

27 October 2024

Strategy and Support
Department of Police, Fire and Emergency Management
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Submitted via submissions.strategy.support@DPFEM.tas.gov.au

**Submission to the Tasmanian Department of Police, Fire and Emergency Management's
consultation on the *Police Offences Amendment Bill 2024***

Woolworths Group Limited (Woolworths) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Tasmanian Department of Police, Fire and Emergency Management's consultation on the *Police Offences Amendment Bill 2024* (the Bill).

Woolworths is one of Australia's oldest and most prominent retailers, serving the community since our founding a century ago, in Sydney in 1924. Today, we are proud to be Australia's largest private sector employer with a dedicated workforce of 180,000 team members nationwide.

Woolworths in Tasmania

Our presence in Tasmania is an enduring one, commencing with the establishment of our first store in Elizabeth Street, Hobart in 1940. Today, 84 years on, we employ almost 5,000 team members in Tasmania across 35 locations comprising Woolworths supermarkets, Big W stores and our Hobart support office. Notably, more than 55% of our team are female and more than 28% are under the age of 25 - highlighting that for many young Tasmanians a job at Woolworths is their entry into the workforce.

Because of this legacy, we have a responsibility to ensure the safety and wellbeing of our team members, customers, and the wider community within our retail precincts.

While we continuously adapt to the evolving retail environment, we are increasingly concerned by the high incidence of violent and abusive antisocial behaviour occurring at our sites, such as edged weapon assaults, impacting both team members and customers.

The underlying causes of this behaviour are complex, with contributing factors including mental health issues, substance abuse, and a perceived lack of consequences for offenders. This trend presents a significant challenge to our ability to maintain a safe operating environment in Tasmania.

We therefore welcome the Tasmanian Government's commitment to enhancing community safety through this legislation, particularly within retail precincts which increasingly serve as vital community hubs.

Woolworths' position

In the last financial year, our Tasmanian workforce experienced 394 reported incidents of violence and aggression, with physical and verbal abuse being the most prevalent forms, equating to 50.7% of all reported incidents.

Our team members tell us that increasingly violent and aggressive conduct by members of the community are taking an emotional toll on their wellbeing.

In a recent [confidential and unattributable] listening session with team members, we heard the following:

- *'Whilst at work, I have had my car stolen, my cards stolen and my car vandalised by youth. This costs me money as it comes out of my pocket'.*
- *'By different youths, I have been threatened with knives, axes, scissors, and a hammer. This has been traumatising to me'.*
- *'If I have been abused at work that day, when I get home and see my kids, I burst into tears. I can see the pain in my family's eyes. They want me to quit, but I need to feed my family'.*

Despite a majority of customers being respectful, there is a clear upward trend in abusive behaviour towards retail workers. This is a concerning development that requires a multifaceted response.

We acknowledge the Government's efforts to address this issue, including the introduction earlier this year of mandatory minimum sentencing for offenders who abuse frontline workers. However, we believe further measures are needed to effectively combat this growing issue.

We believe the proposed amendments in the Bill are necessary to provide stronger safeguards for retail workers and the community as well as sending a clear message that abusive behaviour will not be tolerated.

We are calling for stronger action to address the rising tide of violence and aggression towards retail workers. We believe the proposed amendments are a critical step in the right direction. We are committed to working with the Government and other stakeholders to combat this issue.

Extending the definition of a public space

While we commend the Bill's aim to include public and passenger transport services and vehicles within the definition of 'public space', we believe the definition should also be expanded to encompass retail precincts, such as shopping centres, parking lots, and service delivery vehicles, even outside of normal trading hours.

It is in the public interest to actively prevent crime and antisocial behaviour in these places, and empower police to address such issues. These spaces, while privately owned, are fundamentally public facing and experience similar challenges with crime and antisocial behaviour as do other sections of the community. Furthermore, retail precincts are increasingly serving as important

community hubs. They play host to a variety of purposes outside of business hours, such as community events, access to essential services and a connection point particularly for young people.

