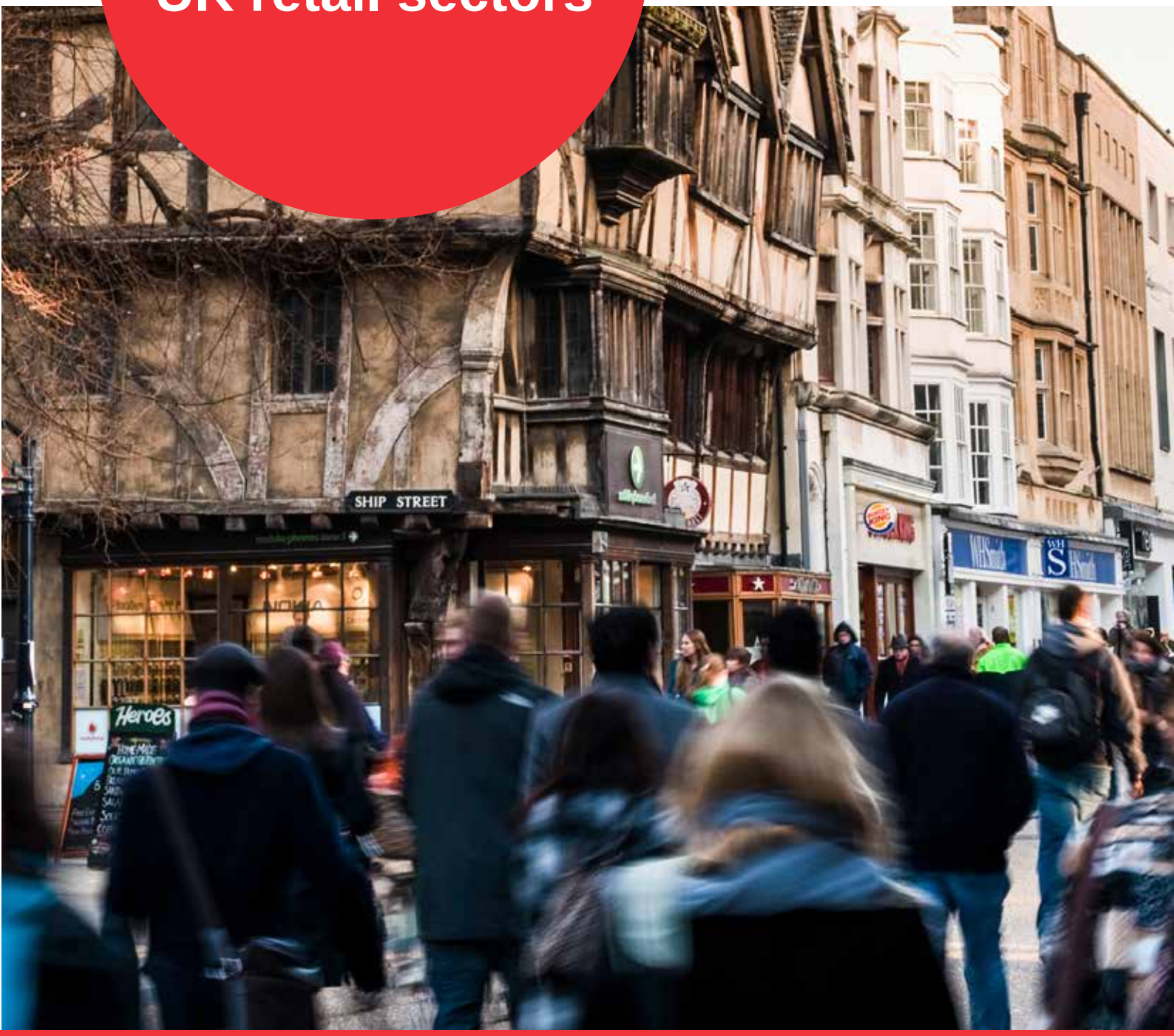
Industry Insight: Crime and security in the UK retail sectors

First Response Group
Total Security, Risk & Facilities Management





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Foreword

Wherever we live and whatever our circumstances, shops are part of the fabric of British life. From bustling high streets to quiet suburban corners, the service provided by these businesses is something our country simply couldn't do without. And in times of crisis, and on ordinary weekends alike, shops are there, unfailingly, to meet our needs.

