against individuals associated with criminal high street businesses:

1. Banning offenders from accessing town and city centre locations, preventing them from entering or operating other criminal high street businesses.
2. Banning offenders from working at, or being employed within, the type of business associated with the closure order.

136 Home Office; MoJ, Crime and Policing Act 2026: anti-social behaviour (ASB) factsheet, May 2026.

The use of these orders to restrict the activity of offenders linked to criminal high street businesses could also stop the common practice of workers moving to different premises after a closure order has taken place. As violating a Respect Order is a criminal offence, this would allow the police to immediately arrest those who continue to operate or work within criminal high street businesses, and escalate enforcement action, including a custodial offence if offenders continue to break the law.

RECOMMENDATION 9

The Home Office and MoJ should amend guidance on the use of Respect Orders, making it standard practice for offenders associated with a premises subject to a closure order to receive a Respect Order. This should limit their access to specified high street locations, ban them from working at, or being employed within, the type of business associated with the closure order, and require them to take steps to address their offending.

In addition to the greater use of ASB tools to crack down on high street offenders, the Home Office should ensure that immigration enforcement is being utilised to crack down on illegal working.

The first priority for the government should be to close loopholes in the immigration system which are being exploited by certain types of anti-social businesses linked to high street crime. The second priority should be to improve interaction between Immigration Enforcement and frontline enforcement agencies like Trading Standards.

Firstly, the Home Office should immediately close loopholes in the immigration system that allow for vape shops and mini marts to sponsor migrant workers. This includes the presence of multiple vape shops and mini marts on the Home Office's public register of licensed sponsors for worker and temporary worker immigration routes.[137]

While the Home Secretary has announced she has instructed officials to review the presence of such businesses on the register, the government must ensure that no such business associated with anti-social behaviour or criminality is able to access it.[138]

RECOMMENDATION 10

The Home Office should immediately remove businesses associated with high street crime from the public register of licensed sponsors for worker and temporary worker immigration routes. This should include vape shops, mini-marts, nail bars, car washes, takeaways, sweet shops, and barbers.

Secondly, while Immigration Enforcement teams will occasionally accompany Trading Standards officers on duty, usually during multi-agency days of action, the Home Office should ensure that in day-to-day work, there is a deeper engagement and collaboration between enforcement agencies. At present, Trading Standards have no direct phoneline to Immigration Enforcement and lack the ability to perform

137 The Telegraph, Vape shops allowed to sponsor foreign worker visas, May 2026. Accessed: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2026/05/30/vape-visas-migrants-shops-sponsors-workers/.

138 Home Office, New laws to shutdown dodgy high street shops in crime crackdown, June 2026. Accessed: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-laws-to-shut-down-dodgy-high-street-shops-in-crime-crackdown.

an immigration status check. This means that apart from multi-agency days of action, Trading Standards officers lack a quick tool to contact Immigration Enforcement or check the status of those they encounter.

To improve collaboration between Trading Standards and Immigration Enforcement, we recommend that the Home Office establish an Illegal Working Escalation Service (IWES), modelled on the Homelessness Escalation Service that currently exists to identify the immigration status of non-UK national rough sleepers.

RECOMMENDATION 11

The Home Office should establish an IWES to enable Trading Standards and other frontline enforcement agencies to report and escalate cases of illegal working to Immigration Enforcement. The aim of IWES should be to significantly increase the reporting of and evidence base for illegal working on the high street by enforcement agencies, as well as the detention and removal of those in the UK illegally.

Accompanying this service should be extended powers granted to Trading Standards officers to perform Home Office system checks using the name, date of birth, and nationality of suspected offenders. These checks will enable Trading Standards officers to confirm an individual's immigration status and if they have been subject to immigration powers in the past. This extension of powers should be based on the existing ability of police constables and NCA officers to conduct immigration checks via the National Command and Control Unit, the central contact centre for immigration enforcement.

As the primary enforcement agency responsible for illicit trade and criminal high street businesses, Trading Standards should also be granted powers to fine businesses guilty of illegal working offences. Trading Standards officers told the CSJ that they regularly come across cases of illegal working during their investigations, so extending their ability to sanction businesses would provide another enforcement outlet without having to rely on the capacity of immigration enforcement.

Ending landlord complicity

The current enforcement landscape means that landlords remain largely unaccountable for criminal activity taking place in their premises. 98 per cent of Trading Standards professionals think landlords should be prosecuted or fined for not taking action to remove tenants, where they are aware that the tenants are committing offences on the premises.[139]

To increase enforcement, complicit landlords who knowingly let to offenders should face strengthened liability and penalties, while all landlords more broadly should be supported with tools to better identify high-risk prospective tenants before signing a lease.

This should begin with a compulsory civil penalty issued by Trading Standards to the landlord of a premises subject to a closure order. This civil penalty should have no upward limit, but begin at £10,000, as recommended by the CTSI.[140] 50 per cent of proceeds should be ringfenced for Trading Standards services.

139 CTSI, Hidden in Plain Sight: Tackling Crime on the UK's High Streets, n.d., p. 31.
140 Ibid, p. 31.

RECOMMENDATION 12

The Home Office should introduce a civil penalty starting at £10,000 with no upward limit for landlords whose premises have been subject to a closure order. 50 per cent of revenue from this fine should be ringfenced for Trading Standards.

Furthermore, to tackle the issue of phoenixing, where a company quickly dissolves after its creation, leaving behind a trail of unpaid tax like business rates, we recommend that landlords become liable for unpaid business rates, with the aim of incentivising much more comprehensive vetting of tenants. Landlords should only become liable when, during the tenancy, they received formal notice from an enforcement body that criminal behaviour has taken place at the specific premises by the tenant and have taken no action to stop offending and/or evict the tenant.

RECOMMENDATION 13

MHCLG should introduce secondary liability for landlords where business rates are unpaid by a tenant. A landlord would become liable for the unpaid business rates of a tenant where (a) the landlord has received formal notice from an enforcement body of illegal activity taking place at their premises by the tenant, (b) the landlord has failed to take reasonable steps to address this, for example by initiating eviction proceedings, and (c) the ratepayer subsequently dissolves, is struck off, or otherwise cannot be pursued, leaving business rates unpaid.

More widely, all landlords should be given greater support to identify criminality and to evict offending tenants. To do this, the government should include a new criminal and enforcement history check, modelled on the existing Disclosure and Barring Service check, which cross-references prospective tenants with the Police National Computer and Trading Standards data.

RECOMMENDATION 14

MHCLG and the Home Office should consult on a new mandatory reference check for commercial landlords to vet a prospective tenant. This should include:

- **Identity and ownership verification.** Landlords should be required to verify that the company director is the genuine beneficial owner of the business, cross-referenced with Companies House data.
- **Financial verification.** This check should be designed to flag possible money laundering and financial crime, including a credit check, proof of income, revenue, bank statements, and/or HMRC verified tax records.
- **Landlord references.** A reference from a former commercial landlord if relevant.
- **Professional character reference.** A reference from a regulated professional who can be held accountable for its accuracy.
- **Criminal and enforcement history check.** MHCLG and the Home Office should design a referencing framework which is integrated with Police National Computer and Trading Standards data via a secure portal (similar to the DBS checking service), to flag any individual or associated business that has previously been subject to enforcement action.

2.3.12 Stopping illegal goods from reaching the high street

A plan to tackle the growth in criminal high street businesses must also include attempts to stop the import of illegal goods which fuel the black market upon which these enterprises depend.

While some illicit goods are manufactured in the UK, an estimated 10.3 billion cigarettes were imported into the UK in 2025 without paying tax.[141] 3.5 billion of these were counterfeit cigarettes.[142] The Border Force is capturing just a fraction of these cigarettes at the border, with just 1.5 billion seized in 2025/26.[143]

Only by strengthening the UK's borders can illicit goods be stopped from reaching the high street. We echo CTSI in calling for the unfettered access of Trading Standards officers to conduct enforcement activity at all entry points and customs clearance zones, the powers to stop and detain vehicles at entry points, and access to HMRC export and import data. The government should fund this through a £20 million boost to Trading Standards funding at the UK border.[144] The government should also continue to invest in anti-smuggling technology which can detect illicit products at the border.

In addition, the government should introduce a broader tobacco and vapes licensing regime which covers the whole industry supply chain, rather than just at point of sale. This would mean that every business which manufactures, exports, or imports tobacco and vaping products would not be able to operate in the UK unless they comply with a whole supply chain licensing regime.

We were told by experts that OCGs are increasingly operating throughout the tobacco and vapes supply chain, including acting as wholesalers, distributors, and manufacturers, in addition to operating criminal high street businesses. A whole supply chain licensing regime will ensure that enforcement agencies can better monitor the tobacco industry and identify those involved in illicit operations. It would also support efforts to intercept illicit goods before they make their way to the high street.

RECOMMENDATION 15

The Home Office should consult on extending tobacco and vape licensing to the entire industry, ensuring that every aspect of the supply chain, from manufacture, through to distribution and sale, is regulated by a licensing regime. This would help to better monitor the tobacco industry and identify, disrupt, and prosecute those involved in illicit operations.

141 KPMG, Illicit cigarette and heated tobacco consumption, and oral nicotine share in Europe, June 2026, p. 226.

142 Ibid, p. 226.

143 HMRC, Annual outputs for tackling tobacco smuggling: Outputs for April 2025 to March 2026, July 2026.

144 CTSI, Hidden in Plain Sight: Tackling Crime on the UK's High Streets, n.d., p. 7.

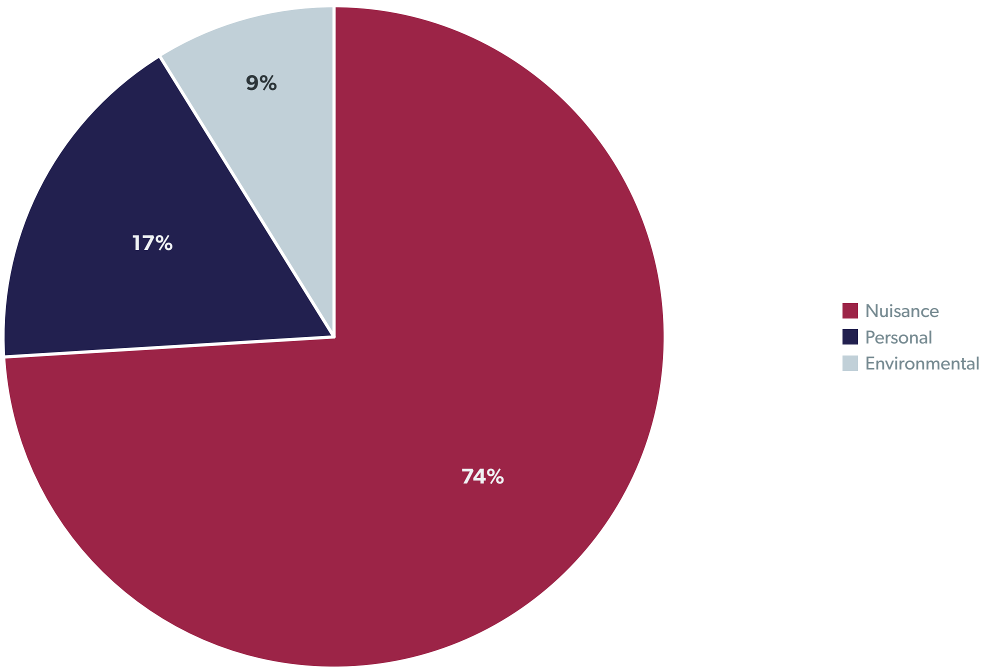
2.4 Anti-social behaviour

2.4.1 The state of ASB in Britain

ASB is defined by the College of Policing as conduct that has caused, or is likely to cause, harassment, alarm, or distress to any person.[145] There are three main categories of ASB. One: personal ASB, which is when a person targets a specific individual or group. Two: nuisance ASB, which is when a person causes trouble, annoyance or suffering to a community. Three: environmental ASB, which is when a person's actions affect the wider environment.[146]

The latter two are most relevant to insecurity in town and city centres. Examples include the misuse of electric bicycles, rowdy or drunken behaviour in public spaces, fly-tipping and littering, prostitution, begging, intimidation, and vandalism. Nuisance ASB makes up the vast majority of ASB reports (74 per cent) in Home Office data.

Figure 23: Categories of ASB experienced in 2025/26



Source: CSJ analysis. ONS, Crime in England and Wales: Appendix tables year ending March 2026, July 2026.

From 2024/25 to 2025/26, the ONS identified a statistically significant increase in the number of people experiencing ASB.[147] In 2024/25, over one in three (36 per cent) people said they had personally experienced/witnessed ASB in their local area, rising to over two in five (41 per cent) in 2025/26.[148] Between 2024/25 and 2025/26 there was an increase in all types of ASB recorded by the CSEW, as shown in Figure 24.

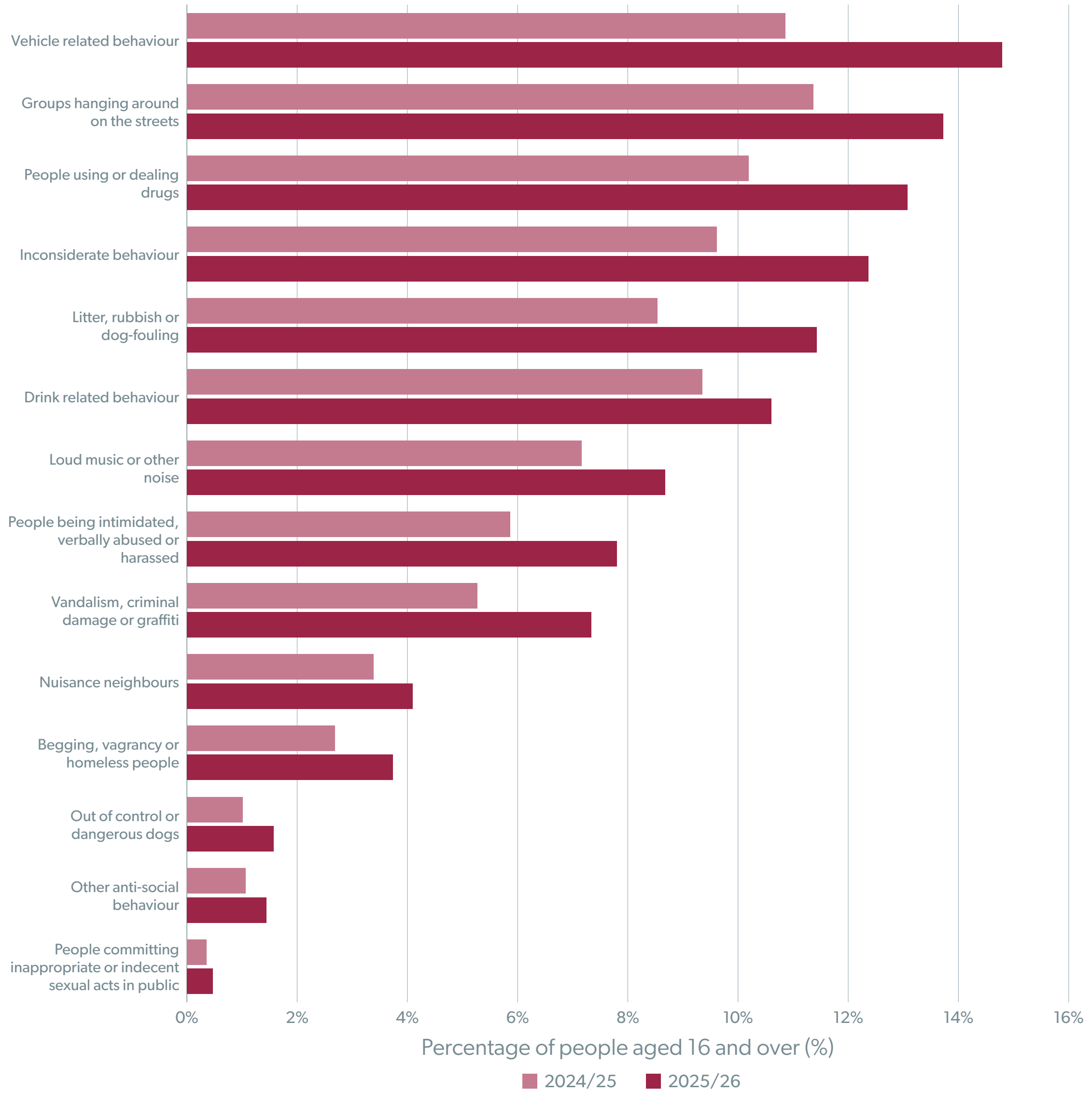
145 College of Policing, Anti-social behaviour, n.d. Accessed: https://www.college.police.uk/guidance/anti-social-behaviour.

146 Metropolitan Police, What is antisocial behaviour?, n.d. Accessed: https://www.met.police.uk/advice/advice-and-information/asb/asb/antisocial-behaviour/what-is-antisocial-behaviour/.

147 ONS, Crime in England and Wales: year ending March 2026, July 2026.

148 ONS, Crime in England and Wales: year ending March 2026, July 2026.

Figure 24: Types of ASB experienced

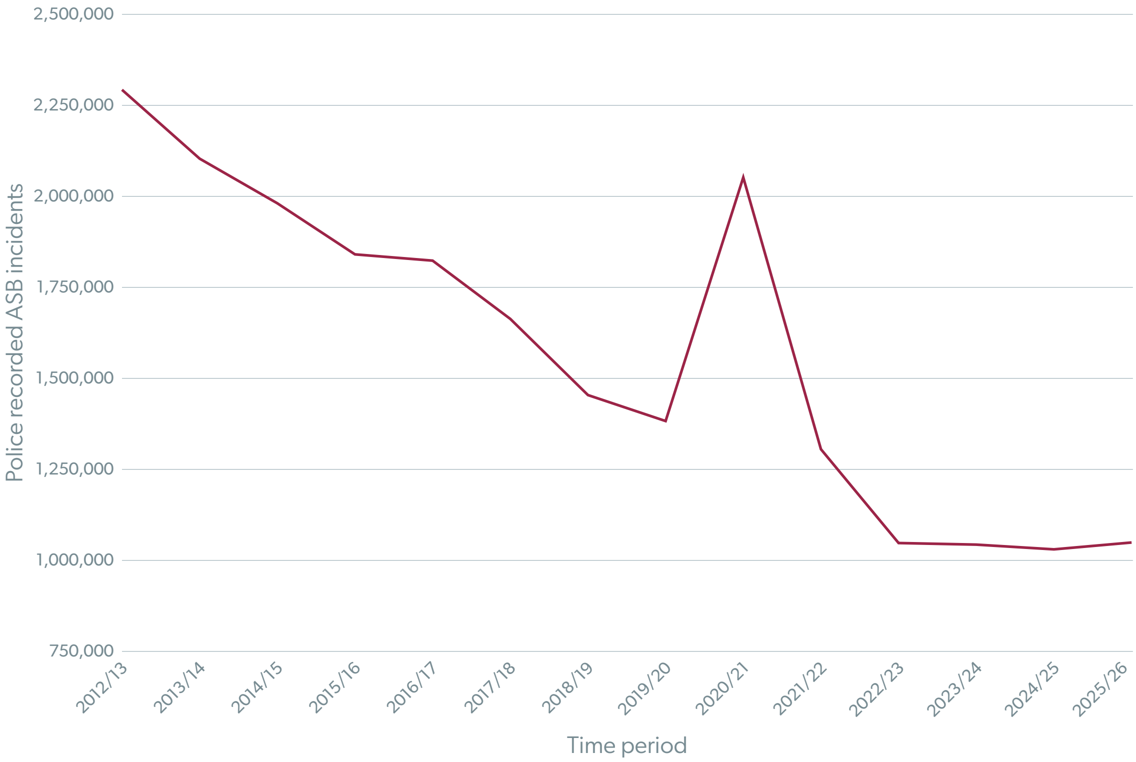


Source: CSJ analysis. ONS, Crime in England and Wales: Appendix tables year ending March 2026, July 2026.

While reports of groups hanging around on the streets was the most common type of ASB to be reported in 2024/25, in 2025/26, vehicle related behaviour rose to become the most prevalent type of ASB, with 15 per cent of people aged 16 and over reporting experiencing a form of vehicle related ASB in the year.

However, despite an increase in both the perception and experience of ASB, police recorded crime data tells a different story. Police recorded ASB incidents in England and Wales per year have declined by over one million, from nearly 2.3 million recorded incidents in 2012/13, to just over one million in 2025/26.

Figure 25: Police recorded ASB incidents



Source: CSJ analysis. ONS, Crime in England and Wales: Appendix tables year ending March 2026, July 2026.

The discrepancy between the CSEW and police recorded crime data is well established, with the ONS stating that the CSEW generally provides the better measure of longitudinal trends in common crime.[149] Police recorded crime data is complicated by the fact it is dependent on individuals reporting crime in the first place, as well as how police forces choose to report it. This is a particularly acute issue for ASB, where there have been longstanding concerns over reporting of incidents.[150]

Therefore, we consider CSEW data, which indicates a growing incidence and perception of ASB, to be a better marker of true levels of ASB than police recorded crime data. While police recorded data could indicate a real decline in the prevalence of ASB in Britain, it is likely a significant underestimate of the true number of ASB incidents that take place each year.

Moreover, despite a long-term decline in police recorded ASB incidents, between 2024/25 and 2025/26, there was a small uptick in ASB reported to the police, mirroring the increase identified by the CSEW. Despite a decline over time in police recorded incidents, it is clear that ASB is a growing concern among Britons.

Growing concern about ASB is evidenced in recent polling conducted by the Common Ground Justice Project and Focaldata in June 2026. Their analysis identified that ASB now ranks as a top concern among members of the public. Asked which types of crime they are most concerned about, the public's top answers were ASB (42 per cent), over and above drug dealing (41 per cent), shoplifting (32 per cent), knife crime (27 per cent), burglary (17 per cent), and serious violent crime (16 per cent).[151] Over half (53 per cent) state that the justice system is bad at handling ASB.[152]

149 ONS, Crime in England and Wales: year ending March 2026, July 2026.
150 Home Office, ASB hotspot response pilot evaluation, August 2025.
151 Polling of 1,492 UK adults conducted by the Common Ground Justice Project and Focaldata, June 2026.
152 Ibid.

