



Dr Lisa Cameron MP
House of Commons
London
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12 October 2020

Dear Lisa,

Thank you for your letter of 18 July to the Home Secretary about protecting people being exploited in UK garment factories and a 'Fit to Trade' licensing scheme. I am replying as the Minister for Safeguarding and I am very sorry for the delay in responding to your letter,

I would like to reiterate the Home Secretary's comments made both in Parliament and in the media and express my deep concern about these appalling reports of illegal and unsafe working conditions for garment workers in Leicester. The Government is committed to tackling modern slavery and will not tolerate the exploitation of vulnerable workers for commercial gain.

Investigations of criminal offences are the responsibility of operational law enforcement partners, who have the appropriate powers to do so. The National Crime Agency (NCA) has launched an investigation into these serious concerns. This has been taken forward using a partnership approach, as the allegations cover the full spectrum of labour exploitation from non-payment of national minimum wage to forced labour and modern slavery, along with suspected breaches of social distancing measures. This requires the expertise of a number of bodies, including the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA), Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and Leicestershire Police.

On top of this, as the Home Secretary announced in Parliament on 13 July, a multi-agency local taskforce has been set up in Leicester to urgently examine these issues upon her request. The Taskforce will enable the relevant enforcement bodies as well as Leicester City Council to work together at pace, to take appropriate action against those who exploit workers, and to engage communities to report and raise awareness.

Eradicating modern slavery from the domestic and global economy is a key priority for this Government. Section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 established the UK as the first country in the world to require businesses to report on how they are tackling modern slavery in their organisation and supply chains. It is now more important than ever before that businesses step up and take responsibility for conditions in their supply chains.

As you rightly mentioned, this issue has been raised before and action was previously taken to investigate those claims. Since 2017 a number of operations have been undertaken in the Leicester area linked to potential exploitation including by the GLAA, HMRC and Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate. This also includes activity

working closely with Leicester City Council in response to a recommendation made by the previous Director of Labour Market Enforcement. On each occasion, where breaches were found appropriate enforcement action was taken, including warning letters, recovery of unpaid wages and director disqualifications.

We have strengthened law enforcement powers through the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which provides the tools to tackle slavery offences, including a maximum life sentence for perpetrators and also through the Immigration Act 2016, which provides the GLAA with wider enforcement powers under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 to investigate labour exploitation, across employment agencies, national minimum wage, gangmasters licensing and modern slavery legislation.

We have also committed to go further on state enforcement and establish a single enforcement body for employment rights to better protect vulnerable workers and create a level playing-field for the majority of employers complying with the law.

With regards to your support and recommendation for the Government to introduce a 'Fit to Trade' licensing scheme in the garment sector, the Government recognises that licensing can be a valuable tool for driving up standards and tackling labour exploitation in certain sectors. However, this needs to be balanced against the potential creation of a burden on compliant businesses. Given the serious nature of the allegations in Leicester and the spectrum of issues and concerns, it is imperative that we have a strong evidence base to inform the options we are considering to protect vulnerable workers and drive up standards. We will continue to consider the most appropriate measures do this alongside the work of the Taskforce that has been set up in Leicester. My officials are in touch with representatives from the British Retail Consortium regarding this proposal and will continue discussions on what solutions are available for the garment industry to support the Government's commitment to eradicate modern slavery.

Thank you for your support and dedication to ensuring that modern slavery does not exist in the textile and fashion industry.

I am copying this response to Baroness Young OBE and Helen Dickinson OBE.

Yours ever,



Victoria Atkins MP