Despite a 48% reduction in neighbourhood crime since 2010, shoplifting, and violence towards retail workers have continued to rise, casting a shadow over high streets and jeopardising the livelihoods of countless traders.

Amidst this, the recent budget casts a harsh light on the challenges facing the retail sector, amplifying financial pressures at a time when security risks are at an all-time high. Organised crime is growing, offences that were once confined to our high streets are spreading outwards and retailers are left in a precarious position – to choose between essential security or managing their escalating costs.

But despite this stark reality, there are glimmers of hope. In response to the increasing threat to retail the UK government has introduced a series of measures aimed at enhancing the safety of retail workers and reducing theft. However, with many initiatives still in their development stages, the fundamental question remains – is it enough?

Barry Dawson
Group Managing Director





The retail crime landscape

On the high street

The latest figures reveal a troubling surge in retail crime across the UK, with shoplifting up 32% in the year to September 2023, making it 12% higher than pre-pandemic levels (ONS, 2023). This spike has driven retail crime and security costs to an unprecedented £3.3 billion in 2023, almost double the previous year (BRC, 2023).

> **High-demand items like food and alcohol are primary targets, meaning not only retailers but everyday shoppers feel the impact as these costs inevitably drive-up prices.**

For small businesses, these losses are crippling, endangering their very survival and further eroding the vitality of Britain's high streets.

Retail workers face escalating risks, with a shocking 1,300 incidents of violence or abuse reported daily - up from 870 a day last year (BRC, 2024). Confrontations with thieves are the main trigger, creating hostile and dangerous work conditions. Supermarkets are especially vulnerable, with 77% reporting regular customer theft (CVS, 2021), highlighting the widespread nature of this issue.



Despite an increase in police numbers, only 14.5% of shoplifting incidents result in charges or summonses, leaving 53% of retailers dissatisfied with the police response (ONS, 2023).

For prolific offenders, many of whom are driven by drug dependence, shoplifting remains a low-risk, high-reward crime, with nearly 70% of incidents linked to substance misuse (CVS, 2021).

This wave of retail crime threatens not only businesses but also communities, potentially creating retail deserts where shops can no longer afford to operate. A robust, zero-tolerance approach is urgently needed to restore safe shopping environments, protect retail workers, and ensure the resilience of local economies across the UK.

As retail workers face increasing levels of anxiety and risk, the toll placed on them is palpable.



Other topline statistics from the BRC's crime survey, that examines 2022-23, found:

- 2022-23 saw a sharp rise in violence and abuse, returning to levels seen during the pandemic, with nearly half a million incidents reported annually.
- Customer theft has also surged, with losses doubling to almost £2 billion.
- Confidence in police response continues to erode, with 60 per cent of retailers rating it as poor or very poor, and cybercrime remains on the rise.
- 61% of retailers reported that the police's response to retail crime they experienced was poor or very poor. Only 32% said it was fair and just 6% said it was good.
- 55% of retailers said that the main reason for failure to report was lack of belief that anything would happen as a result, with 87% reporting this as one of the top two reasons. The other main reasons were lack of staff time (38% indicating it as a top two reason) and difficulties with the reporting system (58% as a top two reason).





