Belfast Sunday Opening

Business Survey

Overview

Usdaw is the UK's fifth largest trade union, representing around 365,000 members. Our members are predominantly employed in retail stores, however we also have significant membership across distribution, road transport, home delivery, food manufacturing and pharmaceutical industries.

Usdaw has longstanding recognition agreements with some of Northern Ireland's largest retailers including Tesco, Asda, Co-op, Primark and Sainsbury's. The strength of these agreements demonstrates the benefits that a union working together in partnership with employers can achieve for both workers and businesses.

Sunday opening has been an issue that Usdaw has campaigned on for many years, and our members have told us time and time again that they do not want Sunday trading laws to be extended.

Usdaw is disappointed that the issue of extended Sunday trading hours in Belfast is yet again being discussed by the City Council. This was reviewed last year, in 2024, 2020, 2017 and numerous times before that. On all of those occasions, it was determined that such an extension is not the right move.

Usdaw members and other retail workers deserve to have their voices heard in this conversation; and we are tired of having to make the case year after year. The changes proposed have no evidencable benefit for Belfast, and yet they would have a significant detrimental effect for retail workers.

Sunday trading in Belfast currently represents a compromise that suits everyone – retailers have a chance to trade, and shoppers have an opportunity to shop if they wish to; but retail workers have a chance to rest and spend time with their families. We see no compelling reason why this should change.

Please see overleaf for Usdaw's response to the **Business Survey**.

1. What sector do you operate in or are associated with?

Retail

Accommodation

Food and Drink

Leisure

Culture

None of the above

2. What size of business do you represent or are you associated with?

Large shop (greater than 280 sq m)

Small shop (less than 280 sq m)

3. Currently retail businesses with a floor space exceeding 280 sq m cannot open outside of 1pm-6pm on a Sunday. If there were no restrictions to opening hours, would you extend your opening hours?

Yes

No

Not sure

4. You indicated that you would not open earlier if there was a change to Sunday trading hours for larger retailers. Can you confirm the reason for this decision.

Additional costs

Availability of staff

Other: Usdaw is a trade union with a membership of 360,000 across Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and 13,000 workers in the private sector in the Belfast area — primarily working in retail.

Our members have told us clearly that they do not support the extension of Sunday Trading in Belfast, and feel they would come under pressure to work more hours at the weekend — diminishing family time, and putting pressure on caring responsibilities.

In a recent survey of Usdaw members in the Belfast area, **82%** told us that they viewed the extension of Sunday trading hours in Belfast as a negative, with **76%** of working parents and carers saying it would negatively impact their family life.

5. In which are of the city is your business located

City Centre

North Belfast

South Belfast

East Belfast

West Belfast

Citywide

6. Which Geographic area should extended Sunday Trading hours apply to

City Centre only

Entire BCC area

Neither

Unsure

7. Please explain your answer:

Usdaw does not feel Sunday trading should be extended anywhere in the Belfast area. The rules Belfast City Council are proposing to use are clearly intended for use by seaside towns in the busy summer period. We feel this the proposal to use this rule is not in the spirit for which it was intended.

Belfast is a vibrant and thriving urban city, it is not a holiday resort.

8. Overall, would you see the extension of opening hours on Sunday as positive or negative

Positive

Neither positive nor negative

Negative

Not sure

Sunday working does not attract any form of premium payments for workers within the retail sector. It is a day which is used by retail workers to catch-up with families, relax and, for many, attend religious services. Due to flexible working contracts prevalent across the retail sector, Sundays are the only days where many families can be guaranteed to be able to spend time together. There is not an adequate business case for family life across Belfast to be so disrupted.

9. Please feel free to add any other thoughts or feedback you have on the proposal to extend Sunday opening hours:

Usdaw members in Northern Ireland have been surveyed twice in recent years (2020 and 2026), and on both occasions the response has been clear – retail workers want to keep Sundays special and oppose any extension to Sunday trading hours in Belfast.

We surveyed our members in May 2026, using the questions from BCCs own consultation survey, over 200 people responded, and the feeling was clear:

- **82%** of members said extending Sunday opening hours in Belfast would have a negative impact.
- **40%** said it would have a negative impact on their family life.
- This rose to **76%** when we look at people who have caring responsibilities – showing the scale of the impact for parents and carers who work in retail in Belfast

The individual responses to the survey have been submitted to BCC planning department for inclusion in the 'individual survey' consultation.

