

Written evidence from the British Retail Consortium (FL0024)

The BRC's purpose is to make a positive difference to the retail industry and the customers it serves, today and in the future.

Retail is an exciting, dynamic and diverse industry which is going through a period of profound change. Technology is transforming how people shop; costs are increasing; and growth in consumer spending is slow.

The BRC is committed to ensuring the industry thrives through this period of transformation. We tell the story of retail, work with our members to drive positive change and use our expertise and influence to create an economic and policy environment that enables retail businesses to thrive and consumers to benefit. Our membership comprises over 5,000 businesses delivering £180bn of retail sales and employing over one and half million employees.

Our members are concerned by allegations of human rights violations in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of China.

BRC works with its members to take a zero-tolerance approach to modern slavery and human rights abuses in any form and has a long track record of driving responsible business practices.

With our members and stakeholder partners we successfully campaigned for the **Transparency in Supply Chains clause** of the Modern Slavery Act when the Bill had little application to businesses, to ensure all businesses are transparent about the actions they are

taking to tackle this crime. Through our [Better Retail Better World](#) campaign leading retailers have committed to eliminating recruitment fees in supply chains to drive out a root cause of modern slavery. We established a [Retailer Protocol for Handling Reported Cases of Modern Slavery in the UK Supply Chain](#), and are founding Supporters of [Stronger Together](#), a multi-stakeholder business-led initiative aiming to reduce modern slavery particularly forced labour, labour trafficking and other hidden third party exploitation of workers.

With regards to fashion, we helped set up the [Apparel and General Merchandise Public](#)

[and Private Protocol](#), a partnership between enforcement bodies and industry to tackle labour exploitation in the UK garment industry. Many of our members were involved in setting up the [Fast Forward](#) labour standards improvement program for the garment manufacturing industry. And we have been campaigning for a [Fit-to-Trade licensing scheme of UK garment factories](#) to prevent the exploitation of workers in this industry.

On the back of the recent Covid-19 pandemic, BRC is supporting the [ILO global garment industry call to action](#), which aims to bring together actors from across the sector to help manufacturers survive the economic disruption caused by the pandemic and protect garment workers' income, health and employment. And we have been working with UK Government to drive this forward.

Our members seek to operate in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs). To meet their responsibilities under the UNGPs businesses are expected to have a human rights policy, a due diligence process, and an access to remediation process. If they are unable to carry out any one of these actions, then their ability to operate responsibly may be compromised.

As part of their due diligence processes, our members will be conducting a mixture of country and region risk assessments, detailed mapping of supply chains, announced and unannounced audits, establishing grievance mechanisms, supplier training and awareness raising. In addition, they will be working with third party expert organisations. A growing number of BRC members source their cotton under the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) program. In March 2020, BCI suspended licensing and assurance activities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of China. As a result, there is no new licensed Better Cotton coming from the region.

We believe that the most effective approach to addressing the issues raised by this inquiry requires government to government dialogue, as well as collaboration between government, industry, civil society groups and representatives of those workers at the centre of the allegations.

Our members request clearer guidance from the UK Government regarding how to conduct business responsibly with China. We propose this could be developed through setting up a multi-stakeholder task force to develop an agreed collective approach to assessing the situation, increasing transparency, and protecting both the rights of workers and the integrity of global supply chains.

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