Police response and reporting challenges

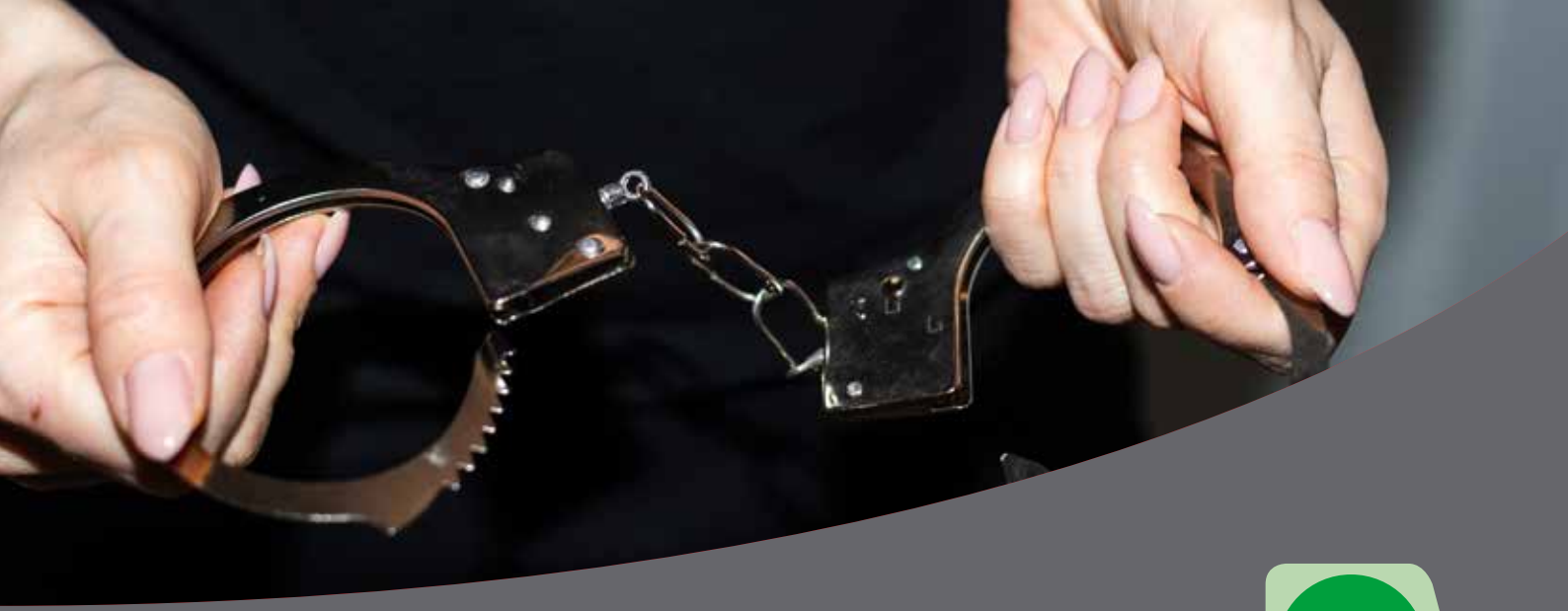
Despite the increase in crime, many incidents go unreported. CVS findings reveal that, within the wholesale and retail sector, the primary reason for not reporting incidents to the police is the perception that the crime is too trivial (37%). When incidents do get reported, it is often because of the theft of high-value items (64%) or when there is violence towards staff (26%).

However, even when crimes are reported, police response and outcomes remain a point of contention. Most cases are closed without identifying an offender, with only 14.5% of reported shoplifting cases resulting in charges or summons. While this is higher than the general charge rate for crime (5.9%, excluding fraud and computer misuse), retailers report dissatisfaction with police handling of these incidents. In 2021, over half (53%) of wholesale and retail premises that reported crime to the police expressed dissatisfaction with the response, highlighting a gap in confidence and support for tackling retail crime effectively.



What's driving the hike in retail crime?

Retail crime in the UK is rising sharply, with shoplifting increasingly linked to prolific offenders. Recent data highlights that shop theft now accounts for 14% of all sentencing occasions involving these individuals, revealing a troubling cycle of repeat offenders frequently moving through the criminal justice system. For a substantial number of these offenders, drug dependency is a primary motivator, with an estimated 70% of shop theft attributed to habitual users of heroin, crack cocaine, or powdered cocaine. This intersection of addiction and crime presents a complex challenge, as retailers, law enforcement agencies, and communities contend with a problem that is both economic and profoundly social.