In 2020, during a previous Sunday trading consultation, our members told us:

- 91.69% of respondents thought that shops **should not open longer on Sundays.**
- 82.54% of respondents currently **work at least some Sundays**, whilst over a quarter work every Sunday.
- Over two-thirds of respondents (68%) said that they have **already come under pressure** to work on Sundays.
- 61.49% said the main impact on them and their family from working Sunday was **less time with family/friends.**

Retail workers as well as retailers, should be key stakeholders in this discussion. Increased pressure to work on Sundays will have a direct and negative impact on them and their families, which should not be considered with equal weight as with the perceived convenience of some extra shopping hours for customers.

During the pandemic, retail workers were identified as key workers. Vital to the economy. Too often undervalued and subjected to abuse by customers. The incredible contribution that retail workers already make across such a large proportion of the week should not be forgotten or taken for granted.

Usdaw's Freedom From Fear campaign has shown that threats, abuse and violence against shopworkers is on the increase. Our survey of shopworkers found that in 2025 78% of shopworkers experienced verbal abuse in their workplace and over half experienced threats. Sadly 11% were physically assaulted.

Usdaw has campaigned for over two decades for 'Freedom From Fear' for shopworkers and for stronger laws to protect workers and tougher sentences for those who do commit these crimes. Such strengthened provisions are still not in place within Northern Ireland.

Therefore the abuse continues and so it is vital that our members have the opportunity to get a proper break from their workplaces and the jobs that too often lead to stressful and traumatic confrontations. The consultation does not clearly consider the mental and physical impact on workers who will be asked to put themselves in harm's way for greater periods of time.

Usdaw urges Belfast City Council to consider the views and wellbeing of retail workers in the city, and to keep trading hours as they currently are.

10. Please explain your answer:

Allowing large stores to open for longer on Sundays would have a negative impact on retail workers, their families and our communities.

Longer Sunday trading would take a heavy toll on staff who would come under even more pressure to work, when they would rather be spending time with family and engaging in community, sports and leisure activities or attending church.

There would also be a detrimental impact on smaller retailers who can already open longer hours on Sundays. These traders rely on the boost in trade they get on Sunday morning, with St George's Market being a prime example.

There is no evidence that extended Sunday opening hours would lead to significant economic benefits in the retail sector, or job creation. Whilst there may be an increase in the length of time shoppers are in the city centre, it does not follow that this would significantly boost sales overall. Consumers will still have the same limited budgets – extending opening hours simply stretches the window when customers can make their purchases.

This is why there is no appetite from retailers to extend trading hours, on Sunday or any other day of the week. In fact, across the UK there has been a trend in recent years of retailers reducing their trading hours. It has become increasingly apparent that longer trading hours do not translate to a boost in profits but merely redistributes sales, while at the same time increasing costs and overheads. However, we can expect that larger stores would feel obliged to open longer to retain customer loyalty and gain a competitive advantage. There would not be a financial benefit to workers of getting extra hours, as Retailers are used to changing staffing hours to suit shopping times, so staff would simply lose working hours in the week and have to work on Sundays.

Belfast is already a thriving city economy. According to the Demos-PwC Good Growth for Cities Index, it one of the fastest growing cities in the UK. It performed strongly, on growth and was projected to outpace average UK economic growth in 2025/26. One of its notable strengths in the report was that the city was growing, but “not at any cost”, with a good work-life balance to workers in the city specifically mentioned.

Other industry bodies have also expressed concern with the proposal – Glyn Roberts, Retail NI Chief Executive has said: *“To completely deregulate Sunday trading and create another normal shopping day shows a poverty of ambition and ideas for the city. It is an idea that belongs to the past and not to a modern progressive 21st century city.*

“We need new thinking to animate Sunday mornings and offer shoppers and visitors something different. This proposal will provide large multinationals with even more trading time, directly at the expense of small independent retailers who use trading time on Sunday mornings to sustain their business.”

We know that small businesses are concerned about a detrimental impact on their trade if Sunday trading is extended in Belfast. The current rules mean that smaller, often independent, retailers do have the opportunity to open on Sundays – driving leisure and retail trade to these retailers in our neighbourhoods, and giving them a potential boost while the big brands on the high street are closed.

If the rules change and Sunday becomes ‘just like any other day’ there is no day of differentiation for this type of leisure shopping. There will be no time when small, independent stores can open without the competition from large multinationals. This will be a detrimental step for small independent retailers in Belfast.

If Belfast City Council is committed to creating an enhanced city centre retail offer to drive footfall and economic growth, then fundamental change is needed. The challenges in retail are due to an accumulation of factors over many years, with some being more complex than others. Retailers have been vocal about their priorities and what is needed to help the sector in this current climate and this is sharply focused on fundamental issues such as business rates, high rents/long leases and many other factors that have burdened the sector in recent years. Usdaw is keen to engage with the council to develop and support a strategy to drive growth which has decent work and respect for retail workers at its core.