2.4.2 Government action to tackle ASB

The powers available to enforcement agencies to tackle ASB are contained primarily in the *Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014*. These include:

- **ASB Civil Injunctions:** prohibiting individuals aged 10 and above from participating in certain activities and requiring attendance at rehabilitative activities.
- **Criminal Behaviour Orders (CBOs):** which if attached to a criminal sentence can place prohibitions or requirements on an offender designed to address their ASB.
- **Community Protection Notices:** requiring individuals who have diminished the quality of life for those in the locality to remedy the problem.
- **Public Space Protection Orders (PSPOs):** prohibiting specific activities in a designated area.
- **Dispersal Powers:** requiring those conducting ASB to leave the area for 48 hours.
- **Closure Powers:** limiting access to a residential or commercial building associated with ASB for up to three months, with the potential of a further three-month extension.

According to the Home Office's statutory guidance on ASB powers, multiple different agencies are able to utilise specific tools. This includes local councils, social landlords, the police, combined authorities, Transport for London, and the courts.[153]

In addition to the 2014 Act, the government has introduced a range of new powers available to enforcement agencies within the *Crime and Policing Act 2026*. These new powers include Respect Orders, stronger disposal orders, increasing the upper limit of fixed penalty notices, and allowing the police to seize a vehicle being used to commit ASB without warning.[154]

These powers give the police a comprehensive toolkit with which to police ASB and sanction offenders. In this sub-chapter we outline how the government can best make use of the powers that agencies have available. To do this the government should first double down on its commitment to rebuild neighbourhood policing. Secondly, the government should set new targets for enforcement agencies to use the full range of ASB powers available to police forces and the courts. Thirdly, the government should review the appropriateness of existing powers and consider strengthening penalties so that ASB results in clear consequences.

2.4.3 Rebuilding neighbourhood policing

An effective response to ASB is dependent on active and well-resourced neighbourhood police forces. Part of the reason for why the perception of ASB has increased is due to a lack of visible policing and a belief that officers do not prioritise the crimes that individuals care about. Four in five adults in England and Wales say they do not have confidence in the police to investigate minor crimes fully when reported.[155]

Neighbourhood policing provides communities with identifiable and dedicated police officers. Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) are dedicated officers responsible for patrolling communities and tackling ASB. These police officers are rooted in neighbourhoods and have a preventative function, and at their best, stop crime from occurring in the first place.

153 Home Office, Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014: Anti-social behaviour powers, July 2025, pp. 28–87.

154 Home Office; MoJ, Crime and Policing Act 2026: anti-social behaviour (ASB) factsheet, May 2026.

155 YouGov, Attitudes to policing and the wider law and order system, March 2026. Accessed: https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/54367-attitudes-to-policing-and-the-wider-law-and-order-system.

Neighbourhood policing is a critical function of police forces and increases communities' confidence in the police. A government evidence review found that public perceptions of policing can be enhanced or undermined by different levels of police visibility, with those who know police personnel by name or sight being likely to rate their confidence in the police positively.[156]

For neighbourhood policing initiatives to succeed, officers need to have a consistent presence and build relationships with local residents. However, abstractions (temporary removal from core duties) of police personnel for mutual aid, public order requirements or to back-fill other under resourced police teams takes officers away from neighbourhood policing teams and interrupts these officers' ability to build crucial local relationships.

The public's growing perception of higher crime, ASB, and unsafe high streets has mirrored the decline in neighbourhood policing across England and Wales. CSJ polling has found that nearly one in five (19 per cent) people blame a lack of police presence as a main reason for why adults commit crime and ASB.[157]

Our inquiry has reinforced the perception that Britain's high streets, town, and city centres are unsafe, and that this is related to a lack of visible police presence. One focus group participant said:

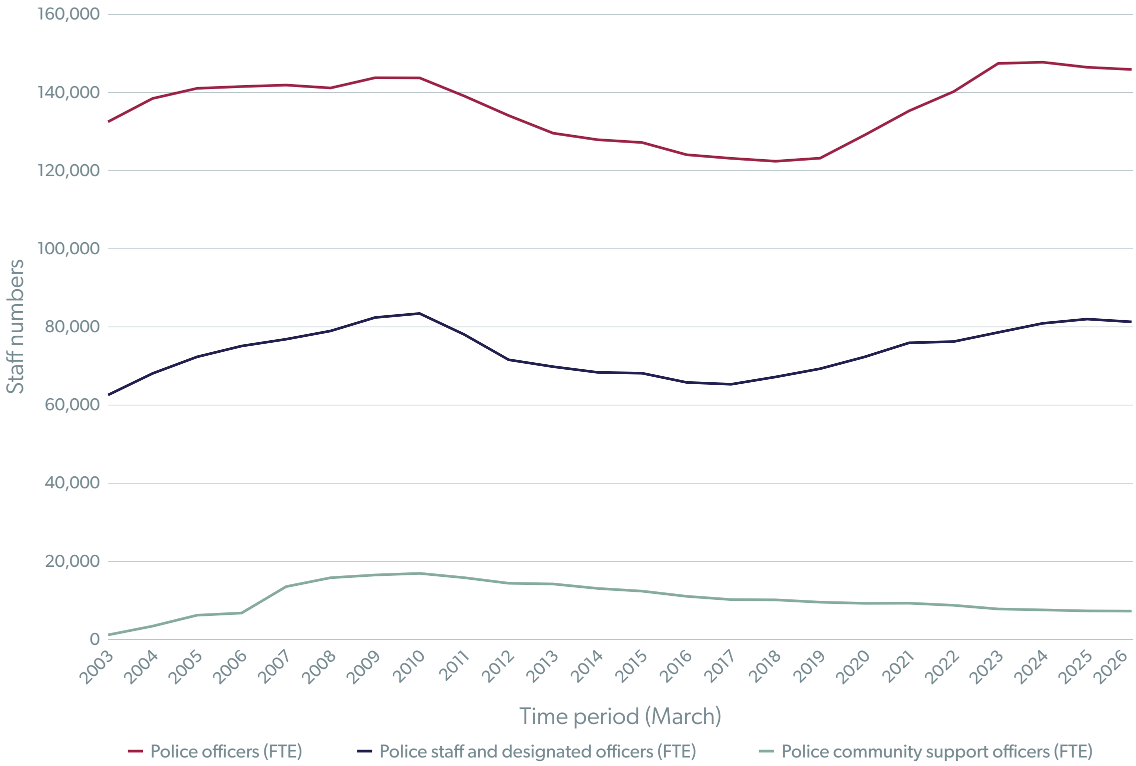
> *"I think it's just about getting a presence on the high streets again, you know, [it] makes people feel a lot more secure, and especially if you've got police on the high streets, like we used to back in the day."*
>
> **Focus group participant, North East**

While the government has made a welcome commitment to rebuilding neighbourhood policing, including setting new targets on abstractions, police officer and PCSO numbers have continued to decline since the general election in 2024. For example, PCSO numbers fell from 7,568 in March 2024, to 7,259 in March 2026, while police officer numbers fell from 147,745 to 145,886 in the same period.

156 Home Office, Public perceptions of policing: A review of research and literature, August 2023.

157 CSJ, Two Nations: The State of Poverty in the UK, December 2023, p. 136.

Figure 26: Police workforce numbers in England and Wales



Source: CSJ analysis. Home Office, Police workforce, England and Wales: 31 March 2026, July 2026.

Despite a fall in total numbers, the government say that existing police officers have been re-directed to community roles through its Neighbourhood Policing Programme. Year one of the programme has resulted in an increase of 3,123 FTE police officers and PCSOs working in neighbourhood policing.[158]

The increase in neighbourhood policing numbers is welcome, but to improve trust between police forces and the general public, there needs to be a major recalibration between what matters to the public and where police budgets and resources are deployed.

This should begin with a clear commitment to protecting neighbourhood policing teams, and a guarantee that they will take action to prevent the ASB that matters most to communities. This requires that neighbourhood police officers not be routinely taken off their local duties in order to back-fill vacant places on other teams. Neighbourhood officers should not be classed as a 'taskable' resource to be deployed to incidents which are primarily the responsibility of emergency response patrol teams.

To achieve this, we recommend that the government set a cap for the amount of time an officer in a neighbourhood policing team can be abstracted to other duties. The government has yet to publish its measure for quantifying the abstraction of police personnel away from neighbourhood policing roles, despite committing to do so before the end of 2025.[159] It has made no commitment to publish national standards on abstractions. We recommend that the abstraction measure is published without further delay, and that the government introduces national standards by 2027, including a cap on the proportion of time an officer in an assigned neighbourhood role can be abstracted to other duties.

158 Home Office, Surge in neighbourhood police in communities fighting crime, April 2026. Accessed: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/surge-in-neighbourhood-police-in-communities-fighting-crime.

159 Home Office, Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee Performance Framework, May 2025.

RECOMMENDATION 16

The Home Office should ensure that neighbourhood policing teams are protected from routine abstraction to other duties. Neighbourhood officers should not be treated as a resource to back-fill vacant places on response teams or to attend incidents that are primarily the responsibility of emergency response patrol teams.

We recommend that:

- The Home Office publish its abstraction measure by the end of 2026.
- The Home Office introduces national abstraction standards by 2027 and that these standards include a cap on the proportion of time an officer in an assigned neighbourhood policing role can be abstracted to other duties.

Addressing the root causes of ASB

While active neighbourhood police officers are critical to deterring immediate crime and responding to it, they also have an important preventative role, and this is particularly important when it comes to working with communities to tackle the root causes of ASB.

Ivison Trust, a charity that supports the parents of children vulnerable to child exploitation, told us that children committing ASB can be vulnerable to, or being, actively exploited by criminals. Ivison Trust said that in the past this has led to children being criminalised for their own exploitation.

Some of the warning signs for exploitation include shoplifting, drug use or dealing, and threatening behaviour in public spaces. Identifying these warning signs and intervening early are crucial in addressing both the public safety risk posed by the child, and for intervening for their own protection. This is where active neighbourhood police officers can play a vital role, taking a supportive and preventive approach.

Ivison Trust spoke of children they had supported who had been debt-bound to criminal gangs. In some cases, OCGs have given children vaping products laced with addictive illegal drugs. They then become dependent on the OCG due to their addiction. In other cases, young girls have been given nail treatments at criminal high street businesses which they were led to believe were free and then coerced - through violence and threats - into selling illegal drugs or shoplifting to order, because they were made to believe they owed a debt.

The Civil Injunction power which prohibits individuals, including children, from engaging in certain activities and requires them to seek rehabilitation is referenced by the Home Office as an effective means to disrupt the activities of OCGs, and provide the opportunity for a young person to seek help and escape the cycle of crime.[160] This is only possible with committed and well-resourced teams of neighbourhood PCSOs and police officers, local authority workers, and the third sector working together to address the root causes of ASB in society.

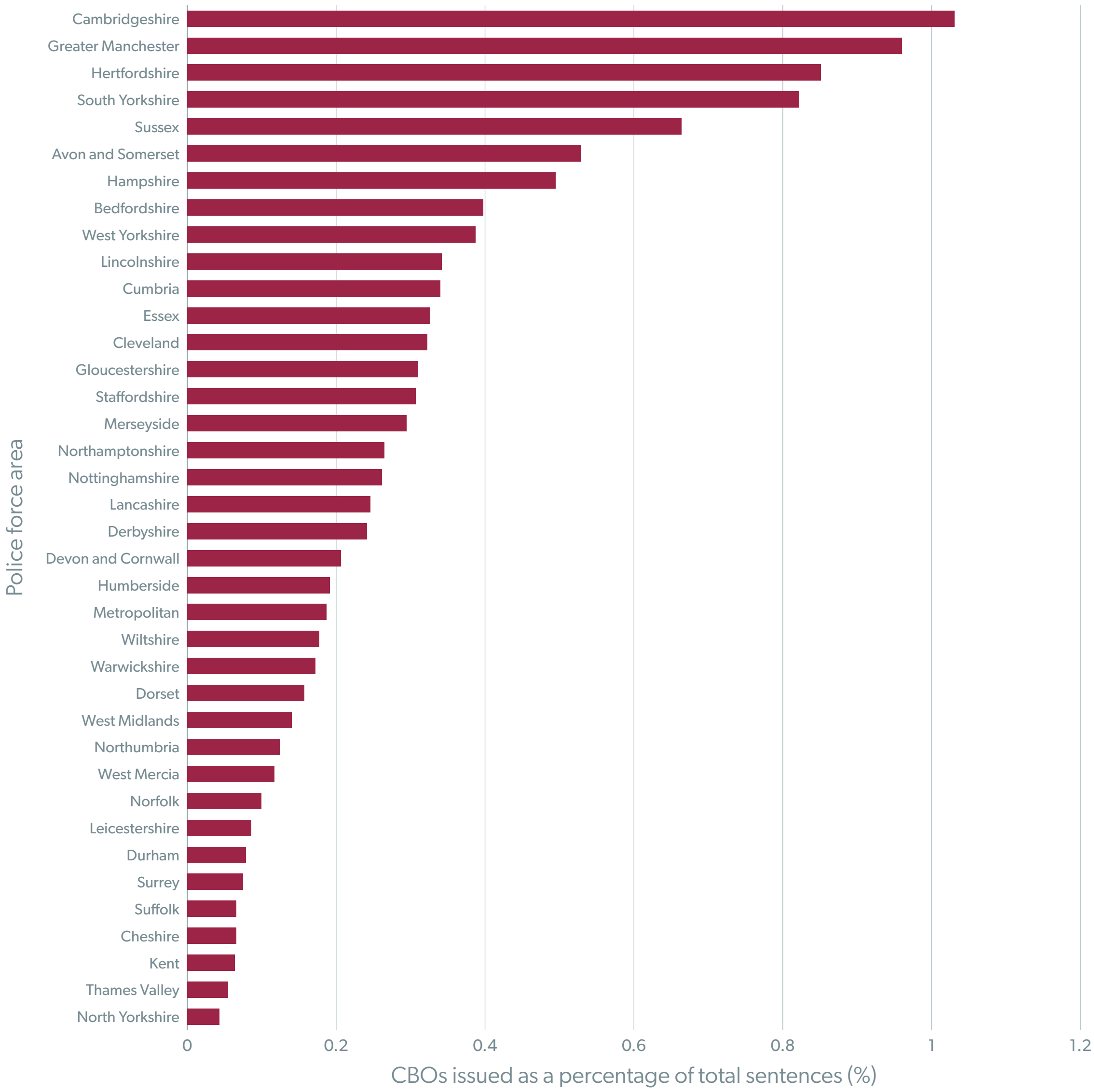
160 Home Office, Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014: Anti-social behaviour powers, July 2025, p. 36.

2.4.4 Utilising the full range of ASB powers

An effective response to ASB is dependent on the police and criminal justice system being able to utilise the full range of powers available to them. Interviews with police officers outlined that there is currently a post-code lottery over the use of different ASB powers, meaning some areas can effectively crack down on ASB, while in others, powers are not being fully utilised.

CSJ analysis of the use of CBOs reflects this qualitative finding, that ASB powers are inconsistently used, which limits their effectiveness across the country as a whole. CBOs are an order on criminal conviction to prohibit the offender from doing anything described in the order (which might include acts associated with prior ASB). Figure 27 shows CBOs as a proportion of total sentences in each police force area (CBOs can only be attached to an existing criminal conviction).

Figure 27: Issuing of CBOs as a proportion of total sentences in police force areas in 2024

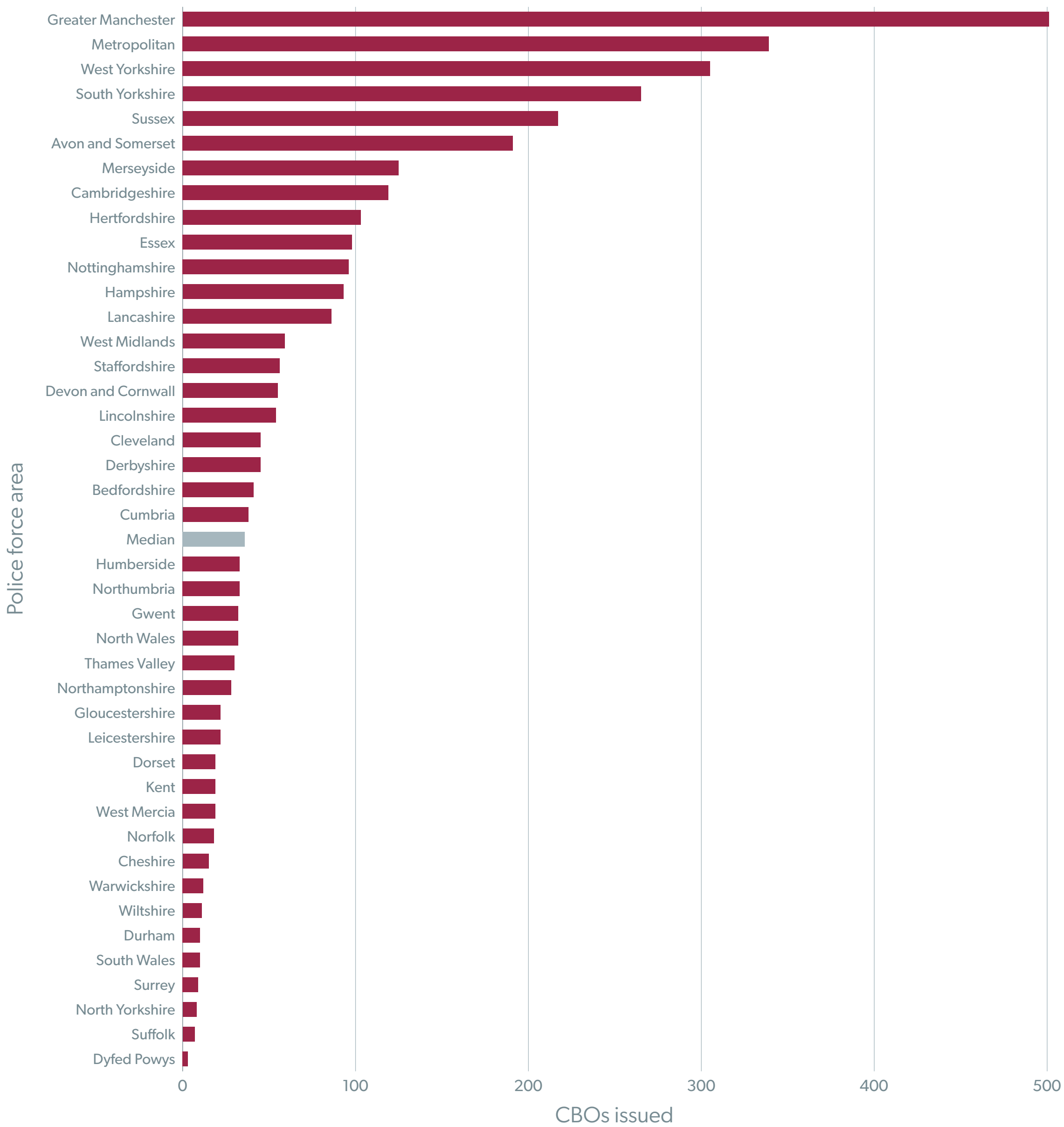


Source: CSJ analysis. Court Proceedings Data via answer to Written Parliamentary Question UIN 78737, October 2025; MoJ, Outcomes by Offence data tool: December 2024, July 2025.

Courts in Cambridgeshire used CBOs the most as a percentage of total sentences, equating to over one CBO issued for every 100 sentences. This fell to fewer than 0.10 per cent in Leicestershire, Durham, Surrey, Suffolk, Cheshire, Kent, Thames Valley and North Yorkshire, meaning that fewer than one in 1000 sentences had a CBO attached. While this data shows a significant discrepancy between regions, it also demonstrates that tools like CBOs are rarely used by the courts.

The raw numbers further reinforce the postcode lottery in ASB tools. There is a wide variation in the use of CBOs, with courts in Greater Manchester police force area issuing 501 in 2024, followed by 339 in London, and 305 in West Yorkshire. The median figure for CBOs issued in 2024 was 36.

Figure 28: CBOs issued by criminal courts in police force areas in 2024



Source: CSJ analysis. Court Proceedings Data via answer to Written Parliamentary Question UIN 78737, October 2025.

Data on CBOs reveals two clear patterns. Firstly, a significant inconsistency in regional use, and secondly, their continued rarity as a sentencing tool across the criminal justice system. There are several reasons for this. Experts told us that police forces often want to utilise CBOs in sentencing, but that they were too difficult to progress through the courts. In addition to CBOs, we were also told that the evidential bar for obtaining a PSPO, another crucial ASB power for police forces and local authorities, was also set inordinately high by the courts.

To tackle these problems and ensure that ASB powers are being used consistently across England, we recommend that the Home Office and MoJ issue new guidance directing police forces, local authorities, and courts to make full and consistent use of available ASB powers, including CBOs and PSPOs. Guidance should set clear expectations around the use of these powers and be accompanied by a reporting requirement to ensure compliance can be monitored nationally. These changes should have the intention of increasing the deployment of ASB powers throughout the criminal justice system.

RECOMMENDATION 17

The Home Office should revise statutory guidance on ASB powers to require full and consistent use of all available ASB powers, including CBOs and PSPOs, by police forces, local authorities, and other relevant enforcement agencies. Usage data should be published for all ASB powers included in the statutory guidance, closing a monitoring gap that currently allows inconsistent use to go unmonitored.

2.4.5 Ensuring ASB has consequences

Certain police forces are leading the way in utilising new powers and working with other organisations and agencies to enforce the law on ASB, to ensure incidents result in clear consequences. Nottinghamshire Police is one such example, where Operation Reclaim has made clear that parents could "pay the price" for repeated incidents of ASB conducted by their children. This could include fines, or even the loss of a social tenancy.[161] The government should learn from such examples and ensure that all police forces are consistently utilising new approaches to tackle corrosive ASB across communities. In addition, the government should make it easier to use powers to tackle prevalent forms of ASB and ensure enforcement agencies are able to quickly utilise powers to clamp down on crime that makes communities unsafe.

161 Nottinghamshire Police, Operation Reclaim: Parents could pay the price for their children's behaviour if they continue to cause problems in the city centre, May 2026. Accessed: https://www.nottinghamshire.police.uk/news/nottinghamshire/news/news/2026/may/operation-reclaim-parents-could-pay-the-price-for-their-childrens-behaviour-if-they-continue-to-cause-problems-in-the-city-centre/.

RECOMMENDATION 18

The Home Office should lead a cross-government review of ASB and its consequences, drawing on the powers and portfolios of other departments to ensure ASB carries clear, enforceable consequences. This review should also assess the appropriateness of existing ASB powers, the capacity of enforcement agencies to use them, and where decisive action from central government is needed to address specific and emerging forms of ASB.