Professor Emmeline Taylor from the University of London addressed the House of Lords justice and home affairs committee, describing the surge in retail crime as a "tsunami" driven by broader societal issues, including poverty, mental health challenges, and substance abuse.

Taylor's insights echo a growing body of evidence suggesting that retail crime is far more than an isolated issue of theft; it is frequently a symptom of deeper, systemic social problems.

However, this narrative does not encompass the full picture. Paul Gerrard, Public Affairs Director at the Co-op, highlighted an increasingly pervasive issue: organised criminal gangs targeting retailers in coordinated efforts to steal at scale. The Co-op reported a staggering 44% increase in retail crime over the past year, with many incidents attributed to gangs emptying shelves systematically, stealing "to order," and leaving stores with significant financial and stock losses.

Supermarkets and other high-footfall retailers are especially impacted, prompting many to invest heavily in additional security measures, including enhanced CCTV systems, in-store security personnel, and even advanced AI-powered monitoring technologies. Some have also turned to community partnerships and stronger ties with local authorities to build safer retail environments. However, there is a growing sense among retailers that, without more robust support from the police and a systemic approach to addressing the



root causes of crime - including support for addiction treatment, mental health, and poverty alleviation - retail crime will likely continue to pose a significant challenge for UK businesses.

The retail sector is calling for both immediate and long-term solutions. While stricter sentencing and enhanced security measures may offer temporary relief, experts argue that real progress will require deeper investment in social support systems and more integrated community policing efforts. This may mean not only a crackdown on organised retail crime but also a renewed focus on rehabilitation programmes that target addiction and mental health issues, addressing the very factors that drive prolific offenders back into a cycle of crime. Retailers and communities alike are seeking a shift towards prevention, recognising the complex web of issues contributing to the rising tide of retail crime across the UK.







Retail crime – it’s not just on the high street

As omnichannel retail continues to expand, retail crime is evolving to penetrate every stage of the supply chain, extending far beyond the high street and shop floor into warehouses, distribution centres, and fulfilment facilities.

> **Recent data reveals a 345% increase in the development of warehouse spaces exceeding one million square feet over the past decade, with occupancy by online retailers surging by a remarkable 813%.**

These sprawling sites, often holding goods worth millions of pounds, are becoming prime targets for organised criminal networks. Unlike high street stores, which benefit from public visibility, CCTV, and on-site personnel, these remote locations present unique vulnerabilities that make them susceptible to sophisticated criminal operations. Warehouses and distribution centres, situated in less trafficked areas, often lack the constant oversight found in traditional retail settings, offering criminals the opportunity to strike with reduced risk of detection.

As retailers increasingly rely on complex, global supply chains to meet omnichannel demand, new vulnerabilities are emerging. Criminals are not only targeting warehouses but are also exploiting weak points in transportation and logistics. Goods in transit, especially high-value items like electronics or luxury products, have become frequent targets during loading, unloading, and delivery processes.



In-transit vulnerabilities

The shift towards rapid fulfilment has led to a significant increase in goods in motion, creating more opportunities for theft. High-value items being transported to and from warehouses are especially vulnerable during transit, particularly in loading zones, storage depots, and at delivery hand-offs. Criminals leverage these weak points, often employing advanced tracking methods to follow valuable shipments and coordinate thefts at points of transfer, where security protocols are sometimes less rigorous.

With retail crime continuing to expand across all parts of the supply chain, many experts argue that a more comprehensive approach is needed. This includes bolstering security at warehouses, enhancing transit protections, and fostering closer partnerships with law enforcement to address the evolving tactics of organised criminal groups. Retailers are now recognising that securing the supply chain requires as much attention as protecting goods on the shop floor, reflecting the changing landscape of retail crime in the UK.





Hope in the aisles?