To illustrate this point, consider a recent incident in January, where three offenders set fire to cardboard bales in the loading dock of a supermarket, resulting in damage to bales, pallets and electrical damage. In a separate incident in March, a customer was knocked unconscious and received a laceration to the head when assaulted by a group of young people in the car park outside the store. In June, a team member sustained minor head injuries after being assaulted by an unknown offender whilst on a break in the customer car park. The team member was transported to hospital for their injuries.

Extending the definition of ‘public space’ to include retail precincts, regardless of operating hours, would provide greater clarity and legal certainty for police and security personnel, enabling them to better address crime and antisocial behaviour and ensure community safety within these important spaces.

Increased penalties

The Bill proposes several amendments aimed at bolstering community safety by increasing penalties for certain offences. These include unlawful entry on land, possession of dangerous articles and acts of violence, and destruction or damage of property.

These amendments are a necessary response to concerning trends in recidivist criminal behaviour requiring stronger deterrents. We believe these increased penalties are proportionate and effective measures that align with community expectations for appropriate consequences for offences involving firearms, assault, and property damage.

Increasing penalties for carrying a dangerous articles

The rise in incidents involving edged weapons in Tasmania is a serious concern, demanding a robust response. Between July 2023 and June 2024, 6.5% of incidents reported involved an edged weapon, twice as much as the previous year.

We observed an alarming increase in such incidents. We strongly support the proposed amendments to Section 6 of Section 15C of the *Police Offences Act 1935*, which would increase penalties for carrying a dangerous article and enhance the ability of police officers to search individuals reasonably suspected of possessing such articles.

These amendments align with a broader trend across Australia. Within the past 18 months, several jurisdictions have reviewed and strengthened their legislation concerning the lawful use and carriage of weapons, demonstrating a national recognition of this growing threat to community safety.

We recommend that the Tasmanian Government consider adopting legislation similar to *Queensland's Summary Offences (Prevention of Knife Crime) and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2024*, which came into force in September of this year. This Act strengthens safeguards by improving storage requirements and identification checks for individuals purchasing edged weapons. Such measures help to prevent impulsive acts of violence where an individual gains access to a weapon and immediately uses it to cause harm, intimidate, or threaten others.

While not a panacea for the issues we are experiencing in our retail precincts and the community more broadly, these measures play a vital role in reducing access to dangerous weapons and preventing their misuse. Furthermore, adopting similar legislation in Tasmania would promote consistency with other jurisdictions, particularly New South Wales, where amendments to the *Summary Offences Act 1988 (No. 25)* will come into force in December this year, and South Australia, which is currently reviewing a consultation that commenced in July 2024.

Where possible, we advocate for a harmonised approach across all jurisdictions to provide a consistent regulatory landscape.

Improving evidentiary and consorting provisions

Woolworths is experiencing a concerning increase in youth related crime, with incidents increasing in severity and most commonly perpetrated by recidivist offenders.

In September, an Assistant Supermarket Manager reported that eight juvenile offenders threw a hammer at a security guard and displayed a knife after being asked to leave the supermarket. Weeks prior, another Supermarket manager reported that three known juvenile offenders entered a supermarket. One was carrying a small knife and proceeded to verbally abuse and attempt to incite violence against a service desk worker. Sadly these incidents are not isolated. Retail crime not only results in financial loss and damage to property but also creates an intimidating and unsafe environment for our team members and customers.

We note that New South Wales has implemented a consorting provision under Section 93X of the *Crimes Act 1900 (NSW)*. This provision makes it an offence for an individual to consort with a person convicted of an indictable offence after receiving a prior warning. The warning period lasts for up to six months for minors and two years for adults.

We believe that adopting a similar approach to NSW and expanding the consorting provision to encompass retail precincts could serve as a valuable deterrent, particularly for juvenile offenders. By empowering police to issue warnings and take action against individuals who habitually associate with known offenders within retail precincts.

We believe that these amendments will make a significant contribution to improving public safety and creating a safer environment for businesses like Woolworths to continue to operate in Tasmania.



Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this consultation. We strive to be a partner to the Government on improving safety across our retail sites. Should you wish to discuss the contents of this submission further, please contact Jade Garcia, [REDACTED], Woolworths Group [REDACTED]