Such measures could include the following:

- MHCLG should widen the statutory basis for possessing social housing as a result of a criminal conviction and/or breaching an ASB order. This would make repeat ASB or crime in a local authority area a legitimate ground for eviction from social housing. This liability should extend to other household members even if they are not named on the tenancy, including where the perpetrator is a child. While existing legislation gives grounds for possession due to ASB when the offence has taken place in the 'locality' of a home, we recommend that these provisions are amended so conditions for eviction are satisfied when the breach occurred anywhere within the respective local authority area.
- The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) should scale up the use of benefit deductions to recover unpaid ASB-related fines from claimants or members of their household. The DWP should introduce a presumption for deductions for court ordered fines to begin at the maximum deduction rate of 15 per cent, an increase from the current five per cent default for fines generally, and subject to the priority order governing any other debts already being recovered from the same award.
- The Home Office should create an expedited PSPO+ process for banning the wearing of face coverings in specified public spaces. This would allow local authorities, following approval from the chief officer of the police, to bring forward an immediate face-covering prohibition for a defined area, lasting a maximum of three months initially until confirmed. The order would lapse automatically unless a community consultation is completed and the order formally confirmed within the three month period.

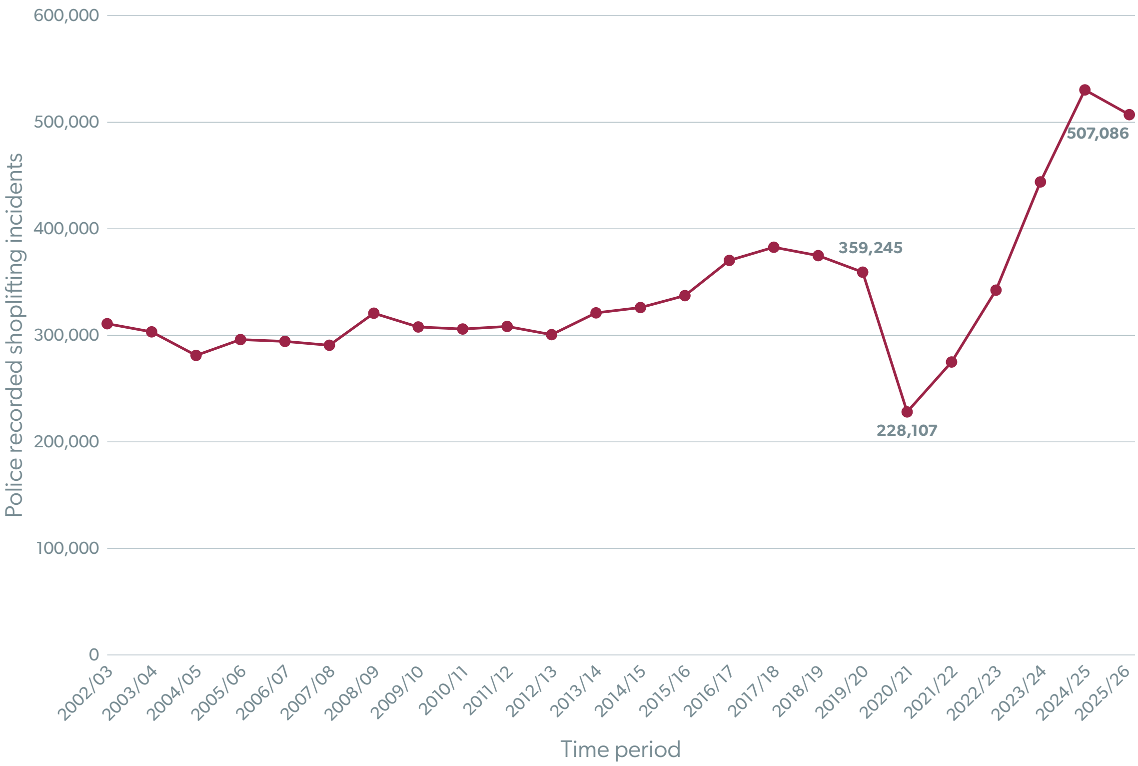
2.5 Shop theft

2.5.1 The state of shoplifting in Britain

Shoplifting, or shop theft, is the term used to describe theft from a shop by taking something without paying for it.[162] 507,086 shoplifting incidents were reported to the police in 2025/26, a decline from the record high of 530,324 incidents that were recorded in the year ending March 2025.[163] The latest figure is 41 per cent greater than pre-pandemic in 2019/20.[164]

162 The Sentencing Council, Shoplifting, n.d. Accessed: https://sentencingcouncil.org.uk/resources/common-offences/shoplifting/.
163 ONS, Crime in England and Wales: year ending March 2026, July 2026.
164 Ibid.

Figure 29: Police recorded shoplifting incidents over time



Source: CSJ analysis. ONS, Crime in England and Wales: Appendix tables year ending March 2026, July 2026.

Despite official statistics showing shoplifting offences at a near record high, they likely underestimate the true scale of the issue due to underreporting. The British Retail Consortium (BRC) estimate that there were a total of nearly 5.5 million shoplifting incidents in 2024/25,[165] while one third (33 per cent) of Brits say they have witnessed someone shoplifting in the last year.[166]

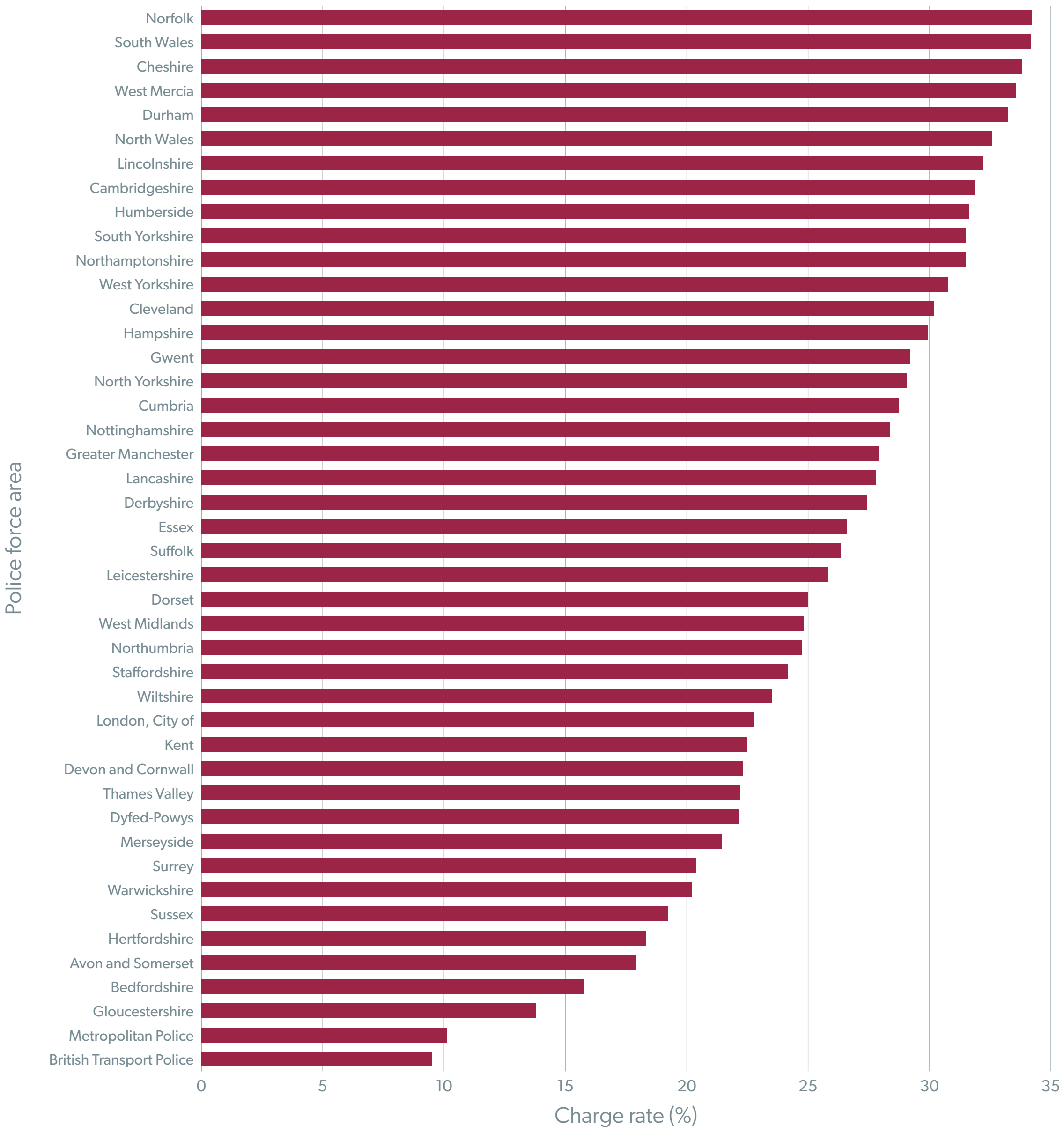
While the CSEW points to a steady decline in headline crime over time, shoplifting is one of the clearest examples of a 'low-level' offence that has increased significantly in recent years. There is also a lack of effective enforcement or consequence. Only one in five (20 per cent) police recorded shoplifting incidents resulted in a charge or court summons in 2024/25.[167] In 2025/26, the charge rate increased slightly to 23 per cent.[168] Enforcement also differs across police forces, with some being much more successful than others at charging individuals.

In 2025/26, over one in three (34 per cent) offenders were charged in Norfolk, South Wales, Cheshire, and West Mercia, followed by 33 per cent of offenders in Durham and North Wales.[169] These are the most successful police forces in England and Wales at issuing a charge or court summons for shoplifting offences.

165 BRC, BRC Crime Report 2026, n.d., p. 14.
166 YouGov, How do Britons feel about shoplifting, March 2026. Accessed: https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/54220-how-do-britons-feel-about-shoplifting.
167 Home Office, Police recorded crime and outcomes open data tables: Outcomes open data, year ending March 2025, April 2026.
168 Home Office, Police recorded crime and outcomes open data tables: Outcomes open data, year ending March 2026, July 2026.
169 Ibid.

This is in stark comparison to police forces like the Metropolitan Police, where just one in ten offenders are charged.[170] Other than the British Transport Police, who charged just nine per cent of offenders in 2025/26, the Metropolitan Police is the worst-performing police force in the country on this metric.[171]

Figure 30: Shoplifting charge rate in England and Wales in 2025/26



Source: CSJ analysis. Home Office, Police recorded crime and outcomes open data tables: Outcomes open data, year ending March 2026, July 2026.

170 Ibid.
171 Ibid.

The volume of shoplifting offences has increased, along with a downward trend in charge rates, due to several interrelated factors. These are:

- A de-prioritisation of 'low-level' offending made possible by badly designed policy.
- The cost-of-living crisis.
- Addiction to illegal drugs.
- Organised crime.
- Cultural toleration of low-level theft.

2.5.2 Police de-prioritisation and poorly designed policy

One reason that charge rates for shoplifting are low is that police forces have failed to prioritise the offence. This is partly a result of limited police capacity, particularly neighbourhood policing, but made worse by poorly designed legislation which explicitly classified shoplifting, where the value of goods stolen was under £200, as a summary only offence.

This had the effect of giving police forces the 'excuse' to de-prioritise low-value incidents. The result of this has been a loss of retailer and public confidence in the police to respond to cases of shoplifting, which is one explanation for the chasm between police recorded estimates of shoplifting and those of the BRC, as many retailers have simply stopped reporting crime.

The legislative change which re-classified shoplifting under £200 as a summary only offence came in 2014, through provisions in the *Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014*.[172] This meant that shoplifting offences, where the value of the goods stolen was under £200, became a summary only offence in the magistrates' court with a maximum prison sentence of six months. Instead of increasing police led prosecutions which was the stated intention of the policy change,[173] retailers said police forces stopped responding to low-value theft incidents at all.[174]

The £200 change has been named by retailers as one of the most significant causes of the increase in shoplifting in recent years.[175] The penalties, if one of the minority of offenders to ever be charged, were too low to ever sustain a meaningful deterrent. Shoplifting quickly became low-risk, high-reward. For example, summary shoplifting cases could be dealt with via a postal process, in the same way as a driving or parking offence. Offenders did not need to attend court and could enter a guilty plea via the post and pay a fine.[176] Retailers said that these changes led to an effective immunity for shoplifters, creating the very conditions for the explosion in offending since the Covid-19 pandemic.

The experiences of retailers are reflected in official data. Police recorded shoplifting offences increased by 10 per cent from 2014/15 to 2019/20, just before the Covid-19 pandemic.[177] Between 2014/15 and 2025/26, shoplifting offences increased by 56 per cent.[178] The charge rate was also higher a decade ago. In 2015/16, nearly one in three (31 per cent) recorded offences resulted in a charge, compared to just over one in five in 2025/26.[179]

172 Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014. Accessed: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/12/section/176.

173 Home Office, Home Secretary speech to Police Federation Annual Conference 2013, May 2023.

174 BRC, BRC Crime Report 2026, n.d., p. 20.

175 Ibid, p. 19.

176 Home Office, Guidance: Implementing Section 176 of the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime, and Policing Act 2014: Low-value shoplifting, June 2014, p. 4.

177 ONS, Crime in England and Wales: year ending March 2026, July 2026.

178 Ibid.

179 Home Office, Police recorded crime and outcomes open data tables year ending March 2016 and March 2026, April 2026.

Despite continuing challenges with the reporting of shoplifting offences and the police response to them, there are positive examples of local partnership working, in which coordinated action and greater intelligence-sharing between the police and local retailers have resulted in a decline in shoplifting offences

Case Study: Shoplifting on Station Road in Chingford and Woodford Green

Station Road had experienced a marked rise in organised shoplifting, with a significant and sustained impact on the businesses trading there. Local partners responded by convening a Shoplifting Summit, bringing together the local MP, Sir Iain Duncan Smith, neighbourhood police, and senior representatives of major retailers. The summit had three objectives: to establish a consistent approach to crime reporting, to secure additional policing resource for the area, and to support large retailers and independent shops alike.

The summit resulted in a focused plan built around better reporting, stronger policing, and closer collaboration with businesses.

Two new CCTV cameras were installed to support detection and evidence gathering. Undercover police work led to a prolific offender receiving a nine-month prison sentence. The police committed additional budget specifically to Station Road, funding increased routine patrols and targeted operations. A WhatsApp group for Station Road business owners was established and now has 160 members, allowing instant communication between businesses.

Progress was assessed at a second Crime Forum at which major retailers were brought back together. Stores reported that a higher proportion of incidents are now formally logged, enabling the police to build stronger cases against repeat offenders. Several retailers confirmed that theft of certain products had fallen by up to 80 per cent. Business owners also reported greater confidence that action was being taken, citing increased police visibility and a more joined-up relationship between officers and retailers.

The Station Road experience has demonstrated that months of coordinated action, partnership working, and sustained pressure can deliver clear and measurable results. Partners in the area are committed to continue working with the police, local businesses, and residents to tackle high street criminality.

2.5.3 The cost-of-living crisis

A lack of police capacity and poorly designed legislation have combined with wider social and economic pressures to drive an increase in shoplifting. One of these is the cost-of-living crisis, which began shortly after the Covid-19 pandemic. As per Figure 31, the increase in shoplifting incidents broadly mirrors the rise in inflation seen after the Covid-19 pandemic, with food and non-alcoholic beverages inflation far outpacing headline inflation (Consumer Price Index including owner occupiers' housing costs [CPIH]), hitting 19.2 per cent in the year ending March 2023. High rates of inflation had the effect of driving up the cost of basic household items, leading many to consider stealing in order to maintain their standard of living, as well as creating the conditions for a black market in cheaper household and luxury goods that had been stolen.

Figure 31: CPIH and food and non-alcoholic beverages inflation rate

Source: CSJ recreation. ONS, Figure 4: Consumer price inflation, UK: June 2026, July 2026.

There is no doubt that the cost-of-living crisis contributed to the increase in shoplifting incidents as more individuals struggled to afford basic goods. The increase in food bank use is also testament to the growth in financial difficulties since the pandemic.[180] However, intertwined with this is a change in cultural attitudes, where individuals would rather steal, than make trade-offs in how they choose to live their life.

For example, during the immediate cost of living crisis, the BBC spoke to one woman who said: "If I was earning enough, I'd probably stop [stealing]. At the moment, I have to choose between paying for food or being able to go out to see my friends. I shouldn't have to make that choice."[181]

This statement reveals something more than just financial hardship alone. Embedded within it is a moral judgement, an assumption of entitlement to a certain standard of living, one this individual was unwilling to compromise on. Rather than adjusting expectation to live within reduced means, she turned to theft to preserve her lifestyle. We outline how changing cultural attitudes could have contributed to the increase in shoplifting in section 2.5.6.

180 CSJ, Lonely Nation Part 4: Loneliness and food banks, December 2024, p. 13.

181 BBC News, 'The cost of living started my shoplifting': Why stealing goods is on the rise, July 2023. Accessed: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-66049150.

2.5.4 Addiction to illegal drugs

Shop theft is often related to illegal drug addiction, providing a source of income for people with an active drug dependency. The offender will steal produce, and then sell it on to an individual or unscrupulous business to fund the purchase of drugs, or to keep for themselves. Historic research by the Home Office in 2014, referenced as recently as April 2024,[182] estimated that as much as 70 per cent of shop theft is drug related.[183]

CSJ analysis suggests that drug addiction is worsening in Britain, possibly contributing to the surge in shoplifting.[184] In 2024, 5,565 deaths related to drug poisoning were registered, an increase from the year before.[185] Furthermore, the age-standardised mortality rate for deaths related to drug poisoning has risen every year since 2012.[186] 2.9 million people reported using any drug in the year ending March 2025, approximately 8.7 per cent of the population, a 0.1 per cent decline from the year before.[187]

In 2018, the CSJ published *Desperate for a Fix,* which undertook an inquiry into the nature of drug related shoplifting and theft. It found a cross-government failure to tackle the addictions that fuel a significant proportion of shop theft.[188] The report identified that the criminal justice system was set up to manage offenders quickly, rather than genuinely rehabilitate them.

Since 2019/20, there has been no progress in improving rehabilitation for shoplifters who come into contact with the criminal justice system. One metric for assessing rehabilitation among shoplifters with active addictions, and across the offender cohort as a whole is reoffending rates.

The problem of reoffending is reinforced by ACS analysis, which found that 45 per cent of shop thieves were repeat offenders.[189] Individuals with an active drug addiction are likely to be among the most prolific and repeat offenders, as their addiction pushes them into frequently stealing.

MoJ data shows that two thirds (67 per cent) of shoplifters go on to commit another offence within a year of conviction, an increase from 55 per cent since 2019/20, with the average offender committing an additional nine offences.[190] For those who have served a custodial sentence, re-offending is even worse, with 87 per cent going on to commit an additional offence within 12 months of their sentence.[191] The number of re-offences has grown by 47,365 from 2019/20, despite the number of reoffenders falling by 881.[192] This indicates that a growing number of reoffences are being committed by a smaller number of more prolific offenders, although this pool has been growing since the low of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020/21. Full figures can be seen below in Table 3.

182 HM Government, Fighting Retail Crime: More action, April 2024, p. 8.
183 Home Office, Understanding organised crime: estimating the scale and the social and economic costs, October 2013, p. 133.
184 CSJ, Still Ambitious for Recovery: How to address illegal drug addiction and strengthen law enforcement's role, December 2024.
185 ONS, Deaths related to drug poisoning in England and Wales: 2024 registrations, October 2025.
186 Ibid.
187 ONS, Drug misuse in England and Wales: year ending March 2025, December 2025.
188 CSJ, Desperate for a Fix: Using shop theft and a Second Chance Programme to get tough on the causes of prolific drug-addicted offending, June 2018, p. 4.
189 ACS, Retail Crime: What Works and What's Next, 2025, p. 5.
190 House of Commons, Shoplifting: Reoffenders (UIN127409), April 2026.
191 Ibid.
192 Ibid.

Table 3: Reoffending rate for adult offenders (shoplifting)

	Apr 2019-Mar 2020	Apr 2020-Mar 2021	Apr 2021-Mar 2022	Apr 2022-Mar 2023	Apr 2023-Mar 2024
Proportion of offenders who reoffend (%)	**55.3**	**54.4**	**60.7**	**63.8**	**66.8**
Average number of reoffences per reoffender	5.49	5.77	6.44	7.33	9.12
Number of reoffences	83,917	48,692	58,242	78,907	131,282
Number of reoffenders	15,277	8,437	9,045	10,758	14,396
Number of offenders in cohort	27,621	15,504	14,908	16,850	21,545

Source: MoJ data via answer to Written Parliamentary Question UIN 127409, April 2026.

Note: A proven reoffence is defined as any offence committed in a 12-month follow-up period that resulted in a court conviction or caution in this timeframe or a further six-month waiting period (to allow time for cases to progress through the courts).

In *Desperate for a Fix*, we recommended a new approach to sentencing for prolific shoplifters who were committed to making a recovery from their addiction(s), the Second Chance Programme. This would be a two-year rehabilitative sentence for prolific drug-addicted offenders, in place of a custodial sentence in the prison estate. The scheme would begin with a secure phase, ensuring detox and protection for the public, before transferring to a custodial sentence in the community.

In addition to the Second Chance Programme, we recommended the establishment of Problem Solving Courts (PSCs), specifically for addressing the underlying addictions fuelling criminality. The first PSCs were announced in 2022,[193] later rebranded as Intensive Supervision Courts (ISCs) in a national pilot.

An evaluation report published in November 2025 found that the pilots had set 194 ISC sentences, with 78 per cent ongoing or successfully completed.[194] Importantly, the evaluation found that 83 per cent of individuals attended and complied with rehabilitative requirements.[195] In June 2026, the government announced a £9 million funding boost to double the number of ISCs to 11 sites, with a specific focus on prolific offenders, women, and those with substance misuse issues.[196]

2.5.5 Organised crime

Evidence from retailers suggests that shoplifting is becoming increasing organised. The BRC state that "organised retail crime groups are increasingly targeting high-value, easily resold goods, and exploiting gaps in enforcement".[197] ACS polling of retailers shows that over half (52 per cent) say that incidents involving organised crime groups have increased in the last 12 months.[198] In a major intervention after a high-profile organised shoplifting event at an M&S shop in Clapham in Spring 2026, M&S' Retail Director said that shoplifting "is becoming more brazen, more organised and more aggressive."[199]

193 MoJ, New Problem-Solving Courts to combat drug and alcohol-fuelled crime, July 2022. Accessed: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-problem-solving-courts-to-combat-drug-and-alcohol-fuelled-crime.

194 MoJ, Process evaluation of the Intensive Supervision Courts pilot: Final Report, 2025, p. 1.

195 Ibid, p. 28.

196 MoJ, Tough US-style courts to crack down on repeat offenders, June 2026. Accessed: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/tough-us-style-courts-to-crack-down-on-repeat-offenders.