As retail crime continues to impact high streets, warehouses, and supply chains across the UK, a range of government initiatives, law enforcement strategies, and industry collaborations are being deployed to address this multifaceted issue. While efforts like Operation Opal and recent budgetary commitments represent important steps forward, tackling retail crime remains a challenging and complex endeavour.

Budget commitments to tackle retail crime

In the Autumn Budget 2024, Chancellor Rachel Reeves announced new funding and legislative changes aimed at curbing retail crime. Among the most significant changes was the repeal of the “£200 rule,” a provision which previously treated shoplifting incidents involving goods under £200 as minor offences, often not warranting prosecution. The budget also includes increased funding targeted at organised retail crime, sending a signal that retail safety is now a government priority.

This repeal is viewed positively by the retail sector, which has long argued that the “£200 rule” trivialised theft, emboldening offenders to target small-ticket items repeatedly without fear of serious repercussions. The new budget also provides dedicated funding to support law enforcement’s focus on high-value, organised retail theft, which is particularly damaging to retailers and carries greater financial impact.

However, some industry experts express caution, noting that the success of these measures will depend heavily on local police capacity and resource allocation. With police already stretched, ensuring consistent enforcement across the country could prove challenging. Retailers are also concerned about how quickly the impact of



these changes will be felt on the ground, as resource constraints and organisational change take time to implement effectively.

Centralised law enforcement: Operational Opal

Operation Opal, an initiative led by the National Police Chiefs' Council, is dedicated to addressing organised retail crime (ORC) by centralising intelligence and resources across England and Wales. Opal seeks to address the rise in high-value, coordinated shoplifting and organised crime through intelligence sharing, rapid response tactics, and collaboration with retailers. Already in its first three months, Operation Opal has identified 152 prolific shoplifters and facilitated over 23 arrests, demonstrating early signs of impact.

Retailers have praised Operation Opal's centralised approach, which prioritises information sharing and proactive targeting of repeat offenders. By focusing on the most prolific offenders, Opal helps to tackle the root of many recurring retail theft issues. The initiative's emphasis on inter-agency cooperation has also strengthened ties between law enforcement and retailers, enabling better-coordinated responses to ORC.

But despite the benefits, some retailers remain skeptical, arguing that the impact of Operation Opal may be limited to specific geographic areas or larger-scale crimes. Smaller, independent retailers worry that the focus on prolific, high-value offenders might not trickle down to address the day-to-day theft and vandalism issues they face. The program's success, they argue, will rely on its ability to expand and adapt to the diverse needs of both large and small businesses across the country.



The Retail Crime Action Plan

Launched in October 2023, the Retail Crime Action Plan is a comprehensive framework outlining the police's commitment to addressing retail crime. The plan includes prioritising police attendancefor incidents involving violence, providing guidance for retailers on best practices for evidence collection, and strengthening partnerships between retailers and law enforcement. The aim is to improve police response times, ensure thorough investigations, and reduce the burden on retail staff who are often left dealing with the aftermath of theft or violence.

The Retail Crime Action Plan has been broadly welcomed, especially by retail workers and trade groups, who value the commitment to prioritising cases involving violence. By providing clearer guidance on evidence collection, the plan aims to make it easier for police to pursue cases, thus improving the chances of prosecution. The plan also emphasises a joint approach between police and retailers, fostering greater trust and coordination.

However, the Action Plan's effectiveness is likely to hinge on the availability of resources and follow-through from local police forces. Some in the retail industry fear that without dedicated funding for frontline response teams, the plan could be more symbolic than substantive, particularly as police forces are stretched thin in many parts of the UK. Additionally, the plan's effectiveness will require time and adjustments to meet the specific challenges faced by retailers across different regions.


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Future-proofing retail security

The security industry is undergoing a rapid transformation, fuelled by cutting-edge technologies that are setting new standards across the field.

