



Joint Committee on Human Rights

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From Rt Hon Harriet Harman MP, Chair

Rt Hon Alok Sharma MP
Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

By email.

20 July 2020

Dear Alok,

I am writing as Chair of the Joint Committee on Human Rights to raise the issue of abuse and exploitation of workers in the textile industry in Leicester and to remind you of our inquiry and report into this and to ask you to reconsider the Government's decision to reject our recommendations.

In 2017, we published a report on *Human Rights and Business 2017: Promoting responsibility and ensuring accountability* which, looked at whether and to what extent, British businesses were respecting human rights in their supply chain. In this inquiry, we visited Leicester and reported on the alarming physical conditions in place in many garment factories there, including poor cleaning and hygiene practices. We noted that those working in the factories often worked excessively long hours for pay far lower than the minimum wage.

We made several recommendations to address the human rights abuses and violations of work and employment regulations by businesses. In particular, we recommended that the Government should bring forward legislative proposals to give powers to local authorities to close down premises which were found to exploit workers through underpayment of wages, lack of employment contracts or significant disregard of health and safety regulations. We also recommended that the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority should have extended licensing powers in respect of garment manufacturing. Both of these recommendations were rejected by the Government.

Garment factories in Leicester have now been linked to the particularly severe outbreak of Covid-19 in Leicester, which led to the city enduring lockdown restrictions that have been eased in the rest of the UK. In particular, there have been questions raised as to whether workers' right to life (Article 2 ECHR) is sufficiently protected where they – or their colleagues - are incentivised (or forced) to attend work even when ill with Covid-19 in these factories. The recommendations from our 2017 Report were vital when we made them in 2017, and the latest developments only illustrate further that they should be implemented in full. I would be grateful if you would review the Government's decision to reject our recommendations and respond to us by 3rd August outlining what action you plan to take to end exploitation in these factories.

Yours sincerely

Rt Hon Harriet Harman MP
Chair of the Joint Committee on Human Rights