197 BRC, BRC Crime Report 2026, n.d., p. 7.

198 ACS, Retail Crime: Turning Point, 2026, p. 8.

199 M&S, Retail crime chips away confidence in our High Streets, n.d. Accessed: https://corporate.marksandspencer.com/newsroom/blog/retail-crime-chips-away-confidence-our-high-streets.

> *"In the past week alone we have had gangs forcing open locked cabinets and stripping shelves, two men brazenly emptying the shelves of steak and walking out, a large group of young people ransacking a store before assaulting a security guard, a colleague headbutted trying to defuse a situation and another hospitalised after having ammonia thrown in their face."*
>
> **M&S, Spring 2026**[200]

Many OCGs steal to order, selling stolen goods on to criminal high street businesses who are interested in marketing them at a reduced price. ACS polling shows that 25 per cent of independent retailers have noticed products stolen from their store being resold in their area.[201]

Despite these challenges, there is evidence that the police response to organised shop theft is improving, with Opal (the national intelligence unit focused on organised acquisitive crime) securing a 50 per cent reduction in offending since 2024 among the OCGs it identified.[202] Opal saw 148 arrests in first year of operation, responsible for £8 million worth of theft.[203]

While the increasingly organised nature of shoplifting has been recognised by the government as a serious concern, enforcement and sentencing risks being left behind by the evolution in offending. For example, retailers told us that organised criminals can easily exploit legislation, referencing the recently removed £200 threshold. In this instance, organised criminals would exploit the law by stealing less than £200 worth of goods in each incident.[204] Over a long period, however, the cumulative value of stolen goods would be much higher.

In other incidents, experts told us that OCGs would target several retail parks over a few hours, raiding stores like Currys PC World for high value IT goods. Often, these goods would be re-sold to criminal high street businesses, with the OCG operating as a type of criminal wholesaler. Operation Zoridon, run by the Metropolitan Police, is one example of a police response to this type of crime. During the operation the police identified businesses suspected of handling stolen goods, and recovered a total of £150,000 in products, including phones and gaming consoles.[205]

2.5.6 Cultural toleration of low-level theft

In addition to the cost-of-living crisis, addiction, and organised criminality, there are growing concerns that a broader cultural acceptance of shoplifting has led to an increase in the offence, or at the least created the conditions for it.

This has been particularly referenced in political debate in relation to 'middle-class' shoplifters, individuals who would never consider committing a 'brazen crime', but who increasingly consider it a 'victimless' act to steal a 'low value' item from a shop, or not to swipe an item at the self-checkout till. A survey by

200 Ibid.

201 ACS, Retail Crime: Turning Point, 2026, p. 8.

202 National Police Chief's Council (NPCC), Police & retailers unite to dismantle organised crime groups, May 2025. Accessed: https://news.npcc.police.uk/releases/police-and-retailer-collaboration-brings-down-organised-crime-groups.

203 Ibid.

204 BRC, BRC Crime Report 2026, n.d., p. 15.

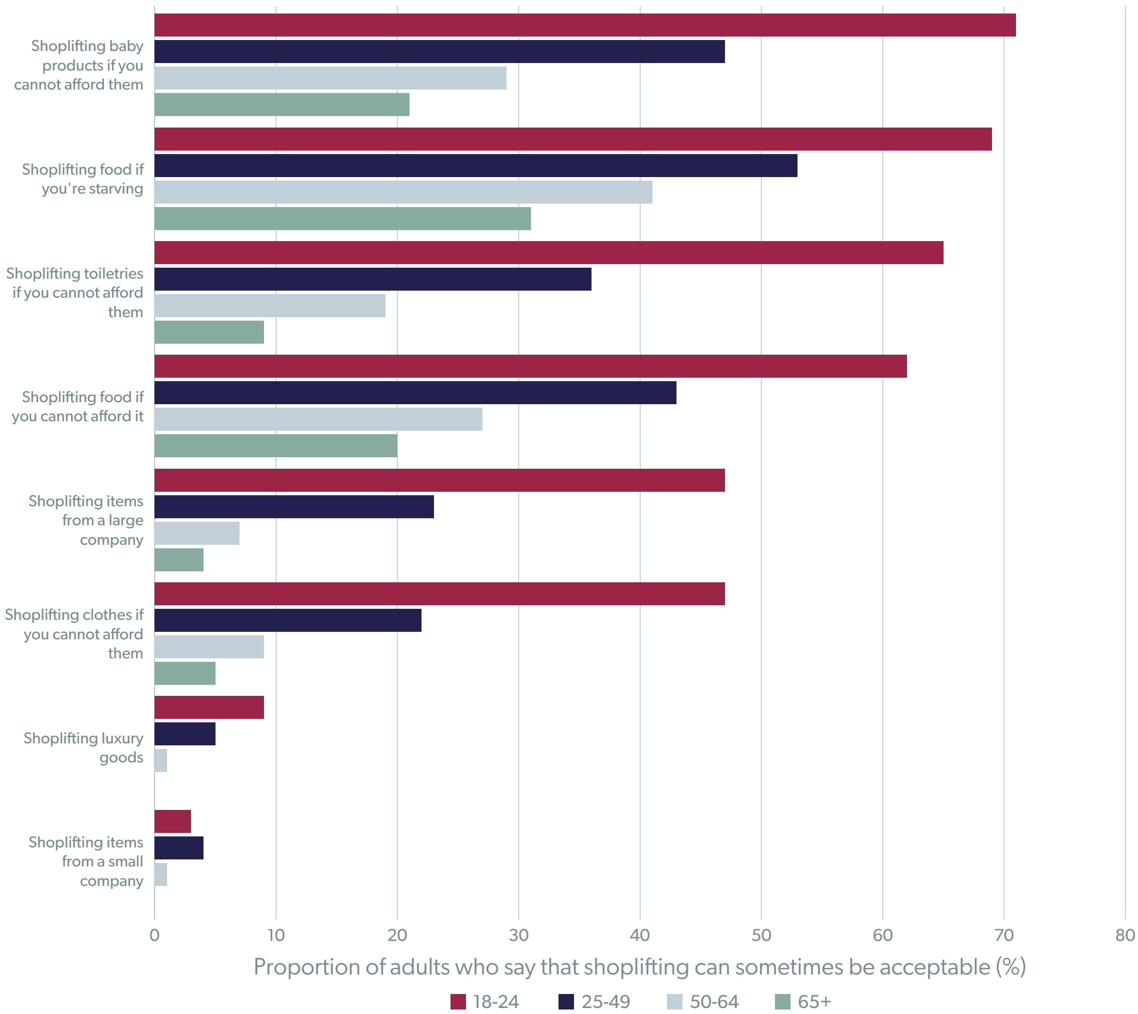
205 College of Policing, Operation Zoridon – disruption of handling stolen goods, March 2025. Accessed: https://www.college.police.uk/support-forces/practices/operation-zoridon-disruption-handling-stolen-goods.

The Grocer in January 2025 found that well over one in three (37 per cent) UK shoppers admitted to not scanning some items when using self-checkout stations at the supermarket.[206]

This issue was referenced by the former Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire, Dame Diana Johnson MP, in 2025. She spoke about her concern regarding 'middle class' shoplifting, pointing towards a trend of offending across a variety of different socio-economic groups.[207]

There is also an inter-generational split when it comes to attitudes towards shoplifting, and if it can ever be acceptable. While shoplifting is considered as an at least fairly serious crime by the vast majority (74 per cent) of the general population, attitudes do vary considerably by age.[208] Over half (54 per cent) of 18–24-year-olds say that shoplifting is not a very serious crime, falling to just six per cent of those aged 65 plus.[209] Nearly half of 18–24-year-olds think it can sometimes be acceptable to shoplift items from a large company, compared to just four per cent of those aged over 65 plus.[210]

Figure 32: Attitudes to shoplifting by age group



Source: CSJ analysis. YouGov, How do Briton's feel about shoplifting?, March 2026. Accessed: https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/54220-how-do-britons-feel-about-shoplifting.

206 The Grocer, Self-checkouts: 37 per cent of shoppers admit to stealing, January 2025. Accessed: https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/news/self-checkouts-37-of-shoppers-admit-to-stealing/700524.article.

207 The Telegraph, Labour blames middle-class shoplifters for pushing up prices, July 2025. Accessed: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2025/07/15/labour-blames-middle-class-shoplifters-for-pushing-up-price/.

208 YouGov, How do Briton's feel about shoplifting?, March 2026. Accessed: https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/54220-how-do-britons-feel-about-shoplifting.

209 Ibid.

210 Ibid.

It is difficult to establish whether a cultural acceptance of shoplifting, among certain groups, preceded weaknesses in legislation and enforcement, or whether a lack of enforcement and deterrence set in motion a chain of events that led many to believe they could 'get away with' shop theft. Nonetheless, it is clear that cost of living pressures and weak enforcement has compounded any shift in cultural attitudes, together contributing to the rise in shoplifting.

Tackling a growing cultural acceptance of shoplifting requires responding to the crime with the gravity it deserves. For years, shoplifting has proliferated as it has come to be seen as a low-risk, low-consequence offence. To end this crisis, the government must take a new zero-tolerance approach to shoplifting, ensuring that offenders feel the full weight of enforcement and the law.

2.5.7 A zero-tolerance approach to shoplifting

A zero-tolerance approach to shoplifting must be two pronged. The first prong should be focused on tackling offending that is related to entrenched disadvantage and poverty, such as addiction to illegal drugs. Sentencing should take this into account, giving offenders who are willing to rehabilitate a meaningful opportunity to do so, with appropriate safeguards in place to protect the public and ensure an appropriate deprivation of liberty as punishment for criminality.

The second prong should be focused on scaling-up enforcement and responding to shoplifting with the gravity that it deserves. Many offenders currently treat shoplifting as a low-risk, high-reward crime. Ending the shoplifting free-for-all requires a resolute focus on increasing the detection of offences, deepening integration between police and retailers to strengthen reporting and evidence-sharing, and, most importantly, increasing the charging and sentencing of offenders in a short period of time.

Tackling shoplifting related to illegal drug addiction

While we welcome the commitment to expand the number of ISCs, more must be done to ensure there are sufficient sentencing options for shoplifters with active drug addictions, that are sufficiently punitive to meaningfully deprive an offender of their liberty, while also giving a real opportunity for rehabilitation. This has become particularly important after changes to 12-month custodial sentences in the *Sentencing Act 2026*, under which, there is a presumption to suspend.[211]

As sentences served in the community are likely to become more common for shop theft offences, there is a need to ensure they are meaningfully robust as well as rehabilitative. The CSJ has long argued that existing sentencing for drug addicted offenders has failed in both these regards.[212]

This is why the CSJ has made the case for the introduction of a new custodial sentence for the criminal courts, the Intensive Control and Rehabilitation Order (ICRO).[213] This new sentence would be served in the community, using Electronic Monitoring, curfew requirements, and regular periodic reviews before the court. The availability and development of technology means that we can go further than ever before in seeking alternatives to custody which robustly punish the offender, while safeguarding the public and commanding the confidence of sentencers.

The ICRO sits between the Suspended Sentence Order (SSO) and Immediate Custody in the prison estate. The availability of the ICRO will be dependent on the court being satisfied that an eligibility test

211 MoJ, Sentencing Bill: sentencing measures factsheet, November 2025.

212 CSJ, Desperate for a Fix: Using shop theft and a Second Chance Programme to get tough on the causes of prolific drug-addicted offending, June 2018, p. 28.

213 CSJ, All Options: The case for a different and better kind of custodial sentence, May 2025.

is met. The ICRO would only be used when the custodial threshold has been passed and be aimed at sentences of three years or less. It is not designed to replace the SSO but used when the SSO is deemed insufficient or unavailable in law.

Under current sentencing reforms, the ICRO would strengthen sentences served in the community by ensuring they suitably punish an offender by making requirements such as GPS tagging and curfews a requirement of the sentence.

In addition, tools like the ICRO can help to fulfil wider public expectations of the criminal justice system. For example, analysis by The Common Ground Justice Project has found that beyond repercussion, policies which make offenders repair the damage caused by their crime, as well as take responsibility for their actions, are popular with the public. The ICRO could therefore link unpaid work requirements to repairing the harm done on the high street where they offended, by cleaning up litter or graffiti, or by paying back into a victim's levy to support initiatives on the high street.

Furthermore, use of tools like the ICRO for individuals with an active drug addiction find support from the public. When asked to choose between conviction packages for offenders, the public choose intensive supervision and treatment, when made aware of how many individuals have complex needs like addiction, mental health, or are homeless.

When presented with a scenario of a prolific shoplifter who breached a court order banning him from shops, 53 per cent of the public included prison within their response, and 55 per cent compulsory treatment.[214] However, when told additionally that the offender is homeless and addicted, and chooses to steal to fund drug use, support for treatment increases to 73 per cent, and prison falls to 43 per cent.[215] Such responses demonstrate that there is public support for criminal justice approaches that can meaningfully offer rehabilitation when an individual's offending is related to problems like addiction.

RECOMMENDATION 19

The MoJ should establish a new custodial sentence for the criminal courts in England, the ICRO. The ICRO should sit between the SSO and Immediate Custody in the prison estate. The ICRO should operate as an immediate custodial sentence outside the prison estate, enforced by punitive requirements, such as unpaid work, electronic tagging, limited only by the discretion of the court and a package of rehabilitation and reform to maximise the prospects of long-term behavioural change. The offender will be directly accountable to the courts, and their sentence will remain subject to changes deemed appropriate by a judge that will review progress. The availability of the ICRO will be dependent on the court being satisfied that an eligibility test is met.

The ICRO would give judges a more effective tool to suitably punish offenders guilty of shop theft where a custodial sentence would otherwise be given. However, many offenders would not meet this threshold, for example, between 2020–2024, 12 per cent of sentences for shop theft were SSOs, while 23 per cent were Community Orders.[216]

214 Polling of 1,492 UK adults conducted by the Common Ground Justice Project and Focaldata, June 2026.

215 Ibid.

216 The Sentencing Academy, Theft from a shop: Bringing together relevant statistics and trends relating to sentencing, August 2025. Accessed: https://www.sentencingacademy.org.uk/sentencinghub/snapshot/shoplifting/.

To strengthen existing SSOs and Community Orders, taking into account the new presumption to suspend sentences of 12 months or under, we recommend that the MoJ issue a new guideline or statutory presumption to scale up the restrictive elements of a SSO for certain offenders found guilty of shop theft.

If an offender has already been found guilty of a previous shop theft offence and/or is linked to organised retail crime, the courts should impose mandatory requirements that are otherwise discretionary for Community Orders and SSOs. All offenders in this more serious group should be subject to GPS tagging, a curfew, and a restriction requirement (e.g. to ban them from the high street) as primary requirements. For this group of offenders, these requirements would no longer be discretionary but presumed. In addition, if an active addiction is contributing to offending behaviour, there should be a requirement to engage in a treatment programme.

Alongside the ICRO, a strengthened SSO and Community Order would ensure that the former is used only for those who would otherwise be sentenced to custody, while also ensuring there is a more robust SSO and Community Order regime for offenders who have already committed a shop theft offence, and/or who are linked to organised retail crime.

RECOMMENDATION 20

The Sentencing Council should issue a new guideline for offenders found guilty of repeat shop theft, or whose offending is linked to organised retail crime, extending the restrictive elements of an SSO and Community Order. All offenders in this group should be presumed subject to GPS tagging, a curfew, location restrictions (e.g. exclusion from the high street) and addiction treatment (if relevant) as primary requirements of their sentence. All other requirements should remain at the judge's discretion. Should this not be achievable through sentencing guidelines alone, the MoJ should bring forward a statutory presumption to operationalise a strengthened SSO and Community Order for this group of offenders.

Scaling-up enforcement to crack down on shoplifting

Below we outline the steps the government should take to scale-up enforcement against shoplifting. This includes the following:

1. Exempting shop theft from the presumption to suspend custodial sentences of 12 months and under.
2. Rolling out fast-track courts to expand access to immediate justice.
3. Rolling out facial recognition technology in shops and integrating retail and police data.
4. Extending the powers of retail security guards to arrest and detain offenders and carry defensive equipment like incapacitant sprays.

Exempting shop theft from the presumption to suspend short custodial sentences

Together, ISCs, the ICRO, Community Orders, and SSOs have the potential to transform outcomes for offenders whose criminality is fuelled by active drug addictions and other forms of disadvantage, by giving them the opportunity to serve their sentence in the community. These instruments can suitably deprive an individual of their liberty as a punishment for crime but also give a meaningful opportunity for recovery and rehabilitation.

However, sentencing that is weighted towards rehabilitation must be balanced by strong alternatives for those who show no willingness to change. Furthermore, with prison capacity extremely limited, there is a genuine risk that the government use tools like the ICRO, SSOs, and Community Orders more broadly, as a way to manage prison space, rather than in the best interests of victims, the public, and offenders.

For example, the government explicitly referenced capacity within the prison estate as a reason for reforming sentencing within the *Sentencing Act 2026*, in particular the presumption to suspend all sentences of 12 months and under.[217] While this reflects a genuine operational pressure, it is the wrong basis on which to reform sentencing. It shows sentencing policy being driven by extraneous concerns such as prison capacity, rather than by what best serves victims, the public, and the offender.

Deploying suspended and community sentences as a means to manage prison capacity risks undermining deterrence and the safety of the public. Under the new rules, almost every shoplifter currently in custody would otherwise have been subject to the presumption to suspend short sentences as nearly all serve sentences of under 12 months. 13,415 individuals were sentenced to immediate custody for shop theft in the year ending December 2025, with only 152 sentenced to over 12 months in custody.[218]

Some offenders genuinely committed to rehabilitation may benefit from sentences in the community but, by uniformly devaluing custodial sentencing, the government risks weakening deterrence for shoplifting, repeating the same error the previous government made in introducing the £200 summary offence threshold.

A plan to restore security to Britain's high streets, town, and city centres must ensure that sentencing for crimes like shoplifting remain a meaningful deterrent, and that the courts have the ability to remove people from the community when they pose a continued risk. To this end, we therefore recommend that the MoJ exempt shop theft from the presumption to suspend short sentences of 12 months and under.

This would mean that, for custodial sentences of 12 months or under for shop theft, judges would retain full discretion to impose immediate custody where the offence or offender history warrants it, particularly for the most prolific offenders who pose an ongoing risk. In the longer term, we recommend that the government remove the presumption to suspend short sentences completely when the prison overcrowding crisis has been resolved. The presumption should not become a permanent feature of sentencing policy.

RECOMMENDATION 21

The MoJ should exempt sentencing for shop theft from the presumption to suspend short sentences. This would mean that for short custodial sentences of 12 months or less, judges would be under no obligation to suspend a sentence. In the long term, the MoJ should remove the presumption to suspend short sentences when the prison overcrowding crisis has been resolved.

217 MoJ, Sentencing Bill: Sentencing measures factsheet, November 2025.
218 MoJ, Criminal Justice Statistics Quarterly: December 2025, June 2026.

Rolling out fast-track courts to expand access to immediate justice

A zero-tolerance approach to shoplifting must be resolutely focused on increasing the number of crimes that result in a charge, as well as increasing access to more immediate justice. The Metropolitan Police has written to the Home Secretary along these lines, asking for access to fast-track processes that bring prolific offenders before the courts within 72 hours of a charge.[219]

We echo these calls and recommend that the MoJ establish a series of fast-track courts, specifically designed to quickly convict and sentence for 'low-level' offences like shoplifting and ASB. This would ensure the quick resolution of low-level offending where there is clear evidence and remove unnecessary delays. In 2012, The Standard reported on similar proposals recommended by The Magistrates Association, which recommended that the government establish magistrates' courts in shopping centres like Westfield, with glass walls, allowing the public to clearly see justice being done.[220] We recommend that the government consider such approaches to increase public awareness and confidence in the justice system.

RECOMMENDATION 22

The MoJ should establish a series of 'fast track' courts, piloted in localities that suffer from high rates of retail crime, ASB, and other 'low-level' offending. Such courts should be designed to progress cases in 72 hours, from initial charge to sentencing. The MoJ should explore the possibility of utilising empty retail space on high streets or in shopping centres for new courts, as a means of increasing public awareness and confidence in the justice system.

Rolling out facial recognition technology in shops and integrating retail and police data

Retailers are leading the way in developing innovative responses to prevent shoplifting occurring in the first place and identifying the criminals responsible. This is being achieved through investment in advanced technology like facial recognition and artificial intelligence (AI). A new zero-tolerance approach to shoplifting is dependent on the scaling-up of this technology within shops and substantial data sharing between businesses and the police to identify repeat offenders, fuse evidence across multiple shops, and provide law enforcement with the information they need to build a case.

One example of new technology is Auror, a retail crime intelligence platform, which was established to connect isolated incidents of crime across multiple different locations and shops, and thereby build the evidence case against individuals and OCGs. During 2024/25, Auror's partnership with Boots led to the arrest of 42 individuals responsible for thefts across 78 stores.[221] In April 2026, it was announced that the Met Police and Auror had launched a pilot allowing the police to securely receive crime reports and evidence directly from retailers.[222]

219 Metropolitan Police, Met and retailers urge government to fast-track justice for repeat shoplifters, June 2026. Accessed: https://news.met.police.uk/news/met-and-retailers-urge-government-to-fast-track-justice-for-repeat-shoplifters-510569.

220 The Standard, Shop around for justice with courts at Westfield checkouts, April 2012. Accessed: https://www.standard.co.uk/hp/front/shop-around-for-justice-with-courts-at-westfield-checkouts-6503882.html.

221 Auror, UK retailer Boots and intelligence unit Opal partner on 15 operations involving 136 offenders, n.d. Accessed: https://www.auror.co/uk/customers/boots-opal-partnership.

222 Auror, Auror rolls out across London to take on repeat offenders and organised retail crime, April 2026. Accessed: https://www.auror.co/uk/media-center/auror-rolls-out-across-london-to-take-on-repeat-offenders-and-organised-retail-crime.

Facial recognition technology is proving to be one of the most effective approaches to identifying offenders. The use of fast-tracked Retrospective Facial Recognition (RFR) processes by the Metropolitan Police has achieved an 80.5 per cent identification rate for unknown retail offenders, and in one case identified a suspect linked to 52 previously unsolved offences.[223]

In Croydon, where the Home Office and Metropolitan Police tested a pilot using static live facial recognition cameras, there was a 10.5 per cent reduction in crime compared to the same period last year, while 172 arrests took place over 24 separate occasions when the cameras were switched on.[224] Greater integration between industry and police data could achieve similarly impressive outcomes if this technology is rolled out further.