Innovations in surveillance, access control, and digital security are enabling organisations to protect their assets and personnel with unprecedented precision. High-tech tools, such as biometric authentication, drones, and AI-powered monitoring systems, are revolutionising security practices, giving teams real-time insights that empower faster, more effective responses to potential threats. As technology continues to advance, the security sector is poised to adopt even more sophisticated solutions, creating safer environments for businesses and individuals alike.

A critical component of this transformation is biometric authentication, including fingerprint, iris, and facial recognition systems, which provide highly secure methods of identity verification. The uniqueness of biometric data makes it difficult to duplicate, significantly reducing the risk of unauthorised access. Smart cards and proximity sensors are also enhancing controlled access, while simultaneously creating robust audit trails that help organisations track movements within sensitive areas. This enhanced control allows security personnel to monitor access points in real-time, improving situational awareness and enabling prompt responses to any security anomalies.

Drones are another transformative tool for retail security. With their ability to operate day or night and cover vast areas, drones offer an effective solution for monitoring large properties and remote facilities. In sectors like retail and logistics, drones are used to secure expansive warehouses and distribution centres, where traditional security measures are often insufficient.



PwC estimates that drones could add £45 billion to the UK economy by 2030, with £7 billion attributed directly to security.

These technologies not only increase security coverage but also offer economic advantages, especially for larger operations.

Yet, technology is only part of the solution. While it plays a vital role in making our supply chains more secure, effective security relies on an informed, engaged workforce. Every employee, from warehouse operatives to managers, must be trained to recognise insider threats and respond to suspicious behaviour or breaches. As noted by the National Business Crime Centre, distribution centres and warehouses are more likely to experience employee theft than any other business, and addressing the risks of internal theft by company employees and contractors should feature at the heart of a business's security strategy.

A recent Los Angeles heist, involving $30 million stolen from a 'secured' site, underscores the level of planning and insider knowledge that organised criminals use to bypass standard defences. This sophistication makes unpredictability essential, and highlights the fact that mobile security patrols, varying routes and timing, deter criminals by preventing easy assessments of site vulnerabilities.

Crime doesn't follow a nine-to-five schedule, and neither should retail or warehouse security. Out-of-hours security, through remote monitoring and check-ins, ensures that facilities remain protected during their most vulnerable hours, reducing the risk of overnight heists.



