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By Email

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP
Prime Minister

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Paddy Lillis
General Secretary

Dear Mr Johnson

Queen's Speech 2021

Usdaw represents 400,000 members working in a variety of industries across the private sector including retail, distribution, transport, food manufacturing, call centres and funerals.

Throughout the pandemic, many Usdaw members have quite rightly been recognised as key workers, undertaking essential work. At the same time, however, our members in retail have suffered with a shocking increase in abuse, threats and violence during the course of their work. In addition to this, many workers have been made redundant as more than 180,000 retail jobs were lost during 2020, with a prediction that as many as 200,000 retail jobs could disappear in 2021.

Ahead of the forthcoming Queen's Speech, which comes at a crucial moment in our recovery from the crisis, we urge you to consider the following areas for the Government's legislative programme:

- Legal Protection for Retail Workers from Violence and Abuse
- Strengthening of Employment Rights
- A Recovery Plan for the Retail Sector
- Action on Universal Credit

Legal Protection for Retail Workers from Violence and Abuse

According to Usdaw's 2020 survey of over 2,700 retail workers, around 90% were abused last year, 60% reported threats of physical violence and nearly 1 in 10 were physically assaulted. Usdaw's survey showed that 71% of incidents against retail workers were related to the essential measures being taken to keep shops safe, such as enforcing social distancing and face coverings. However, these issues have merely overtaken previous 'trigger points' for abuse, mainly shoplifting and age-restricted sales which were already contributing to an increase in violence and abuse. Retail workers are responsible for enforcing rules around age-related sales or social distancing, yet they are given inadequate protection by the law.

A major step forward in tackling this issue would be the creation of a specific offence of abusing, threatening or assaulting a retail worker. A new offence has been created in law by the Scottish Parliament under the Protection of Workers Act, which will come into effect, in Scotland, from August 2021. This legislation provides an ideal template for the creation of a

new offence in law to protect retail workers. Usdaw's Parliamentary petition calling for this change in the law received over 104,000 signatures, and in February 2021, more than 65 retail CEOs wrote to you, calling for a new statutory offence to be created. There is clearly public and industry wide support for the creation of a new offence.

Udaw notes that the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill is to be carried over to the next Parliament. We are calling for the Bill to be amended to deliver protection for shopworkers.

Strengthening of Employment Rights

The Queen's Speech in 2019 outlined an Employment Bill which has so far not been introduced and we are disappointed that there is also no indication that it will be included in the forthcoming Queen's Speech.

The Government must take urgent action to protect workers, particularly those in precarious employment. The previous Government reviews of current employment provisions, which Usdaw has closely engaged with, have highlighted a wide range of issues which point to a fundamental lack of employment security in the UK. However, many of those issues have still not been tackled. New legislation is needed to cover the following areas:

- In line with the recommendation of the Low Pay Commission, as part of their 2018 review into one-sided flexibility, Usdaw believes that the Government must urgently introduce a 'right to switch to a normal hours contract'.
- In addition to a right to switch to a normal hours contract, Usdaw also believes that the Government must introduce a right to a minimum contract of 16 hours per week for any worker who wants it. This call is backed up by the Living Wage Foundation in their 'Living Hours Campaign'.
- The Coronavirus crisis has highlighted that many workers previously deemed to be low skilled are key workers, essential to the functioning of the UK economy. In light of this recognition, we must ensure that all workers are able to escape in-work poverty. Usdaw is calling on the Government to immediately increase the National Minimum Wage to £10 per hour, for all workers, regardless of their age.
- People with caring responsibilities, particularly women, have been disproportionately impacted by the Covid-19 crisis. The Government must commit to more effective family friendly employment rights, including a statutory, day one right to ten days' paid carers and parental leave, ending the qualifying periods for basic rights such as sick pay and parental leave, and strengthening health and safety rights and protection against redundancy for pregnant women and new mothers.

A Recovery Plan for the Retail Sector

The crisis in retail has reached a tipping point, and with full business rates relief and the moratorium on evictions ending in England this summer, many stores may never reopen. Recent figures from the British Retail Consortium show that one in seven stores were lying empty across Britain by the end of March 2021, with the overall vacancy rate rising to 14.1% over the first three months of the year.

As the largest private sector employer in the UK, retail can play a huge role in the post-pandemic economic recovery but this will not happen without the right support for the sector. As such, we are calling for the following:

- Business rates relief to continue at 100% for the rest of the financial year for those businesses most impacted by lockdown, as has already been announced in Scotland.
- The use of legislation to support the fair resolution of conflict between commercial landlords and tenants; the moratorium on evictions and other protection measures for commercial tenants, should not be withdrawn until alternative support is in place.
- A wider, more in-depth, review on commercial rents and leases. The pandemic has further highlighted the fact that the current system is no longer financially viable. In order to move forward landlords and tenants will need to work together to establish the parameters of a model that works for them and for the industry, to be supported by legislation where needed.

In addition to the above measures, we need swift and decisive action to reform business rates in the longer term. The interim report from Government once again highlights the consensus that the business rates system is no longer fit for purpose, resulting in store closures, mass job losses and stifling investment within the sector. We are calling for:

- A reduction in the multiplier to a more manageable and fixed level.
- A revaluation exercise by 2022 at the latest and going forward more frequent revaluations to ensure the system is more responsive to market changes and trading conditions.
- The removal of downward transitional relief which is unfairly impacting many retailers who are overpaying on their 'true' rate liability.
- Improvements in the 'Check, Challenge, Appeal' (CCA) system, especially around increased transparency regarding the evidence/methodologies used to determine valuations.
- The introduction of an online sales tax to fund a reduction in business rates for retailers. This would help to create a significant and meaningful long term income stream for Government, reduce the mounting pressure on the sector and go some way to addressing the imbalance between online and bricks and mortar retailers.

Action on Universal Credit

The Coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the role and functionality of the UK's welfare system. In January 2021, there were 6 million people on Universal Credit, this is an increase of 98% since 12 March 2020. Usdaw welcomed the Government's temporary measures to improve Universal Credit during the pandemic, including the temporary increase in the standard rate. However, more must be done to tackle the financial insecurity that many households now face.

- The £20 additional weekly uplift must be immediately made permanent.
- The five week wait should be scrapped, by making advance payments non-repayable.

- The two-child limit should be immediately removed so that welfare payments take all dependent children in a household into account when granting a claim.
- The Benefit Cap should be stopped.
- Universal Credit payments, or at least the child elements of Universal Credit, should be paid to the main carer by default. This was a commitment made by the government in January 2019, but has still not yet been introduced. This has become even more urgent with the rise in domestic violence since the start of the pandemic.

If you or your team would like to discuss any of the issues raised above, please feel free to contact me.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Paddy Lillis".

PADDY LILLIS
General Secretary