While progress is welcome, we were told by retailers that many businesses lack the confidence to utilise these new forms of technology due to legal risk. Legal uncertainty is also hampering police forces' ability to roll out facial recognition. This is why the Home Office has proposed to establish a new legal framework for law enforcement, concluding that the current framework "does not give the police sufficient confidence to use it at significantly greater scale."[225]

While it is welcome that the government is providing a stronger foundation for police forces to utilise this technology, the retail sector requires similar support. While the private sector currently falls outside the scope of the government's new framework, they have indicated that the consultation will consider whether the framework should extend to other organisations.[226] Further clarity for the private sector within the government's consultation response would help retailers utilise this new technology to its fullest extent. Furthermore, the government should consider a separate legal framework for private businesses to utilise technologies like facial recognition.

RECOMMENDATION 23

The Home Office should consult on a new legal framework for private sector businesses to use biometrics, facial recognition, and similar technologies. This should build upon the ongoing consultation for law enforcement's use of these technologies. This consultation should lead to the establishment of a clear legal framework that gives retailers the maximum confidence and ability to utilise new technologies to tackle crime. Within this consultation, the Home Office should establish model data sharing agreements that can be easily replicated by police forces and local businesses to enable greater data sharing at a local level.

223 Metropolitan Police, Met and retailers urge government to fast-track justice for repeat shoplifters, June 2026. Accessed: https://news.met.police.uk/news/met-and-retailers-urge-government-to-fast-track-justice-for-repeat-shoplifters-510569.

224 Metropolitan Police, Met makes one arrest every 35 minutes during live facial recognition pilot, May 2026. Accessed: https://news.met.police.uk/news/met-makes-one-arrest-every-35-minutes-during-live-facial-recognition-pilot-509256.

225 Home Office, New legal framework for law enforcement use of biometrics, facial recognition and similar technologies: Government consultation, December 2025, p. 5.

226 Ibid, p. 10.

Extended powers for shop security guards

In addition to facial recognition, retailers would benefit from legal clarity when it comes to the use of force by security guards. At present, security guards hold no powers beyond those of an ordinary citizen and are prohibited from carrying defensive equipment such as batons or incapacitant sprays.

To avoid legal risk, many retailers instruct their security guards to make no physical intervention when a shoplifter is carrying out an offence. Their presence is instead meant to deter and help deescalate situations. While this is an understandable management of legal risk, it turns security guards into mere observers of crime and implies there is no consequence to committing an offence.

One solution to this is giving businesses greater legal confidence to instruct security guards to take a more forthright approach to shoplifters in store, to stop crime happening as it occurs. Lord Walker of Broxton, Executive Chairman of supermarket chain Iceland, has proposed legislation that would allow trained retail security guards to carry equipment such as truncheons, extendable batons, and pepper spray under a formal licensing scheme.[227] The Security Industry Authority (SIA), which licences those working as security guards, is well placed to design and administer a more rigorous licence for holding such equipment.

Alongside the question of equipment, there is an urgent need for greater legal certainty around powers of arrest and detention. Although security guards may exercise citizen's arrest powers, many retailers and individual guards feel unable to use them in practice due to fear of legal liability. This concern was recognised during the passage of the *Crime and Policing Act 2026*, when Lord Blencathra tabled an amendment which would have given retail security staff the power to arrest and detain those caught in the act of stealing, subject to robust safeguards including mandatory training, body-worn cameras, minimum force requirements, secure detention rooms, and an immediate obligation to contact police.[228] Though the amendment was not moved, Lord Blencathra's explanatory statement made clear that the law in this area "needs clarification so that properly trained security staff can make lawful arrests and detain suspected thieves until the police arrive."[229]

We echo the proposals made by Lords Walker and Blencathra and recommend that the government introduce new legislation creating a defined statutory power of detention for specifically licensed security staff, built on the safeguards set out in Amendment 216B.[230]

Any detention of a suspect by a security guard should only continue until the police arrive at an incident. The use of this power should be contingent upon immediate police notification. However, the police are unable to respond to every shoplifting incident, and when this is the case, security guards should be empowered to use reasonable force to recover stolen stock (including by undertaking a search), and to remove an individual from a shop premises. Alongside this, retailers should be expected to report every incident of shoplifting to the police, alongside evidence such as CCTV or photos.

Compliance with these conditions should determine the lawfulness of detention and reasonable force, giving security staff certainty by introducing clear criteria. Eligibility to exercise this power should be tied to a new SIA licence category, with the SIA responsible for administering the training and compliance standards attached to it. This should be accompanied by a licensing framework enabling holders of this licence to carry approved defensive equipment.

227 Financial Times, Arm guards with pepper spray to stop shoplifters, says UK government adviser, May 2026. Accessed: https://www.ft.com/content/a15ee33c-db04–46cb-b660-d03bdb1fdf34?syn-25a6b1a6=1.

228 House of Lords, Crime and Policing Bill: Volume 850 debated on Wednesday 19 November 2025, November 2025.

229 House of Lords, Lord Blencathra's amendment (216B) after Clause 39: Crime and Policing Act 2026, n.d.

230 Ibid.

A key aim of these reforms should be to ensure immediate repercussion for committing a crime. Granting security guards powers to be able to meaningfully prevent and stop crime from happening could go far to tackle the perception that shoplifting carries no consequences.

RECOMMENDATION 24

The Home Office should bring forward legislation creating a defined statutory power of detention for licensed retail security guards, in specified settings such as shops, modelled on the safeguards proposed in Lord Blencathra's Amendment 216B: mandatory training, body-worn cameras, minimum force requirements, secure detention rooms, and immediate notification of the police.

If the police are unable to attend within a reasonable time period, security guards should be able to use reasonable force to recover stock from a thief (including by undertaking a search), and to remove that individual from the premises, alongside the expectation that the retailer immediately reports the incident to the police.

Eligibility to exercise this power should be tied to a new SIA-administered licence category. This should be accompanied by a licensing framework enabling holders of this licence to carry approved defensive equipment.

Chapter Three:

High streets to connect and belong

While security acts as the foundation, strong communities are also dependent on connection and belonging. In this chapter, we consider how the government can strengthen these latter two pillars of community life through efforts to renew Britain's high streets.

Connection is facilitated by the assets within communities that bring people together. Pubs, cafes, restaurants, parks, community centres, and places of worship are just some examples. Belonging is enabled by agency, which is when communities feel a meaningful stake in how their area changes and develops over time.

In this chapter we outline a set of policy recommendations to foster connection and belonging. These include a permanently lower rate of VAT for hospitality, planning reform to incentivise high street regeneration, and supercharged community ownership powers.

3.1 Securing the future of hospitality

Hospitality is the backbone of the modern high street. Evidence shows that as traditional retail has declined, the hospitality sector has increased in size. A longitudinal study of retail centres in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Hull, Liverpool, and Nottingham found that over a 20-year period, beauty, health, food, and drink outlets, as well as financial and professionals services, had partially offset the decline in retail.[231] The study recommended a speeding up of this adjustment.[232]

Another study found that the Covid-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst accelerating the transformation of the retail landscape and its decline.[233] The study found evidence to suggest that consumer preferences for leisure activities, including the night-time economy, have become particularly important for high streets in the post-pandemic era.[234]

While hospitality plays a critical role in sustaining the modern high street, it also contributes to a wide range of social benefits. Britain's pubs, restaurants, cafes, and bars operate as valuable connectors, providing spaces for people to meet and enjoy life together.

Research conducted by the University of Oxford has shown that frequenting a local pub can directly affect social network size and life satisfaction, with those who visit a local pub tending to feel more socially

231 Orr, Alison., et al., "Not quite the 'death of the high street' in UK city centres: Rising vacancy rates and the shift in property use richness and diversity", *Science Direct* (133), February 2023.

232 Ibid.

233 Dolega, Les., "Reconfiguration and economic performance of British retail centres in the post-pandemic era", *The International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research*, January 2026, pp. 1–39.

234 Ibid.

engaged and contented.[235] Academics at Loughborough University found similar, that pubs play a vital role in a web of social infrastructure, allowing people to feel active and connected with the outside world.[236] Punch Pubs, in collaboration with Northumbria University, identified that their average pub inputted up to £1.3 million in economic and social value into the local community.[237]

However, despite the importance of the hospitality sector to local economies and community life, the industry faces a severe viability challenge, with figures like celebrity chef Tom Kerridge warning that businesses are under "huge pressure" from rising costs and pay a disproportionate share of tax compared to other European countries.[238]

The cumulative financial burden faced by the hospitality industry – including but not limited to business rates, employer national insurance contributions (NICs), minimum wage increases, VAT, rents, energy costs, high interest rates, and subdued consumer demand – threatens the existence of thousands of businesses across the country and the vitality of our high streets.

There are nearly 7,000 fewer pubs and bars in 2025 compared to 2010, and over 1,000 fewer since 2020.[239] Changes to property values in 2026 meant that pubs faced a 45 per cent increase in total bills,[240] with UKHospitality stating that the average pub would pay £12,900 more in business rates over three years.[241] In response to widespread concern about the impact of rising business rates on pub viability and closures, the government announced a significant relief package of 15 per cent on new rates in 2026/27, with bills frozen in real terms for two years until 2028/29.[242]

Despite this relief, financial pressures persist across the sector, with one survey indicating that two-thirds of businesses will be forced to cut jobs as a result of cost increases in April 2026.[243] Similar analysis by the British Beer and Pub Association found that two pubs closed per day in the first three months of 2026.[244]

A strategy to repair Britain's high streets must alleviate the excessive financial burden borne by hospitality businesses in the UK. Tax on property (of which business rates is one), is the fourth highest in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD),[245] while UK VAT for hospitality businesses at 20 per cent is 7.2 per cent higher than the European average of 12.8 per cent.[246] UKHospitality analysis suggests that the sector pays the most tax as a proportion of pre-tax profits (75 per cent) than any other sector in the economy.[247]

In the long term, this should include wholesale reform of the business rates system, ensuring the burden of taxation is shared more equally between online and high street businesses, and that investment in high street locations is incentivised compared to out-of-town retail.

235 Dunbar, R.I.M., et al., "Functional Benefits of (Modest) Alcohol Consumption", *Adaptive Human Behaviour and Physiology* (3), December 2016, pp. 118–133.

236 Loughborough University, Open Arms: The Role of Pubs in Tackling Loneliness, 2021, p. 27.

237 Punch Pubs, The true economic and social value of pubs, April 2026. Accessed: https://www.punchpubs.com/socialvalue/.

238 VAT's the Problem, n.d. Accessed: https://www.vatstheproblem.co.uk/.

239 ONS via Nomis, UK Business Counts – local units by industry and employment size band, September 2025.

240 House of Commons, Beer and Public Houses: Business Rates (UIN 103036), January 2026.

241 UKHospitality, Hospitality business rates reform 'unravelling', with urgent action needed, November 2025. Accessed: https://www.ukhospitality.org.uk/hospitality-business-rates-reform-unravelling-with-urgent-action-needed/.

242 HM Treasury, Pubs and Live Music Venues Relief, January 2026. Accessed: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pubs-and-live-music-venues-relief.

243 UKHospitality, Quarterly member's survey: Q2 2026 – One-in-six hospitality venues risk closure, as sector unites behind VAT cut, n.d. Accessed: https://www.ukhospitality.org.uk/insight/quarterly-members-survey/#:~:text=Q2%202025%20%2D%20One%2Dthird%20of%20hospitality%20businesses%20now%20operating%20at%20a%20loss.

244 British Beer and Pub Association, Two pubs closed a day in first three months of year, as BBPA calls on Government to take long-term action, May 2026. Accessed: https://beerandpub.com/news/two-pubs-closed-a-day-in-first-three-months-of-year-as-bbpa-calls-on-government-to-take-long-term-action/.

245 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Revenue Statistics OECD 2025: The United Kingdom, 2025 , p. 3.

246 UKHospitality, Hospitality in the UK pays the 2nd highest VAT in Europe, n.d. Accessed: https://www.ukhospitality.org.uk/campaigns/vat/.

247 UKHospitality, #TaxedOut – Budget 2025, n.d. Accessed: https://www.ukhospitality.org.uk/campaigns/taxedout-budget-2025/.

Reform to business rates should also include an evaluation of the methodology for calculating rates, as present calculations based on turnover can lead to excessive tax bills, due to the increased costs of operating. Businesses like Greene King have recommended a system based on profits, rather than turnover.[248]

The government has made a commitment to significant reform of the business rates system, and in September 2025, published an interim report which outlined areas for further exploration.[249] The government should follow up on this report by the end of the year and provide a clear timeline for fulfilling their manifesto promise to replace the business rates system.[250]

3.1.1 A permanently lower rate of VAT for hospitality

In addition to reforming business rates, the government should alleviate the excessive financial burden on hospitality by introducing a permanently lower rate of 15 per cent VAT for the sector. HM Treasury estimates that the fiscal cost of reducing the rate of VAT to 15 per cent for hospitality would cost £5 billion in 2026/27 prices.[251]

We propose funding this by reforms to welfare, outlined in the CSJ's *Wasted Youth* report, which would save £7.4 billion per year.[252] Increasing economic activity in the hospitality sector would work hand in hand with tackling the youth unemployment crisis, providing new job opportunities for out of work young people. The government could supplement savings from welfare by introducing an Online Sales Tax, which if levied at two per cent of all internet sales could raise £2.7 billion in 2027/28.

248 Greene King, Greene King sets out stall on business rates reform with potential to unlock £13.7m for investment, July 2025. Accessed: https://www.greeneking.co.uk/newsroom/cost-of-doing-business.

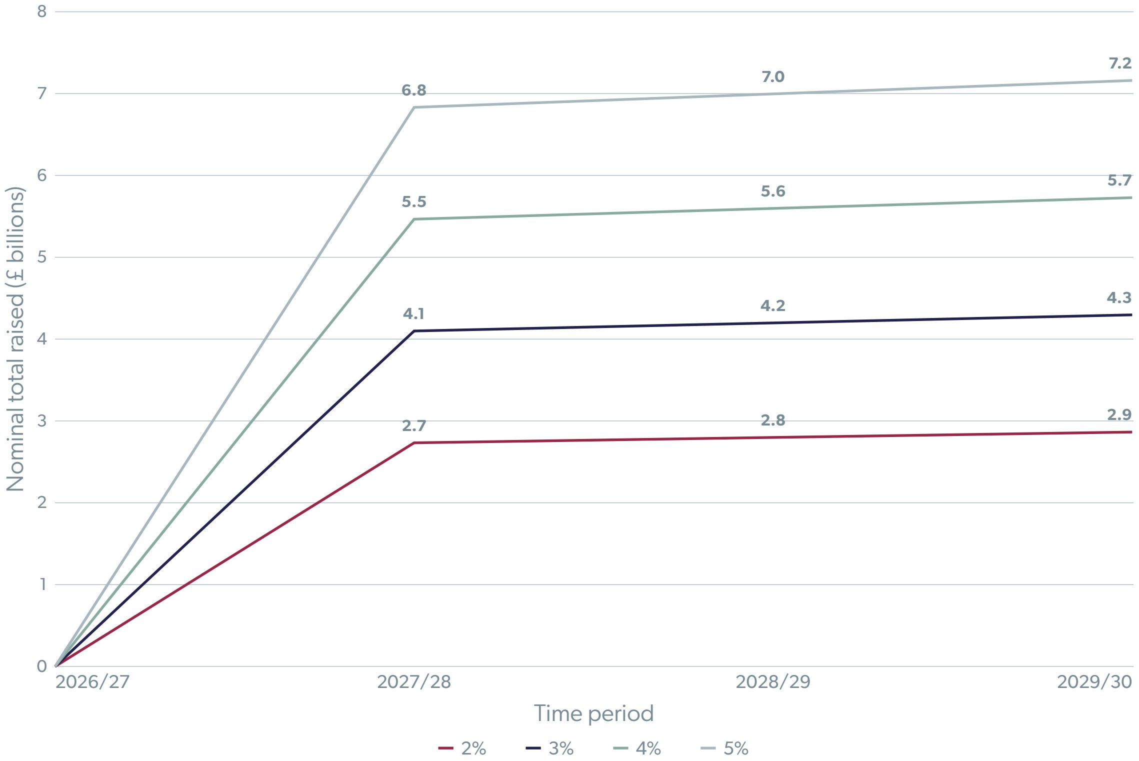
249 HM Treasury, Transforming Business Rates: Interim Report, September 2025.

250 The Labour Party, Change: Labour Party Manifesto 2024, June 2024, p. 31.

251 House of Commons, Public Houses: VAT (UIN 111571), February 2026.

252 CSJ, Wasted Youth: Helping Britain's young adults into work, August 2025, p. 8.

Figure 33: Notional receipts from an Online Sales Tax at different rates



Source: CSJ analysis. ONS, Retail Sales Index internet sales, August 2026. Percentage of average 12-month value for internet sales, based on last known year ending March data, linearly forecast forward to 2029/30. True amount raised may be lower than notional totals.

Additional revenue could be raised by introducing a delivery tax modelled on proposals in New York and Paris,[253] operating as a flat fee on online deliveries. The government could specifically target this at takeaway food deliveries to incentivise in-person hospitality consumption. CSJ analysis of ONS data shows that approximately £7 billion is spent by UK households on take away meals eaten at home,[254] while analysis commissioned by takeaway platform, JustEat, estimates a much greater figure of £33.25 billion spent annually by UK consumers on takeaways.[255] A levy of £1 to £2 targeted at companies like JustEat, Deliveroo, and Uber Eats could raise substantial revenue for HM Treasury. The government could also raise revenue by bringing forward planned changes to the low value customs duty relief on items under £135 to 2027, projected to raise £535 million under current timetables in 2029/30.[256]

RECOMMENDATION 25

HM Treasury should introduce a permanently lower rate of VAT, set at 15 per cent for the hospitality sector. This would cost £5 billion in 2026/27 prices. The Treasury should fund this through reforms to welfare, outlined in the CSJ's *Wasted Youth* report, which would save £7.4 billion per year. This could be supplemented by a new Online Sales Tax, which if set at two per cent of all internet sales could raise £2.6 billion in 2027/28.

253 HM Treasury, Online sales tax: Assessing an option to help rebalance taxation of the retail sector, February 2022, p. 35.

254 ONS, Family spending in the UK: April 2024 to March 2025, June 2026; ONS, Families and households in the UK: 2024, July 2025; Deliveroo, Interim financial report 2025, August 2025. Accessed: https://corporate.deliveroo.co.uk/assets/9217/5451/7640/Deliveroo_H1_2025_RNS_vFINAL.pdf. Average weekly household take away spend = £4.70 x 52 x 28.6m households = £6,989,850,000.

255 Just Eat, Britain's independent takeaways serve up £28 billion boost as platform hits 2 billion orders, March 2026. Accessed: https://newsroom.justeattakeaway.com/en-GB/263537-britain-s-independent-takeaways-serve-up-28-billion-boost-as-platform-hits-2-billion-orders/.

256 Office for Budget Responsibility, Economic and fiscal outlook – November 2025, November 2025.

3.1.2 The Future Workforce Credit

Employment costs represent a significant component of the financial burden facing hospitality businesses, with the increase in employers NICs in April 2025 and minimum wage contributing to significant cost pressures. Analysis suggests that the effect of recent changes has added £2,500 in additional employment costs for a full-time member of staff and resulted in an 18 per cent increase in the cost of employing someone aged below 18.[257] Hospitality also faces a greater employment cost burden than other sectors due to a reliance on service and catering staff. This year, there are 94,000 fewer individuals employed in the hospitality sector than the year before.[258]

These changes have threatened one of the hospitality sector's traditional functions: providing a first job and early career development for young people across the country, as well as offering flexible working arrangements for older people and those with caring responsibilities.[259] In July 2025, UKHospitality identified that job postings for temporary summer jobs were down 25 per cent year-on-year.[260]

At a time when nearly one million young people are not in any form of education, employment, or training (NEET), job opportunities in sectors like hospitality are declining, at exactly the time when the government needs them to increase.

To tackle this problem, and incentivise hospitality employers to employ NEET young people, we recommend the introduction of the Future Workforce Credit, as recommended in the CSJ's *Wasted Youth* report.[261] This would substantially strengthen the government's Jobs Guarantee and Youth Jobs Grant which are designed to tackle the youth economic inactivity crisis. The Jobs Guarantee is designed to subsidise 90,000 jobs for NEET young people aged 18–24.[262] The Youth Jobs Grant will pay businesses £3,000 for every young person they hire and is expected to support 60,000 young people.[263]

The Future Workforce Credit provides a considerably greater incentive for employers. It would be worth 30 per cent of a new employee's salary, a larger payment than existing incentives such as NICs relief and apprenticeship incentives combined, and paid for through reforms to welfare. We also propose reducing the time a young person has to be NEET for to three months, rather than the six months currently proposed. Full details on costings, design and implementation of the Future Workforce Credit are set out in *Wasted Youth: Helping Britain's young adults into work*, published by the CSJ in August 2025.[264]

RECOMMENDATION 26

The government should introduce a Future Workforce Credit to incentivise employers to recruit and upskill NEETs aged 16–24. The Credit would be set at 30 per cent of an employee's salary. The Credit would be paid in two halves: the first upfront and the second after six months with proof of the NEETs continuing employment.

257 UKHospitality, £3.4 billion annual cost increases hit hospitality, n.d. Accessed: https://www.ukhospitality.org.uk/annual-cost-increases-hit-hospitality/.

258 ONS, EMP13: Employment by industry, May 2026.

259 UKHospitality, The Social Productivity Index, March 2025, p. 20.

260 UKHospitality, Death of the Great British summer holiday job?, July 2025. Accessed: www.ukhospitality.org.uk/death-of-the-great-british-summer-holiday-job/.

261 CSJ, Wasted Youth, Helping Britain's young adults into work, August 2025.

262 Department for Work and Pensions, Major employment drive to help unlock 200,000 new jobs and apprenticeships for next generation, March 2026. Accessed: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/major-employment-drive-to-help-unlock-200000-new-jobs-and-apprenticeships-for-next-generation.

263 Ibid.

264 CSJ, Wasted Youth: Helping Britain's young adults into work, August 2025.

To be eligible, the employee must be aged between 16–24 and have been NEET for at least three months before recruitment. They must have been resident in the UK for at least three years. Employers would apply to HMRC for the Credit when hiring a NEET. HMRC would verify NEET status by cross-referencing PAYE returns, data from the National Pupil Database and Individual Learner Records, and DWP records. This will require a data sharing agreement between HMRC and the relevant departments.