Closing words

Barry Dawson
Group Managing Director

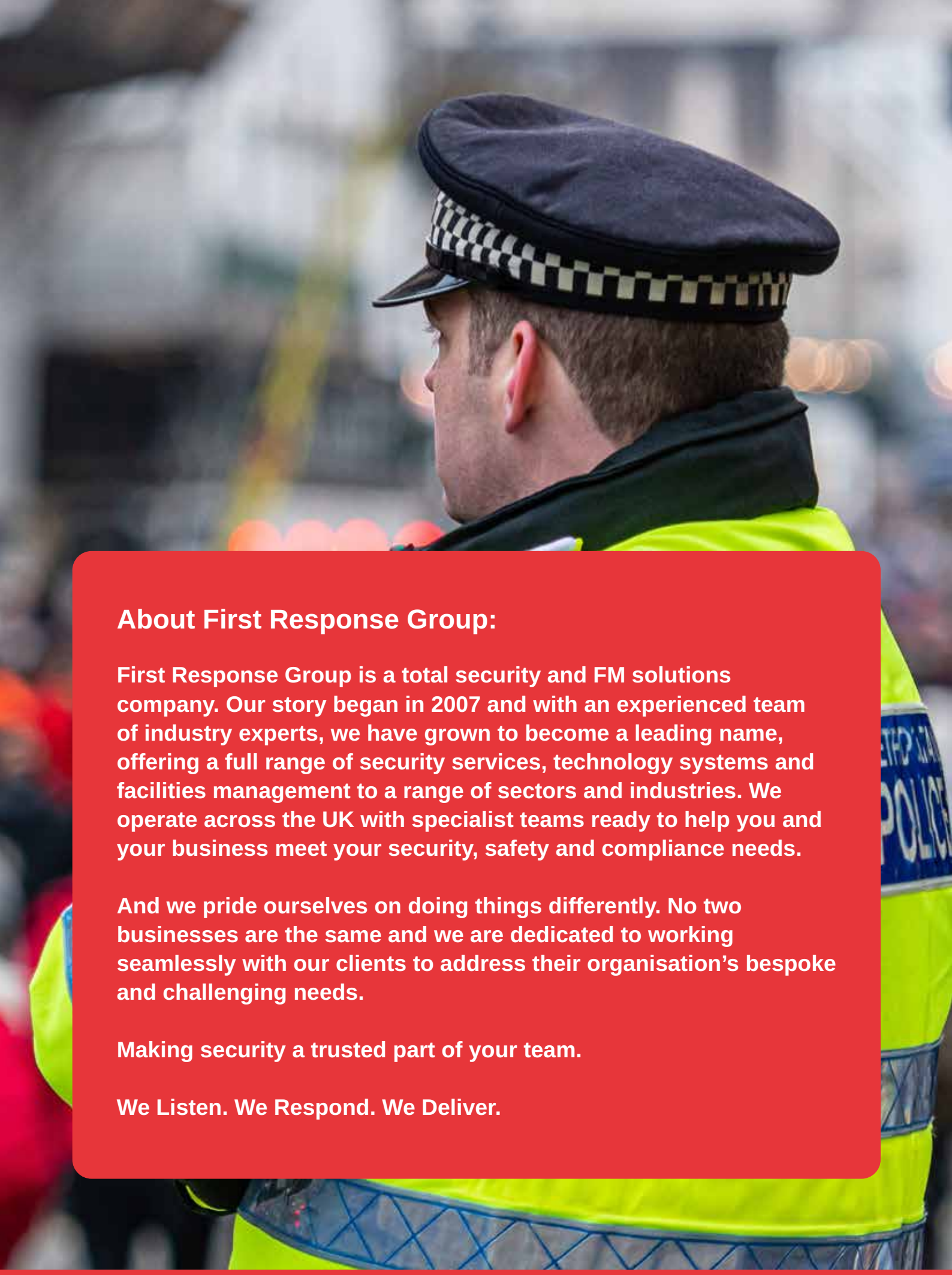
From the high street to the remote distribution hub, the lesson is clear - security can no longer be formulaic or generic. Facilities need custom-tailored defences and specialised staff trained to recognise and prevent complex threats that evolve with each new incident. Recent events, such as the discovery of hazardous packages at a DHL facility in Birmingham, underscore how complex and varied these risks can be. Effective security means more than just placing personnel on-site; it requires highly trained staff equipped with niche expertise to handle the specific threats of each location.

A robust approach should include rigorous risk assessments, targeted surveillance, and dedicated security personnel who understand the unique layout and operations of the site. Without these proactive measures, even seemingly secured locations can become vulnerable targets for well-organised criminals looking to exploit any oversight.

Collaboration is key

I know from our experience at First Response Group that retail security today doesn't end at the shop door; it's now a complex, more strategic challenge that extends from the high street to distribution centres and everywhere in between.

As organised crime evolves, so too must our approach to security. Protecting our businesses requires a holistic strategy that strengthens every link in the supply chain with proactive, customised measures that address specific vulnerabilities. The most crucial element? Collaboration. By uniting with our partners across the retail sector, we amplify our collective strength, building a resilient security framework that can effectively deter and respond to emerging threats.



About First Response Group:

First Response Group is a total security and FM solutions company. Our story began in 2007 and with an experienced team of industry experts, we have grown to become a leading name, offering a full range of security services, technology systems and facilities management to a range of sectors and industries. We operate across the UK with specialist teams ready to help you and your business meet your security, safety and compliance needs.

And we pride ourselves on doing things differently. No two businesses are the same and we are dedicated to working seamlessly with our clients to address their organisation's bespoke and challenging needs.

Making security a trusted part of your team.

We Listen. We Respond. We Deliver.

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