The NEET should not have to be claiming benefits to be eligible for the Credit, to capture the 'other' NEETs not claiming benefits. The onus should also be on HMRC to verify the employee's NEET status not on the employer to prove it, to keep the barriers for employers as low as possible. The application process means the Credit is not automatic and applies only to new employees, so that it directly influences employment decisions.

3.2 Reforming planning

By ambitiously reforming planning, the government has the opportunity not only to stimulate the construction of new homes, but to drive the renewal and regeneration of the country's high streets, town, and city centres.

The success of high streets is contingent on footfall and increasing the number of homes in town and city centre locations, and within the wider catchment areas of high streets, is one of the most efficient ways of growing it.

There is a broad consensus that there is an over-supply of retail space in many town and city centres.[265] Analysis by Savills indicates that there is 158 million sq.ft. of vacant retail space across the country.[266] Consequently, shrinking the space traditionally assigned to retail in favour of housing provides an opportunity to increase town centre footfall, reduce vacancy rates, and build much needed homes.

Analysis suggests that 500,000 homes could be created by repurposing non-residential empty buildings,[267] and evidence has repeatedly shown the economic, social, and health benefits of walkable neighbourhoods - essential for strengthening connection and belonging - which can be created in urban centres.[268]

265 House of Lords, High Streets: Life beyond retail?, November 2024, p. 39.

266 Create Streets, Permitting Beauty: Using design codes to repurpose shops as attractive homes, support local prosperity and sustainably ease the reuse of existing buildings, February 2021, p. 6.

267 London School of Economics, et al., Replacing Empty Spaces with Productive Green Places, March 2026, p. 6.

268 Create Streets, Permitting Beauty: Using design codes to repurpose shops as attractive homes, support local prosperity and sustainably ease the reuse of existing buildings, February 2021, pp. 27–28.

3.2.1 The potential of design codes to de-risk development

While significant planning reform has the potential to boost development and revitalise town and city centres, it should not enable a construction free for all. Instead, the preferences of local people should be placed at the heart of planning reform. The government should enable this by de-risking acceptable, beautiful, and well-designed development.

Design codes provide a means of achieving a more automatic and rules-based planning system by giving developers certainty on what acceptable development looks like. They set visual and quality standards for development to shape better and more healthier places. For example, by setting standards on building heights, street dimensions, greenery, open spaces, materials, and facades. They also involve the public in the pre-planning process, ensuring that local communities are able to make their preferences clear at an early stage.

Originally introduced as part of the *Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023*, design codes were intended to cover entire planning authorities and help improve the quality of new buildings. The Labour government has pivoted away from requiring design codes to be used at this level towards more locally developed codes. Within their planning reform proposals, the government has recognised the potential of design codes to fast-track development in certain areas. For example, within policy proposals for a Brownfield Passport, MHCLG recognised the potential of design codes to speed up the approval of planning applications.[269]

The CSJ's *Lonely Nation: How to tackle loneliness through the built environment* report outlined how the government could use design codes to meet its twin objectives of building more homes and creating well designed communities.[270] Under our proposals, if a planning application met pre-approved criteria set out in a design code, it would be automatically approved and bypass the usual planning process.

Below we outline policy recommendations which would utilise design codes to de-risk and incentivise housebuilding and retail to residential conversion on Britain's high streets, town, and city centres.

3.2.2 Building more housing in town and city centres

Densifying town and city centres through the building of more housing, as well as increasing housebuilding on their peripheries, is not only essential to tackling the country's housing shortage, but necessary for the revitalisation of its high streets.

However, systematic problems with England's planning system stops town and city centres from evolving in use. England's planning system is discretionary, meaning that planning applications are assessed individually and subject to the judgement of planning officers and elected officials. This leads to uncertainty, unpredictability, and too often results in the rationing of land to the detriment of housing supply. The UK's four million missing homes compared to comparable European countries is evidence of this.[271]

The planning system is also subject to significant delays. Statutory timescales for local planning authorities (LPAs) are 13 weeks for major developments (10 homes or more), and 16 weeks if an Environmental Impact Assessment is required.[272] Most town centre development schemes will be classified as major

269 MHCLG, Brownfield Passport: Making the Most of Urban Land, February 2025.
270 CSJ, Lonely Nation Part 3: How to tackle loneliness through the built environment, November 2024, p. 37.
271 Centre for Cities, The housebuilding crisis: The UK's 4 million missing homes, February 2023.
272 MHCLG, National Planning Policy Framework, December 2024, p. 75.

developments. Analysis by the Home Builders Federation has found that just 20 per cent of all major decisions made in 2024/25 were decided within this 13-week statutory timescale.[273] Furthermore, a longitudinal study by Lichfields of planning applications between 2014 and 2024 has identified that the time taken to determine a major outline application has risen to two years, with just four per cent of outline applications for major residential development decided in the 13-week limit over this period.[274]

Furthermore, conditions placed on developers within the planning process, such as affordable housing requirements, limit the viability of housebuilding in town and city centres.[275] For example, in Southwark, Berkeley Homes failed to obtain planning permission to redevelop the 1970s Aylesham [shopping] Centre. This was largely a result of affordable housing targets and requirements to maximise retail floorspace.[276] The result was that the development became unviable, meaning no development is now taking place, a loss of 867 potential new homes.[277]

Building the homes the country needs is dependent on an overhaul of England's planning system. In the long-term, the government should look towards replacing England's discretionary planning system with a new zonal system, where proposals that meet clear rules would be guaranteed planning permission. This should also include a long-term roadmap for regulation that is aligned with the government's housebuilding and infrastructure ambitions.

A long-term roadmap for regulation should include a review of existing regulations that have constrained housing delivery, such as the two-staircase rule for all new residential buildings above 18m, biodiversity net gain, and mandated solar panels. While regulation is essential to ensure safety and quality, there are trade-offs, and evidence suggests new regulation has had a substantial impact on the cost of building. This review should also include the appropriateness of Section 106 requirements on retail floorspace and affordable housing.

RECOMMENDATION 27

MHCLG should lead a cross-government review of existing and planned regulations affecting the construction industry, to ensure that environmental and building safety standards are properly aligned with housing and infrastructure goals. This review should provide the clarity and certainty needed for the sector to plan investment, build workforce capacity, and maintain delivery, while also assessing the trade-offs between regulatory requirements and construction output. As part of this, the government should examine the efficacy of regulations that have constrained delivery, ensuring that standards remain proportionate, and do not unintentionally stall the development of much-needed homes and infrastructure.

In the short-term, the government should roll out the use of design codes in the planning process to give greater certainty to developers. MHCLG should begin this process by introducing a new Brownfield Passport power, alongside a local design code. While the government has implied that they intend to create a Brownfield Passport power,[278] it has yet to be fully adopted within the planning system.

273 HBF, Planning delays are holding back England's housing and infrastructure goals, September 2025. Accessed: https://www.hbf.co.uk/news/planning-delays-are-holding-back-englands-housing-and-infrastructure-goals/.

274 Lichfields, How long is a piece of string: The timescales for securing outline planning permission for housing between 2014 and 2024, May 2025.

275 HBF, The Viability Crunch, May 2026, p. 4.

276 The Planning Inspectorate, Appeal Decision (APP/A5840/W/25/3366760), May 2026.

277 Southwark News, Aylesham Centre redevelopment rejected – it would have changed Peckham's skyline forever and given 12 per cent affordable housing, May 2026. Accessed: https://southwarknews.co.uk/area/peckham/aylesham-centre-redevelopment-rejected-it-would-have-changed-peckhams-skyline-forever-and-given-12-per-cent-affordable-housing/.

278 MHCLG, Brownfield Passport: Making the Most of Urban Land, February 2025.

A Brownfield Passport would most likely utilise Local Development Orders (LDOs), which are permitted development rights for specified types of development in defined areas. They create a simplified planning process and can remove the need for an application for planning permission.

To de-risk housebuilding on brownfield sites, we recommend that MHCLG introduce a powerful new Brownfield Passport power, modelled on existing LDOs. The Brownfield Passport should be integrated locally with design codes to provide upfront consent to planning applications that meet specified criteria. This could effectively establish a mini-zonal system across high streets, towns, and city centre locations, utilising a design code to ensure development reflects the public's design preferences.

RECOMMENDATION 28

MHCLG should introduce a new Brownfield Passport modelled on existing LDO powers. Locally, Brownfield Passports should be used alongside design codes developed by LPAs in consultation with residents. The aim of the Brownfield Passport should be to give automatic planning approval to applications that meet specified criteria within the Passport and locally adopted design code.

To ensure LPAs use these powers, MHCLG should amend the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) to include the following:

1. An expectation that Brownfield Passports are used to set the planning framework for brownfield land in town and city centres where a design code has been adopted, and where doing so would promote new housing. This would set a new positive duty on LPAs to explicitly use Brownfield Passports and link them to design codes.
2. An expectation that where a local authority's brownfield register includes sites in town or city centre locations, design codes should be prepared with a view to their incorporation within a Brownfield Passport.

3.2.3 Converting retail space to residential use

As well as de-risking the planning process for new housing development, design codes can also speed up and ensure high-quality retail to residential conversions. Such conversions have attracted controversy, both for their impact on available retail space, their visual appearance, and housing quality.[279] But properly utilised alongside local authority discretion and design codes, conversions allow the high street to evolve as well as contribute to total housing stock.

The General Permitted Development Order, otherwise known as permitted development rights (PDR), make it easier for some commercial premises to be converted into homes. These powers were consolidated in 2015, and significantly expanded in 2021, when the government introduced a new planning use class (Class MA), which enabled Class E buildings (itself a new class which includes a diversity of uses) to be converted into residential use under PDR rules.[280]

In 2024, the government liberalised Class MA further, by removing the cap on floorspace which could be converted and scrapping the requirement which meant that buildings had to be vacant for at least three

279 House of Lords, High Streets: Life beyond retail?, November 2024, p. 39.
280 Ibid, p. 38.

months before conversion.[281] In the eight years to March 2023, PDR conversions have delivered 102,830 homes to rent or to buy.[282]

While these policies have the potential to revitalise vacant premises, increase footfall in town and city centres, and tackle the housing shortage by creating new homes, they must be implemented carefully to avoid any long-term damage to the commercial heart of the high street.

The House of Lords inquiry into high streets, *Life Beyond Retail*, highlighted widespread concern that rights to convert commercial properties into homes risked damaging the vitality, control, and design of high streets.[283] Others have raised concerns about the quality of homes that can be delivered via PDR, particularly regarding space standards and light.[284]

There are two mechanisms that should be utilised by local authorities to mediate these risks, and ensure that PDRs enable the creation of high-quality, well-designed, and attractive retail to residential transitions. The first are statutory Article 4 powers to limit PDRs in certain areas, and the second is to utilise design codes to guarantee high-quality conversions.

Using Article 4 powers to de-risk retail to residential conversion

Article 4 powers were established via statutory instrument in 2015 and enable LPAs to remove specific PDRs in certain areas.[285] This means that converting a premises from Class E to Class MA and residential use thereafter would require a full planning application, rather than just prior approval. This allows LPAs to safeguard certain areas from retail to residential conversion. Such powers can be used to prevent a 'gap-toothed' high street in prime retail locations, or areas where the local authority wishes to increase commercial use.

As recommended by the House of Lords, local authorities should make full use of Article 4 directions to preserve a core commercial hub on their high streets as designated in their local plan.[286] However, it is important that these powers are used in a targeted way and not to prevent a flexible evolution in the use of town and city centre buildings. A targeted shrinkage of core retail and commercial centres can carry benefits for the vitality of high streets.

The CSJ visited Stockton-on-Tees, where we were told that the demolition of a shopping centre in the town centre allowed for a controlled shrinkage of retail space. This had the impact of keeping vacancy rates relatively low in an additional shopping centre in the town centre by concentrating retail space. Other local authorities could utilise Article 4 powers to deliver similar outcomes, by protecting a core commercial hub, while allowing an evolution in the use of town centre space.

Using design codes to de-risk retail to residential conversion

Design codes should be utilised to de-risk retail to residential conversion, ensuring that development reflects the character of the local high street, is beautiful, and well-designed for future occupiers.

281 Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Explanatory memorandum to The Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) (Amendment) Order 2024, 2024.

282 Ibid.

283 House of Lords, High Streets: Life beyond retail?, November 2024, p. 39.

284 House of Commons Library, Planning in England: Permitted development and change of use, March 2024, p. 34.

285 The Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015. Accessed: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2015/596/contents.

286 House of Lords, High Streets: Life beyond retail?, November 2024, p. 7.

The design practice and think-tank, Create Streets, has set out a range of design code exemplars for retail to residential conversions, showing how these transitions can take place in a way that preserves and adds value to the high street.[287] We echo their recommendation that LPAs embed retail to residential design codes in local planning documents to ensure changes made via PDR reflect the character and preferences of the community.[288] We also recommend that MHCLG ensure design quality (including coherence with a local design code) is clearly specified in the prior approval process.

Design codes like those developed by Create Streets should be used to de-risk PDRs, ensure that new homes contribute to the appeal of the high street, and limit any negative impacts. We recommend that local authorities make use of design codes to set clear boundaries and examples of retail to residential property conversion. Adopted within local plans, this should reduce planning delays and give certainty to those seeking to utilise PDRs. Furthermore, used alongside LDOs, localities could reduce delays on the prior approval process by setting more automatic procedures. This could take the form of a planning policy which states that a certain design or type of conversion will get a faster or automatic approval.

> *"I don't think it would take much to really elevate it [the high street] …just some visual indicators, as you're going along that street, that it's a street with an identity."*
>
> **Focus group participant, Yorkshire and the Humber**

As part of the high streets strategy, the government should issue supplementary national design guidance on the conversion of retail to residential buildings and set an expectation that every local authority issues a design code for shopfront to residential transition for their town and city centres. This could be done quickly and efficiently by building upon the National Model Design Code and designs created by organisations like Create Streets.

RECOMMENDATION 29

MHCLG should amend the prior approval criteria for the General Permitted Development Order for residential conversions to include design quality and coherence with any local design code as a prior approval matter. MHCLG should also issue national planning practice guidance setting an expectation that local authorities produce design codes for retail to residential conversions.

3.2.4 Improving the appearance of shop fronts

In addition to housing, design codes can also be utilised to improve the appearance of shopfronts on the high street. CSJ polling has identified that over two in five adults (42 per cent) think that their high street is full of ugly shops.[289] The visual appearance of shops on the high street is one of the clearest indicators of local flourishing or decline. MHCLG should require that local authorities tackle the growing perception of ugliness on the high street by rolling out shopfront design codes and expecting that localities utilise funding pots like Pride in Place to make improvements.

287 Create Streets, Permitting Beauty: Using design codes to repurpose shops as attractive homes, support local prosperity and sustainably ease the reuse of existing buildings, February 2021, p. 34.

288 Ibid, p. 9.

289 Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 nationally representative UK adults between 15th to 16th April 2024.

Lichfield is one example of positive change, where the local authority has issued a specific design code for its town centre and shopfronts, the *City Centre Shopfront Design Code*.[290] Alongside this, there is a Heritage Shopfront Grant Scheme to financially support businesses to make improvements to align their shopfronts with the design code.[291] Similar schemes have been initiated on the Isle of Wight,[292] and in Merton.[293]

Shopfront design codes could be formalised as planning documents, or as supplementary guidance, by the respective LPA. This would mean that as an official planning document, it must be followed by any business or individual seeking to make changes to their shopfront as part of the planning approval process. Local authorities in receipt of Pride in Place funding should utilise these funding pots to pay for improvements to shopfronts on the high street, as an indicative intervention encouraged by MHCLG.[294]

RECOMMENDATION 30

MHCLG should issue national planning practice guidance establishing a clear expectation that local planning authorities produce shopfront design codes for their town and city centres. Local authorities in receipt of Pride in Place funding should utilise this for shopfront improvement schemes.

3.3 Giving communities control

3.3.1 Agency is the pathway to belonging

The SBI identified that one of the only indicators of community life to show no significant relationship with social breakdown was that of belonging. This shows that despite the significant challenges facing Britain's high streets, communities in Britain retain a strong sense of attachment and belonging.

Belonging is an essential pillar of strong community life. It refers to a strong sense of home, place, and pride in where one comes from, as well as a deep connection to its heritage, traditions, and events.

The pathway to belonging is agency, which means having a meaningful and active stake in one's community and its assets. Agency requires that a community be active agents in shaping their own future. One way in which agency is nurtured is through an active and resourced civil society. This refers to the third sector, the thousands of grassroots charities, social enterprises, clubs, and community groups which stitch together communities, particularly those that steward assets like community halls, buildings, and playing fields.

290 Lichfield District Council, Heritage Shopfront Regeneration, n.d. Accessed: https://ldcdevelopments.co.uk/built-developments/lichfield-city-centre-shopfront/.
291 Ibid.
292 Isle of Wight Council, Newport and Ryde Commercial Frontages Design Guide, n.d. Accessed: https://iwdesignguide.uk/.
293 London Borough of Merton, In Merton, January 2026, p. 29.
294 MHCLG, Pride in Place Programme: list of indicative interventions, March 2026.

> *"We create spaces where anyone in the community can bump into each other, [where] even the most unlikely people meet. We can have an upholstery class, the tool library up and running, a few people in the shop. Conversations that would happen only at a place of worship or where people need to pay now. The thing they have in common is that they come to our place."*
>
> **Charity leader in *Lonely Nation Part 3*[295]**

Belonging is threatened by a lack of agency, and a growing sense that communities lack a meaningful say in how their area changes over time. CSJ polling has found that just one in five (19 per cent) individuals say that they have a meaningful say in how their area changes and develops over time, with 62 per cent saying that they do not.[296]

Despite these challenges, public polling also suggests that people seek to pull together to improve their neighbourhoods. Data from the CLS reports that over half (56 per cent) of individuals tend to agree that people in their neighbourhood pull together to improve it.[297] Although this falls to 43 per cent in the most deprived communities,[298] it demonstrates that on the whole, many individuals seek to work with others to improve their neighbourhoods.

Small charities across Britain demonstrate the positive impact on community life that can be made when given the right resources and powers. For example, in Sunderland, the charity Back on the Map has been able to take an active stake in the high street, by purchasing and reopening several vacant shops.

Case Study

Back on the Map

Back on the Map emerged from the New Labour government's New Deal for Communities programme, which delivered £54 million of investment to regenerate Hendon in the 2000s.

Building on that legacy, the charity has spent over two decades purchasing, renovating, and renting out empty and run-down homes to local people, improving housing quality, rebuilding agency, and building a greater sense of belonging. It now owns over 130 homes, let to local individuals and families.

Beyond housing, Back on the Map has taken a stake in the wider community: transforming a former Carnegie library into a community centre at the heart of Villette Road, Hendon's main high street, and taking ownership of a disused GP surgery and a former probation hub, converting both into assets for local use. The charity already had a foothold on the high street before its retail expansion, running a satellite community production space, a community café, and premises let to a local antiques business.

295 CSJ, Lonely Nation Part 3: How to tackle loneliness through the built environment, November 2024, p. 49.
296 Ibid, p. 41.
297 DCMS, Community Life Survey 2024/25, December 2025.
298 Ibid.

The charity has also played a significant role in renewing the high street itself. A derelict block of former shops on Villette Road, all empty for over two years, had become, in the words of CEO Jo Cooper, “a blight on the street.” After consulting with over 500 local residents on their priorities for the area, Back on the Map secured a £168,000 grant from the Community Ownership Fund to purchase and reopen the shops, bringing in a florist, a tattoo parlour, a baby clothes shop, a sweet shop, and an Asian clothing shop.

The charity has also worked with existing shop owners to improve the visual appearance of the high street through shopfront investment, and helped local traders adopt card payment systems, bringing an additional £16,000 of trade to the street that would otherwise have gone elsewhere.

Crucially, having a meaningful ownership stake gave Back on the Map the power to be selective: charity leaders told the CSJ that community ownership allowed them to turn away takeaways and vape shops in favour of retailers that would genuinely serve the health and vibrancy of the local economy.

3.3.2 Resourcing new community powers

The government has made a welcome commitment to community ownership, and in June 2026, announced a £61 million fund to support community groups to make use of new Community Right to Buy powers, [299] while the new Heritage Revival Fund will provide funding for groups to take ownership of significant cultural assets.[300]

As of April 2026, communities now have access to the Community Right to Buy, giving select organisations the right of first refusal on any Asset of Community Value. This means they have the right to purchase the asset without competition when it comes to market. In addition, further powers include stopping the asset from being sold for 12 months to give local communities the time to raise necessary funds, widening the range of assets that can be registered as an Asset of Community Value, and the right of appeal if a community group is unsuccessful in registering their asset as an Asset of Community Value.[301]

While these powers give communities a strong hand in taking control of their places, without adequate resourcing, they risk being unused. For example, in Scotland, where strong community right to buy powers have existed for several years, there have only been two successful applications for using the Right to Buy (land to further sustainable development) power.[302]

Without resource and capacity, many community organisations will be unable to utilise new powers. While the new Community Right to Buy Fund is to be welcomed, the membership body for community organisations, Locality, warn that demand far outstrips the £61 million promised by the government. CEO of Locality, Tony Armstrong, recommends a substantially larger fund of up to £1 billion, drawing on philanthropy and social investment in addition to government funding.[303]

299 MHCLG, Pubs, shops and local assets protected with communities in charge, June 2026. Accessed: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pubs-shops-and-local-assets-protected-with-communities-in-charge?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications-topic&utm_source=a7fdfd92–858f-4866–9066–6b093fdeec14&utm_content=daily.

300 MHCLG, Pride in Place, September 2025, pp. 16, 22.

301 Locality, What is the Community Right to Buy?, n.d. Accessed: https://locality.org.uk/what-is-community-right-to-buy.

302 Morton Fraser MacRoberts, Can Scotland’s Community Right to Buy deliver on its promise?, January 2026. Accessed: https://www.mfmac.com/insights/real-estate/can-scotland-s-community-right-to-buy-deliver-on-its-promise/.

303 Tony Armstrong, The Community Right to Buy is a reality: Now comes the hard part, April 2026. Accessed: https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/community-right-buy-reality-now-comes-hard-part-tony-armstrong-nedne/.

The CSJ's *Supercharging Philanthropy* report outlined how the government could utilise the giving power of philanthropists through match funding to grow pots like the Community Right to Buy Fund. Our analysis identified £3.87 billion that could be released into match funding initiatives from existing government spend, utilising unclaimed gift aid, dormant funds, and dormant assets to provide the fund for match funding initiatives.[304]

To ensure new community powers are successfully utilised, we recommend that the government use match funding to expand the Community Right to Buy Fund. Utilising existing government spend outlined in *Supercharging Philanthropy*, the government should increase the size of the Community Right to Buy fund to £500 million, with the aim of bringing in an additional £500 million of philanthropic investment over the lifetime of the fund.[305]

The Community Right to Buy Fund could be modelled on the Better Futures Fund (BFF), designed to support children and young people over a 10-year period. The BFF is comprised of £500 million government funding, with an additional £500 million raised through match funding initiatives.[306]

RECOMMENDATION 31

MHCLG should increase the initial investment in the Community Right to Buy Fund to £500 million, with the aim of raising an additional £500 million through match funding initiatives. This should be funded from existing government spend, utilising unclaimed gift aid, dormant funds, and dormant assets, as identified in the CSJ's *Supercharging Philanthropy* report.

Underpinning the Community Right to Buy Fund should be a commitment across local government to support and nurture community ownership. Analysis by Locality has shown that under half (45 per cent) of local authorities have a dedicated Community Asset Transfer strategy.[307] We recommend that the government set a new requirement on every local authority to produce a community ownership strategy, with a particular emphasis on strengthening the Community Asset Transfer.

The Community Asset Transfer is one of the most powerful tools available to communities to take control of local assets. It is well established and the primary route that community groups use to own local buildings and property.

A lack of strategic partnership between local authorities and civil society groups has resulted in the loss of thousands of assets that could have been utilised by community groups for social purposes. Analysis from 2020 indicated that fewer than 20 per cent of councils said they review assets available for Community Asset Transfer as part of their asset reviews.[308] This has led to the loss of thousands of buildings which could have potentially been re-purposed for the community. Analysis from 2023 indicated that from 2010, 75,000 local authority assets had been sold at an asset value of £15 billion.[309]

304 CSJ, Supercharging Philanthropy: How Government and Givers can Unleash a New Wave of Philanthropic Funding, March 2025, p. 28.

305 Analysis from the Social Impact Investment Advisory Group estimates that impact capital (comprised of philanthropic capital, social investment, and institutional impact investment) is worth £106 billion in assets. The philanthropic arm of the Community Right to Buy Fund would represent just 0.47 per cent of existing impact capital across the UK.

306 DCMS, Better Futures Fund, January 2026.

307 The Co-Operative Group, In community hands: Lessons from the past five years of Community Asset Transfer, March 2020, p. 6.

308 Ibid.

309 Institute for Public Policy Research, Parallel Lives: Regionally Rebalancing Wealth, Power and Opportunity, September 2023, p. 6.

Evidence suggests that local authorities with a strategy for Community Asset Transfer deliver better outcomes for community groups. Of councils without a strategy, 55 per cent of transfers were on a lease of fewer than 25 years, compared to 30 per cent of transfers for councils with a strategy.[310] This shows that on average, councils with Community Asset Transfer strategies are delivering better outcomes for community groups, allowing them to develop long-term business plans for the use of assets.

We recommend that within community ownership strategies, local authorities should be required to have an up-to-date policy on asset transfers, and to maintain a list of assets available for transfer, with reviews every five years, mirroring the review period within local development plans. For assets listed within the strategy, MHCLG should introduce guidance that expects local authorities to adopt a presumption in favour of asset transfer, meaning that requests for Community Asset Transfer should be agreed to unless there are reasonable grounds for refusal.

RECOMMENDATION 32

MHCLG should introduce a statutory duty requiring all local authorities in England to publish and maintain a community ownership strategy, including an up-to-date policy on use of Community Asset Transfer powers and a publicly accessible register of assets available for transfer. Strategies should be reviewed every five years. MHCLG should issue guidance on adopting a general presumption in favour of asset transfer as a matter of national policy, so that local authorities are encouraged to act as facilitators of community ownership, rather than gatekeepers.

310 The Co-Operative Group, In community hands: Lessons from the past five years of Community Asset Transfer, March 2020, p. 11.

Conclusion

This report has outlined how the government can restore security, connection, and belonging to Britain's communities, by setting out an ambitious plan to renew the country's high streets. We propose 32 policy recommendations to be included within the PM's ten-year plan for change, as well as the forthcoming high streets strategy.

Repairing Britain's broken high streets has never been more urgent. Analysis in this report has outlined how social breakdown on the high street is fundamentally linked to the strength of community life. People living in areas which suffer most from criminal high street businesses, vacancy rates, and crime are the least likely to agree that their communities are flourishing, across a range of different metrics. Where high streets are insecure, community life is corroded.

Tackling insecurity on Britain's high streets should therefore be a cross-government mission that mobilises every member of the Cabinet. Social cohesion, integration, and pride in place are all deeply intertwined with the social breakdown evident across high streets, town, and city centres. There is no pathway to high street renewal without restoring security to Britain's communities.

List of recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1

HMRC should launch an independent review of its methodology for measuring tax gaps and assess the reliability of estimates produced under its current approach. The review should make recommendations on the most effective methodology for measuring tax gaps and the size of the illicit market across all taxes and duties administered by HMRC.

On the basis of a revised methodology and a robust assessment of the true size of the illicit market for tobacco products, HM Treasury should assess whether further above-inflation duty increases to tobacco duty, and the proposed rate of the Vaping Products Duty, would expand the black market more than they would reduce smoking and vaping prevalence. Where the evidence suggests the disbenefits outweigh the public health gains, HM Treasury should pause the tobacco duty escalator in favour of an inflation-only increase in tobacco duty and should review the rate at which the Vaping Products Duty is set.

RECOMMENDATION 2

DBIST should lead on the creation of a nationwide consumer awareness campaign to raise awareness of the link between illicit and counterfeit goods and wider criminality, as well as the harms of consuming them. This campaign should utilise data collected by Trading Standards services and police forces which clearly explains how wider crime is funded through the purchasing of illicit tobacco.

RECOMMENDATION 3

The Home Office should establish regional High Street Organised Crime Units which include representatives from all relevant agencies, including the police, Trading Standards, Immigration Enforcement, HMRC, modern slavery teams, and the NCA. These Units should report into the national High Street Organised Crime Unit and be responsible for developing and implementing a regional strategy to tackle organised criminality on the high street. Police forces and other agencies should be instructed to make tackling criminal high street businesses a priority. Regional High Street Organised Crime Units should be expected to utilise all existing powers to tackle high street criminality.

RECOMMENDATION 4

DBIST, MHCLG, and the Home Office should lead on a national restructuring of local authority Trading Standards services and include the restructuring of National Trading Standards into a formal enforcement agency with statutory responsibilities and powers. Trading Standards should be re-structured as a tiered service, with national, regional, and local hubs that can deliver on priorities at the right level and allow for escalation and deescalation. This restructuring should be aligned with plans to establish a new National Police Service, with Trading Standards teams integrated as far as possible with police forces at a national and regional level. To save costs on office space to facilitate better partnership working, local Trading Standards should be based within local police force offices, ideally sat with neighbourhood teams.

RECOMMENDATION 5

DBIST should introduce legislation which grants Companies House the power to verify the address and place of business of company directors and their enterprise at point of registration.

RECOMMENDATION 6

The Home Office, working jointly with the MoJ, should introduce a strengthened closure order power available to all local authority Trading Standards services, as well as county councils and the police, to tackle criminal high street businesses. The Home Office should expect that wherever possible, police forces support with enforcing these powers to enhance the safety and effectiveness of Trading Standards officers. The new closure order power should include the following:

- **On the spot closures.** Enforcement agencies should be able to serve a closure order immediately when there is clear evidence of criminality taking place. This would operate similarly to a closure notice, but transition automatically into a closure order after 48 hours unless an appeal is triggered by the business. At this point, the magistrates' court would hear the application within a set period of time. As with Article 31 powers, the premises should remain closed during the appeal period.
- **Extended closure order durations.** The duration of a closure order should be set at 12 months, with the option of a further 12-month extension to prevent further criminality, subject to any appeal process. If a closure order is violated, it should result in a default extension of 12 months.
- **Permanent closure for repeat offenders.** Where criminality continues after a closure order has expired, enforcement agencies should be able to apply to the court for a permanent closure order. A permanent closure order should remain in force until the responsible business has been evicted or vacates the premises. The landlord should also be subject to investigation under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002. Before a landlord is able to re-let a permanently closed premises, they should be required to notify the local authority and agency which issued the permanent closure. Both should have the power to object to a new letting within a specified period where it has reasonable grounds to believe the premises poses an ongoing risk of criminal activity.

- **Simple evidence thresholds.** Demonstrating criminality on more than one occasion should be a sufficient basis to issue a closure order. For example, if a premises continues to stock illicit tobacco or vaping products after a warning, this threshold should be clearly met. Furthermore, as per CTSI recommendations, the government should provide certainty that retaining samples of illegal goods from seizures, rather than entire consignments, is sufficient for judicial purposes.
- **Civil penalties.** Closure orders should be accompanied by a civil penalty fine, issuable by Trading Standards or the police at the point a closure order is made. The penalty should be set at a minimum of £10,000 per premises on the first offence, rising progressively with each additional offence with no upper cap. A penalty notice should not preclude prosecution and 50 per cent of the revenue should be ringfenced for Trading Standards services.

RECOMMENDATION 7

MHCLG should create a fast-track high street rental auction process for premises subject to a closure order, disapplying the standard vacancy requirement. A landlord should become eligible to have a closure order lifted if they have evicted an offending tenant and agree to enter into the High Street Rental Auction process. The full discharge of the closure order should not become effective until the day a new tenant enters the premises.

RECOMMENDATION 8

As required by the *Tobacco and Vapes Act 2026*, DHSC and the Home Office should introduce a stringent licensing regime for the sale of tobacco and vaping products, tied to clear penalties and escalating enforcement action. The licensing regime should include the following provisions:

- **Licence fees and penalties.** Penalty fines for trading without a licence, or in violation of licence conditions, should be set significantly higher than the cost of obtaining a licence, ensuring that compliance is always the more rational commercial choice for retailers. Licence fee revenue should be ringfenced for Trading Standards services, along with a proportion of penalty fees.
- **Fit and proper person checks.** A mandatory background check should be required before a licence is granted. This should be cross-referenced with police and Trading Standards data to establish whether an applicant has previously violated licence conditions, sold illicit tobacco or vapes, or has relevant criminal convictions.
- **Relationship with wholesaler.** A business owner should have to demonstrate an active relationship with a legitimate tobacco or vape wholesaler to obtain a licence.
- **Trading without a licence.** Trading without a licence on three or more occasions should result in a permanent bar on that individual ever holding a personal licence for the sale of tobacco and vape products.
- **Violation of licence conditions.** Violating licence conditions should result in escalating sanctions, beginning with fines and leading to licence suspension. A third violation should result in a lifetime personal licence ban and a minimum one-year premises licence ban. Selling illicit tobacco or vaping products should trigger an immediate review into a premises and personal licence, with a presumption that the licence is suspended for a set period.

- **Civil financial penalties.** Fines should be straightforward for enforcement agencies to issue, operating as civil penalties to reduce the evidential burden on Trading Standards. Fines should be calculated on a progressive scale for repeat offenders, with no upper cap, to ensure they remain proportionate to the scale and persistence of the offending.
- **Criminal sanction for organised and persistent offenders.** The organised and purposeful sale of tobacco and vape products, including illicit products, without a licence or in deliberate and repeated breach of licence conditions should constitute an either-way criminal offence.

RECOMMENDATION 9

The Home Office and MoJ should amend guidance on the use of Respect Orders, making it standard practice for offenders associated with a premises subject to a closure order to receive a Respect Order. This should limit their access to specified high street locations, ban them from working at, or being employed within, the type of business associated with the closure order, and require them to take steps to address their offending.

RECOMMENDATION 10

The Home Office should immediately remove businesses associated with high street crime from the public register of licensed sponsors for worker and temporary worker immigration routes. This should include vape shops, mini-marts, nail bars, car washes, takeaways, sweet shops, and barbers.

RECOMMENDATION 11

The Home Office should establish an IWES to enable Trading Standards and other frontline enforcement agencies to report and escalate cases of illegal working to Immigration Enforcement. The aim of IWES should be to significantly increase the reporting of and evidence base for illegal working on the high street by enforcement agencies, as well as the detention and removal of those in the UK illegally.

Accompanying this service should be extended powers granted to Trading Standards officers to perform Home Office system checks using the name, date of birth, and nationality of suspected offenders. These checks will enable Trading Standards officers to confirm an individual's immigration status and if they have been subject to immigration powers in the past. This extension of powers should be based on the existing ability of police constables and NCA officers to conduct immigration checks via the National Command and Control Unit, the central contact centre for immigration enforcement.

As the primary enforcement agency responsible for illicit trade and criminal high street businesses, Trading Standards should also be granted powers to fine businesses guilty of illegal working offences. Trading Standards officers told the CSJ that they regularly come across cases of illegal working during their investigations, so extending their ability to sanction businesses would provide another enforcement outlet without having to rely on the capacity of immigration enforcement.

RECOMMENDATION 12

The Home Office should introduce a civil penalty starting at £10,000 with no upward limit for landlords whose premises have been subject to a closure order. 50 per cent of revenue from this fine should be ringfenced for Trading Standards.

RECOMMENDATION 13

MHCLG should introduce secondary liability for landlords where business rates are unpaid by a tenant. A landlord would become liable for the unpaid business rates of a tenant where (a) the landlord has received formal notice from an enforcement body of illegal activity taking place at their premises by the tenant, (b) the landlord has failed to take reasonable steps to address this, for example by initiating eviction proceedings, and (c) the ratepayer subsequently dissolves, is struck off, or otherwise cannot be pursued, leaving business rates unpaid.

RECOMMENDATION 14

MHCLG and the Home Office should consult on a new mandatory reference check for commercial landlords to vet a prospective tenant. This should include:

- **Identity and ownership verification.** Landlords should be required to verify that the company director is the genuine beneficial owner of the business, cross-referenced with Companies House data.
- **Financial verification.** This check should be designed to flag possible money laundering and financial crime, including a credit check, proof of income, revenue, bank statements, and/or HMRC verified tax records.
- **Landlord references.** A reference from a former commercial landlord if relevant.
- **Professional character reference.** A reference from a regulated professional who can be held accountable for its accuracy.
- **Criminal and enforcement history check.** MHCLG and the Home Office should design a referencing framework which is integrated with Police National Computer and Trading Standards data via a secure portal (similar to the DBS checking service), to flag any individual or associated business that has previously been subject to enforcement action.

RECOMMENDATION 15

The Home Office should consult on extending tobacco and vape licensing to the entire industry, ensuring that every aspect of the supply chain, from manufacture, through to distribution and sale, is regulated by a licensing regime. This would help to better monitor the tobacco industry and identify, disrupt, and prosecute those involved in illicit operations.

RECOMMENDATION 16

The Home Office should ensure that neighbourhood policing teams are protected from routine abstraction to other duties. Neighbourhood officers should not be treated as a resource to back-fill vacant places on response teams or to attend incidents that are primarily the responsibility of emergency response patrol teams.

We recommend that:

- The Home Office publish its abstraction measure by the end of 2026.
- The Home Office introduces national abstraction standards by 2027 and that these standards include a cap on the proportion of time an officer in an assigned neighbourhood policing role can be abstracted to other duties.

RECOMMENDATION 17

The Home Office should revise statutory guidance on ASB powers to require full and consistent use of all available ASB powers, including CBOs and PSPOs, by police forces, local authorities, and other relevant enforcement agencies. Usage data should be published for all ASB powers included in the statutory guidance, closing a monitoring gap that currently allows inconsistent use to go unmonitored.

RECOMMENDATION 18

The Home Office should lead a cross-government review of ASB and its consequences, drawing on the powers and portfolios of other departments to ensure ASB carries clear, enforceable consequences. This review should also assess the appropriateness of existing ASB powers, the capacity of enforcement agencies to use them, and where decisive action from central government is needed to address specific and emerging forms of ASB.

Such measures could include the following:

- MHCLG should widen the statutory basis for possessing social housing as a result of a criminal conviction and/or breaching an ASB order. This would make repeat ASB or crime in a local authority area a legitimate ground for eviction from social housing. This liability should extend to other household members even if they are not named on the tenancy, including where the perpetrator is a child. While existing legislation gives grounds for possession due to ASB when the offence has taken place in the 'locality' of a home, we recommend that these provisions are amended so conditions for eviction are satisfied when the breach occurred anywhere within the respective local authority area.
- The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) should scale up the use of benefit deductions to recover unpaid ASB-related fines from claimants or members of their household. The DWP should introduce a presumption for deductions for court ordered fines to begin at the maximum deduction rate of 15 per cent, an increase from the current five per cent default for fines generally, and subject to the priority order governing any other debts already being recovered from the same award.

- The Home Office should create an expedited PSPO+ process for banning the wearing of face coverings in specified public spaces. This would allow local authorities, following approval from the chief officer of the police, to bring forward an immediate face-covering prohibition for a defined area, lasting a maximum of three months initially until confirmed. The order would lapse automatically unless a community consultation is completed and the order formally confirmed within the three month period.

RECOMMENDATION 19

The MoJ should establish a new custodial sentence for the criminal courts in England, the ICRO. The ICRO should sit between the SSO and Immediate Custody in the prison estate. The ICRO should operate as an immediate custodial sentence outside the prison estate, enforced by punitive requirements, such as unpaid work, electronic tagging, limited only by the discretion of the court and a package of rehabilitation and reform to maximise the prospects of long-term behavioural change. The offender will be directly accountable to the courts, and their sentence will remain subject to changes deemed appropriate by a judge that will review progress. The availability of the ICRO will be dependent on the court being satisfied that an eligibility test is met.

RECOMMENDATION 20

The Sentencing Council should issue a new guideline for offenders found guilty of repeat shop theft, or whose offending is linked to organised retail crime, extending the restrictive elements of an SSO and Community Order. All offenders in this group should be presumed subject to GPS tagging, a curfew, location restrictions (e.g. exclusion from the high street) and addiction treatment (if relevant) as primary requirements of their sentence. All other requirements should remain at the judge's discretion. Should this not be achievable through sentencing guidelines alone, the MoJ should bring forward a statutory presumption to operationalise a strengthened SSO and Community Order for this group of offenders.

RECOMMENDATION 21

The MoJ should exempt sentencing for shop theft from the presumption to suspend short sentences. This would mean that for short custodial sentences of 12 months or less, judges would be under no obligation to suspend a sentence. In the long term, the MoJ should remove the presumption to suspend short sentences when the prison overcrowding crisis has been resolved.

RECOMMENDATION 22

The MoJ should establish a series of 'fast track' courts, piloted in localities that suffer from high rates of retail crime, ASB, and other 'low-level' offending. Such courts should be designed to progress cases in 72 hours, from initial charge to sentencing. The MoJ should explore the possibility of utilising empty retail space on high streets or in shopping centres for new courts, as a means of increasing public awareness and confidence in the justice system.

RECOMMENDATION 23

The Home Office should consult on a new legal framework for private sector businesses to use biometrics, facial recognition, and similar technologies. This should build upon the ongoing consultation for law enforcement's use of these technologies. This consultation should lead to the establishment of a clear legal framework that gives retailers the maximum confidence and ability to utilise new technologies to tackle crime. Within this consultation, the Home Office should establish model data sharing agreements that can be easily replicated by police forces and local businesses to enable greater data sharing at a local level.

RECOMMENDATION 24

The Home Office should bring forward legislation creating a defined statutory power of detention for licensed retail security guards, in specified settings such as shops, modelled on the safeguards proposed in Lord Blencathra's Amendment 216B: mandatory training, body-worn cameras, minimum force requirements, secure detention rooms, and immediate notification of the police.

If the police are unable to attend within a reasonable time period, security guards should be able to use reasonable force to recover stock from a thief (including by undertaking a search), and to remove that individual from the premises, alongside the expectation that the retailer immediately reports the incident to the police.

Eligibility to exercise this power should be tied to a new SIA-administered licence category. This should be accompanied by a licensing framework enabling holders of this licence to carry approved defensive equipment.

RECOMMENDATION 25

HM Treasury should introduce a permanently lower rate of VAT, set at 15 per cent for the hospitality sector. This would cost £5 billion in 2026/27 prices. The Treasury should fund this through reforms to welfare, outlined in the CSJ's Wasted Youth report, which would save £7.4 billion per year. This could be supplemented by a new Online Sales Tax, which if set at two per cent of all internet sales could raise £2.6 billion in 2027/28.

RECOMMENDATION 26

The government should introduce a Future Workforce Credit to incentivise employers to recruit and upskill NEETs aged 16–24. The Credit would be set at 30 per cent of an employee's salary. The Credit would be paid in two halves: the first upfront and the second after six months with proof of the NEETs continuing employment.

To be eligible, the employee must be aged between 16–24 and have been NEET for at least three months before recruitment. They must have been resident in the UK for at least three years. Employers would apply to HMRC for the Credit when hiring a NEET. HMRC would verify NEET status by cross-referencing PAYE returns, data from the National Pupil Database and Individual Learner Records, and DWP records. This will require a data sharing agreement between HMRC and the relevant departments.

The NEET should not have to be claiming benefits to be eligible for the Credit, to capture the 'other' NEETs not claiming benefits. The onus should also be on HMRC to verify the employee's NEET status not on the employer to prove it, to keep the barriers for employers as low as possible. The application process means the Credit is not automatic and applies only to new employees, so that it directly influences employment decisions.

RECOMMENDATION 27

MHCLG should lead a cross-government review of existing and planned regulations affecting the construction industry, to ensure that environmental and building safety standards are properly aligned with housing and infrastructure goals. This review should provide the clarity and certainty needed for the sector to plan investment, build workforce capacity, and maintain delivery, while also assessing the trade-offs between regulatory requirements and construction output. As part of this, the government should examine the efficacy of regulations that have constrained delivery, ensuring that standards remain proportionate, and do not unintentionally stall the development of much-needed homes and infrastructure.

RECOMMENDATION 28

MHCLG should introduce a new Brownfield Passport modelled on existing LDO powers. Locally, Brownfield Passports should be used alongside design codes developed by LPAs in consultation with residents. The aim of the Brownfield Passport should be to give automatic planning approval to applications that meet specified criteria within the Passport and locally adopted design code.

To ensure LPAs use these powers, MHCLG should amend the NPPF to include the following:

1. An expectation that Brownfield Passports are used to set the planning framework for brownfield land in town and city centres where a design code has been adopted, and where doing so would promote new housing. This would set a new positive duty on LPAs to explicitly use Brownfield Passports and link them to design codes.
2. An expectation that where a local authority's brownfield register includes sites in town or city centre locations, design codes should be prepared with a view to their incorporation within a Brownfield Passport.

RECOMMENDATION 29

MHCLG should amend the prior approval criteria for the General Permitted Development Order for residential conversions to include design quality and coherence with any local design code as a prior approval matter. MHCLG should also issue national planning practice guidance setting an expectation that local authorities produce design codes for retail to residential conversions.

RECOMMENDATION 30

MHCLG should issue national planning practice guidance establishing a clear expectation that local planning authorities produce shopfront design codes for their town and city centres. Local authorities in receipt of Pride in Place funding should utilise this for shopfront improvement schemes.

RECOMMENDATION 31

MHCLG should increase the initial investment in the Community Right to Buy Fund to £500 million, with the aim of raising an additional £500 million through match funding initiatives. This should be funded from existing government spend, utilising unclaimed gift aid, dormant funds, and dormant assets, as identified in the CSJ's *Supercharging Philanthropy* report.

RECOMMENDATION 32

MHCLG should introduce a statutory duty requiring all local authorities in England to publish and maintain a community ownership strategy, including an up-to-date policy on use of Community Asset Transfer powers and a publicly accessible register of assets available for transfer. Strategies should be reviewed every five years. MHCLG should issue guidance on adopting a general presumption in favour of asset transfer as a matter of national policy, so that local authorities are encouraged to act as facilitators of community ownership, rather than gatekeepers.

Appendix A:

Social Breakdown Index methodology

The SBI is a simple composite index of local authorities consisting of three indicators for social breakdown:

1. **The number of shops that have had illicit tobacco, cigarettes, and vapes seized in 2025**

   This data was obtained via an FOI request to all local authorities in GB with a statutory responsibility for trading standards. Northern Ireland was excluded from this FOI as responsibility for trading standards is held at a national level.

   This FOI request was submitted to local authorities on the 3rd February 2026. This includes all county, unitary, metropolitan, and London borough councils. Some localities choose to pool or outsource their Trading Standards, operations meaning that not all local authorities could provide a response. We received 181 responses that could be verified as referring to the number of premises that have been subject to seizure, rather than the total number of seizures that have taken place. Where possible, we have removed data which refer to non-retail premises.

   Some local authorities provided data for the financial year rather than calendar year. Where this occurred, we included 2024/25 data within our 2025 totals, 2023/24 data within 2024 totals, and 2022/23 data within 2023 totals as this was the latest full year period. This required follow-up with some local authorities to obtain 2022/23 data. This introduces a limitation as for these authorities, the reference period runs from April to March rather than January to December, a difference of up to nine months from the calendar-year figures reported elsewhere by other local authorities. As a result, seizure counts are not drawn from an identical time window across all authorities.

   ONS population estimates by local authority were mapped to county council level[311] for mid-2024. These are used to adjust the number of shops with illicit goods seized to per 10,000 population.[312]

   A limitation of the SBI is its reliance on seizure rates as a proxy for the scale of illicit trading. A high seizure rate may reflect greater enforcement activity rather than a greater underlying prevalence of illicit trade. Conversely, a low rate may reflect weak enforcement capacity rather than a genuinely low level of illicit activity. We nonetheless treat higher seizure rates as indicative of a greater prevalence of illicit trading, on the basis that enforcement activity is itself a response to observed or intelligence-led criminal activity.

311 ONS, Local Authority District to County and Unitary Authority (December 2024) Lookup in EW, June 2026. Accessed: https://geoportal.statistics.gov.uk/datasets/ons::local-authority-district-to-county-and-unitary-authority-december-2024-lookup-in-ew/about.

312 ONS, Nomis: Local authority profile, March 2026.

2. **Vacancy rates**

   Data on vacant retail units was obtained from the Geographic Data Service.[313] Vacancy rates were provided at the lower tier for two-tier authorities, which we folded into upper-tier local authorities to obtain county wide vacancy rates.[314]

3. **Police recorded incidents of public order, shoplifting, ASB, bicycle theft, theft from the person, and criminal damage and arson offences.**

   Crime data was obtained from Data Police UK.[315] It covers all English and Welsh constabularies in calendar year 2025, except areas in the Greater Manchester Combined Authority.[316] Crimes are recorded at the LSOA level, which were mapped to local authorities.[317] ONS population estimates by local authority for mid-2024 were used to convert the total crime counts to per 10,000 population.[318]

Construction of the SBI

Construction of the SBI follows standard index methods issued by the ONS.[319] Each indicator was first oriented so that higher values represented worse outcomes. Indicators were then standardised using z-scores to place them on a common scale, i.e. by subtracting from each localities' value the mean across localities, then dividing by the standard deviation across local authorities. The composite index was calculated as the mean of the three standardised indicators. Higher SBI scores indicate a higher degree of social breakdown.

The SBI provides a local authority level analysis of social breakdown and is used in this report as a proxy indicator of the social and economic challenges that affect high streets. Because it operates at local authority level, it can demonstrate how these challenges vary across geographies but cannot identify conditions at the level of an individual high street. Qualitative evidence gathered through roundtables, interviews and visits therefore complements the SBI by illustrating how these problems appear in specific places.

While FOI and vacancy rate data covers Scotland, to ensure consistency between crime data we chose to only include England and Wales within the SBI as Scottish crime data is recorded separately. Only local authorities which had verifiable data available for all three variables were included within the index.

313 Geographic Data Service, Retail Type, Vacancy and Address Data, June 2026. Accessed: https://data.geods.ac.uk/dataset/local-data-company-retail-type-vacancy-and-address-data.

314 ONS, Local Authority District to County and Unitary Authority (December 2024) Lookup in EW, June 2026. Accessed: https://geoportal.statistics.gov.uk/datasets/ons::local-authority-district-to-county-and-unitary-authority-december-2024-lookup-in-ew/about.

315 Data.police.uk, March 2026. Accessed: https://data.police.uk/.

316 Greater Manchester Police does not currently submit data to the Data Police UK portal, and so crime figures could not be obtained for local authorities within the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. We were unable to obtain equivalent data for the Greater Mancher Combined Authority, therefore we have excluded these local authorities from the SBI.

317 National Data Library, LSOA (2021) to Electoral Ward (2025) to LAD (2025) Best Fit Lookup in EW (V2), June 2026; ONS, Local Authority District to County and Unitary Authority (December 2024) Lookup in EW, June 2026. Accessed: https://geoportal.statistics.gov.uk/datasets/ons::local-authority-district-to-county-and-unitary-authority-december-2024-lookup-in-ew/about.

318 ONS, Nomis: Official census and labour market statistics, March 2026.

319 ONS, Health Index methods and development: 2015 to 2021, June 2023.

Table 4: Social Breakdown Index individual components and score by county

Local authority name	Region	Seizure Rate	Seizure Rate Stand-ardised	Vacancy Rate	Vacancy Rate Stand-ardised	Crime Rate	Crime Rate Stand-ardised	SBI	Rank
Westminster	London	0.81	0.10	0.07	-1.01	2560.24	9.06	2.72	1
Newport	Wales	3.51	4.15	0.16	2.55	427.52	0.01	2.24	2
Liverpool	North West	4.40	5.48	0.10	0.14	478.13	0.22	1.95	3
Hartlepool	North East	1.22	0.72	0.18	3.35	792.73	1.56	1.88	4
Blaenau Gwent	Wales	0.74	-0.01	0.22	5.27	478.54	0.23	1.83	5
Blackpool	North West	1.80	1.59	0.14	1.73	937.44	2.17	1.83	6
North East Lincolnshire	Yorkshire and the Humber	2.38	2.45	0.15	2.15	550.06	0.53	1.71	7
Walsall	West Midlands	3.28	3.80	0.12	1.03	338.34	-0.37	1.49	8
Stoke-on-Trent	West Midlands	1.41	0.99	0.15	2.49	549.99	0.53	1.34	9
Islington	London	1.61	1.31	0.10	0.24	932.55	2.15	1.23	10
Southwark	London	1.81	1.60	0.10	0.11	768.59	1.46	1.06	11
Newham	London	2.51	2.65	0.08	-0.53	626.82	0.85	0.99	12
Dudley	West Midlands	2.50	2.63	0.11	0.73	258.22	-0.71	0.88	13
Hackney	London	1.27	0.80	0.11	0.50	727.25	1.28	0.86	14
Sunderland	North East	1.11	0.55	0.14	1.69	500.09	0.32	0.85	15
Stockton-on-Tees	North East	1.26	0.77	0.12	0.89	560.93	0.57	0.75	16
Croydon	London	1.25	0.76	0.13	1.28	440.27	0.06	0.70	17
Cardiff	Wales	1.54	1.19	0.11	0.60	498.15	0.31	0.70	18
South Tyneside	North East	0.99	0.37	0.12	1.15	558.88	0.57	0.70	19
Newcastle upon Tyne	North East	1.09	0.53	0.11	0.66	633.52	0.88	0.69	20
Middlesbrough	North East	0.38	-0.53	0.11	0.75	832.60	1.73	0.65	21
Doncaster	Yorkshire and the Humber	0.97	0.34	0.12	1.19	518.88	0.40	0.64	22
Portsmouth	South East	1.82	1.61	0.09	-0.16	466.68	0.17	0.54	23
Calderdale	Yorkshire and the Humber	1.19	0.67	0.12	1.00	408.67	-0.07	0.53	24
Bristol, City of	South West	0.69	-0.08	0.12	1.00	584.55	0.68	0.53	25
Blackburn with Darwen	North West	1.17	0.64	0.10	0.38	557.52	0.56	0.53	26
Barnsley	Yorkshire and the Humber	1.63	1.33	0.10	0.17	433.97	0.04	0.51	27
Tower Hamlets	London	0.84	0.15	0.10	0.25	682.40	1.09	0.50	28
Nottingham	East Midlands	0.57	-0.25	0.11	0.61	667.76	1.03	0.46	29
Haringey	London	1.10	0.54	0.09	-0.04	637.33	0.90	0.46	30
Denbighshire	Wales	0.51	-0.35	0.13	1.54	470.76	0.19	0.46	31
Gateshead	North East	0.64	-0.15	0.12	1.09	503.16	0.33	0.42	32
North Lincolnshire	Yorkshire and the Humber	1.40	0.99	0.11	0.59	330.99	-0.40	0.39	33
Merthyr Tydfil	Wales	1.02	0.41	0.11	0.47	474.63	0.21	0.36	34
Sheffield	Yorkshire and the Humber	1.37	0.95	0.09	-0.14	486.56	0.26	0.36	35

Local authority name	Region	Seizure Rate	Seizure Rate Stand-ardised	Vacancy Rate	Vacancy Rate Stand-ardised	Crime Rate	Crime Rate Stand-ardised	SBI	Rank
Lancashire	North West	1.05	0.46	0.10	0.29	481.19	0.24	0.33	36
Isle of Anglesey	Wales	1.45	1.06	0.11	0.51	282.65	-0.61	0.32	37
Redcar and Cleveland	North East	0.72	-0.03	0.09	-0.23	672.06	1.05	0.26	38
Bradford	Yorkshire and the Humber	0.55	-0.28	0.12	1.02	412.43	-0.06	0.23	39
Lambeth	London	0.25	-0.73	0.09	0.04	745.58	1.36	0.22	40
Cumberland	North West	0.64	-0.15	0.13	1.36	283.82	-0.60	0.20	41
Knowsley	North West	1.35	0.92	0.10	0.06	335.56	-0.38	0.20	42
Leicester	East Midlands	0.82	0.13	0.09	-0.13	536.99	0.47	0.16	43
Herefordshire, County of	West Midlands	0.79	0.07	0.12	1.12	255.54	-0.72	0.15	44
Kensington and Chelsea	London	0.21	-0.80	0.07	-0.87	912.83	2.07	0.13	45
Coventry	West Midlands	1.17	0.64	0.10	0.18	318.84	-0.45	0.12	46
Brighton and Hove	South East	1.06	0.47	0.07	-0.90	600.87	0.74	0.11	47
Gwynedd	Wales	0.74	0.01	0.11	0.53	369.00	-0.24	0.10	48
Kirklees	Yorkshire and the Humber	0.60	-0.21	0.12	0.97	313.19	-0.48	0.10	49
Torfaen	Wales	0.42	-0.47	0.11	0.86	395.99	-0.13	0.09	50
Wirral	North West	0.88	0.21	0.11	0.56	297.20	-0.54	0.08	51
Neath Port Talbot	Wales	0.49	-0.38	0.12	1.01	329.43	-0.41	0.07	52
Shropshire	West Midlands	1.44	1.05	0.09	-0.06	242.17	-0.78	0.07	53
Wolverhampton	West Midlands	0.92	0.28	0.10	0.26	335.25	-0.38	0.05	54
Southend-on-Sea	East of England	0.92	0.27	0.10	0.08	374.78	-0.22	0.04	55
Wakefield	Yorkshire and the Humber	0.71	-0.05	0.10	0.26	406.02	-0.08	0.04	56
North Northamptonshire	East Midlands	1.02	0.41	0.09	-0.15	391.07	-0.15	0.04	57
Waltham Forest	London	0.50	-0.36	0.10	0.14	502.47	0.33	0.04	58
Conwy	Wales	0.70	-0.07	0.10	0.09	445.64	0.09	0.04	59
West Northamptonshire	East Midlands	0.86	0.18	0.10	0.07	386.46	-0.17	0.03	60
Bridgend	Wales	0.54	-0.30	0.11	0.66	350.84	-0.32	0.02	61
Sefton	North West	0.52	-0.32	0.11	0.87	304.81	-0.51	0.01	62
Hounslow	London	0.97	0.34	0.08	-0.71	512.75	0.37	0.00	63
Wandsworth	London	0.86	0.18	0.08	-0.43	469.30	0.19	-0.02	64
Brent	London	0.57	-0.26	0.08	-0.48	580.35	0.66	-0.03	65
Derby	East Midlands	0.47	-0.40	0.09	-0.09	516.11	0.38	-0.04	66
Merton	London	1.28	0.81	0.08	-0.62	354.03	-0.30	-0.04	67
Carmarthenshire	Wales	0.05	-1.03	0.13	1.51	279.93	-0.62	-0.04	68
Thurrock	East of England	0.83	0.13	0.09	-0.04	364.17	-0.26	-0.06	69
Wrexham	Wales	0.80	0.08	0.08	-0.38	450.79	0.11	-0.06	70
Northumberland	North East	0.24	-0.75	0.11	0.62	411.65	-0.06	-0.06	71
Reading	South East	0.11	-0.94	0.11	0.52	449.19	0.10	-0.11	72

Local authority name	Region	Seizure Rate	Seizure Rate Stand-ardised	Vacancy Rate	Vacancy Rate Stand-ardised	Crime Rate	Crime Rate Stand-ardised	SBI	Rank
Lewisham	London	0.23	-0.76	0.09	0.01	504.02	0.33	-0.14	73
Warwickshire	West Midlands	0.79	0.08	0.09	-0.24	349.90	-0.32	-0.16	74
North Somerset	South West	0.58	-0.24	0.10	0.06	332.13	-0.40	-0.19	75
North Tyneside	North East	0.37	-0.55	0.09	-0.21	466.60	0.17	-0.20	76
Milton Keynes	South East	0.98	0.36	0.08	-0.71	365.17	-0.26	-0.20	77
Swindon	South West	0.04	-1.05	0.11	0.63	375.23	-0.21	-0.21	78
Gloucestershire	South West	0.48	-0.39	0.09	-0.05	377.92	-0.20	-0.21	79
Southampton	South East	0.62	-0.19	0.08	-0.64	464.99	0.17	-0.22	80
Worcestershire	West Midlands	0.42	-0.48	0.10	0.22	331.85	-0.40	-0.22	81
Ealing	London	0.49	-0.37	0.08	-0.74	521.89	0.41	-0.23	82
Sandwell	West Midlands	0.90	0.25	0.08	-0.46	308.54	-0.50	-0.24	83
Caerphilly	Wales	0.40	-0.52	0.10	0.24	319.40	-0.45	-0.24	84
Enfield	London	0.64	-0.15	0.07	-0.83	482.42	0.24	-0.25	85
Lincolnshire	East Midlands	0.35	-0.58	0.09	-0.14	414.41	-0.05	-0.26	86
Westmorland and Furness	North West	0.30	-0.65	0.11	0.69	236.38	-0.80	-0.26	87
Peterborough	East of England	0.09	-0.97	0.09	-0.20	510.65	0.36	-0.27	88
Bedford	East of England	0.36	-0.57	0.09	-0.05	369.89	-0.24	-0.29	89
Greenwich	London	0.43	-0.46	0.08	-0.65	483.59	0.25	-0.29	90
Kingston upon Thames	London	0.46	-0.41	0.08	-0.50	430.77	0.02	-0.30	91
Pembrokeshire	Wales	0.24	-0.75	0.10	0.39	289.60	-0.58	-0.31	92
Derbyshire	East Midlands	0.58	-0.23	0.09	-0.29	322.98	-0.43	-0.32	93
Luton	East of England	0.42	-0.48	0.09	-0.25	359.86	-0.28	-0.34	94
St. Helens	North West	0.42	-0.47	0.09	-0.16	335.80	-0.38	-0.34	95
Staffordshire	West Midlands	0.47	-0.40	0.09	0.01	266.12	-0.68	-0.36	96
Birmingham	West Midlands	0.21	-0.79	0.09	-0.14	374.66	-0.22	-0.38	97
East Sussex	South East	0.52	-0.33	0.08	-0.75	404.68	-0.09	-0.39	98
Monmouthshire	Wales	0.21	-0.79	0.10	0.46	228.59	-0.84	-0.39	99
Leeds	Yorkshire and the Humber	0.53	-0.31	0.07	-0.98	444.99	0.08	-0.40	100
Havering	London	0.14	-0.89	0.09	-0.23	389.72	-0.15	-0.42	101
Norfolk	East of England	0.33	-0.61	0.09	-0.05	277.15	-0.63	-0.43	102
Hillingdon	London	0.64	-0.15	0.05	-1.68	540.97	0.49	-0.45	103
Sutton	London	0.84	0.15	0.07	-1.07	320.57	-0.45	-0.46	104
Richmond upon Thames	London	0.61	-0.19	0.07	-0.87	346.91	-0.33	-0.46	105
Medway	South East	0.58	-0.24	0.06	-1.19	423.06	-0.01	-0.48	106
Cheshire East	North West	0.62	-0.18	0.08	-0.36	215.24	-0.89	-0.48	107
Halton	North West	0.38	-0.54	0.08	-0.39	302.71	-0.52	-0.48	108
Leicestershire	East Midlands	0.75	0.02	0.07	-0.86	282.92	-0.60	-0.48	109
Telford and Wrekin	West Midlands	0.51	-0.34	0.07	-0.93	382.54	-0.18	-0.48	110
Buckinghamshire	South East	0.85	0.16	0.07	-0.76	222.23	-0.86	-0.49	111

Local authority name	Region	Seizure Rate	Seizure Rate Stand-ardised	Vacancy Rate	Vacancy Rate Stand-ardised	Crime Rate	Crime Rate Stand-ardised	SBI	Rank
Bath and North East Somerset	South West	0.10	-0.96	0.09	-0.26	355.75	-0.30	-0.50	112
Powys	Wales	0.22	-0.78	0.09	0.05	225.90	-0.85	-0.53	113
Hertfordshire	East of England	0.61	-0.20	0.07	-1.11	361.76	-0.27	-0.53	114
Kent	South East	0.32	-0.62	0.07	-0.78	373.89	-0.22	-0.54	115
Slough	South East	0.96	0.32	0.06	-1.54	326.66	-0.42	-0.54	116
Vale of Glamorgan	Wales	0.07	-1.00	0.09	-0.15	309.04	-0.49	-0.55	117
Wiltshire	South West	0.17	-0.85	0.09	-0.14	266.37	-0.68	-0.55	118
Ceredigion	Wales	0.00	-1.11	0.10	0.23	228.24	-0.84	-0.57	119
Isle of Wight	South East	0.56	-0.26	0.07	-0.98	311.24	-0.48	-0.58	120
Bromley	London	0.27	-0.71	0.07	-0.95	391.57	-0.14	-0.60	121
Cheshire West and Chester	North West	0.27	-0.71	0.08	-0.42	257.79	-0.71	-0.61	122
Cornwall	South West	0.00	-1.11	0.09	-0.18	292.65	-0.56	-0.62	123
West Sussex	South East	0.69	-0.08	0.06	-1.57	377.23	-0.20	-0.62	124
Suffolk	East of England	0.39	-0.52	0.08	-0.43	206.54	-0.93	-0.62	125
Cambridgeshire	East of England	0.07	-1.00	0.08	-0.49	332.56	-0.39	-0.63	126
North Yorkshire	Yorkshire and the Humber	0.25	-0.73	0.08	-0.66	304.01	-0.52	-0.64	127
East Riding of Yorkshire	Yorkshire and the Humber	0.45	-0.44	0.08	-0.58	211.42	-0.91	-0.64	128
Windsor and Maidenhead	South East	0.69	-0.07	0.07	-1.07	237.70	-0.80	-0.65	129
York	Yorkshire and the Humber	0.05	-1.04	0.06	-1.27	489.25	0.27	-0.68	130
Essex	East of England	0.33	-0.61	0.08	-0.74	257.12	-0.71	-0.69	131
Surrey	South East	0.36	-0.57	0.07	-0.93	288.61	-0.58	-0.69	132
West Berkshire	South East	0.00	-1.11	0.08	-0.39	282.66	-0.61	-0.70	133
Central Bedfordshire	East of England	0.32	-0.63	0.07	-0.82	249.97	-0.74	-0.73	134
Bexley	London	0.19	-0.82	0.07	-1.14	336.19	-0.38	-0.78	135
Harrow	London	0.15	-0.89	0.06	-1.36	373.81	-0.22	-0.82	136
Dorset	South West	0.13	-0.92	0.07	-0.81	246.29	-0.76	-0.83	137
Hampshire	South East	0.21	-0.80	0.07	-1.09	224.04	-0.85	-0.91	138
Solihull	West Midlands	0.27	-0.70	0.05	-1.69	302.07	-0.52	-0.97	139
Rutland	East Midlands	0.00	-1.11	0.07	-0.84	154.19	-1.15	-1.03	140
South Gloucestershire	South West	0.10	-0.96	0.05	-1.58	292.07	-0.57	-1.04	141
Bracknell Forest	South East	0.08	-0.99	0.06	-1.42	256.41	-0.72	-1.04	142
Warrington	North West	0.23	-0.76	0.05	-1.68	230.19	-0.83	-1.09	143
Wokingham	South East	0.00	-1.11	0.05	-1.78	191.29	-0.99	-1.29	144

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