

**Labour Market: Worker Exploitation
Economic Development, Transport and Climate Emergency Scrutiny
Commission**

Stakeholder questionnaire

The City Mayor's Strategic Plan commits to tackle non-compliance across all sectors that may be blighted by low pay and poor conditions. This questionnaire is part of a collaboration by the Scrutiny Commission with the University of Leicester aiming to gather information on the monitoring, incidence, and practices of worker exploitation across different sectors in Leicester. For these purposes, worker exploitation is seen as a continuum stretching from low pay to poor conditions or Modern Slavery.

Given your expertise worker/community engagement and in combatting specific aspects of worker exploitation, Leicester City Council (Economic Development, Transport and Climate Emergency Scrutiny Commission) would like to invite you to complete this questionnaire prior to the evidence session on worker exploitation. The Commission considers matters which include regeneration, public transport and cycle and car provision, tourism, adult learning and job provision.

We understand that some information might be regarded as sensitive and, in this instance, would encourage you to submit this to either the secretary of the Scrutiny Commission, Dr Ed Brown (edmund.brown@leicester.gov.uk) or the University of Leicester research lead, Prof Nik Hammer (nh80@le.ac.uk). Any information received in this regard will be treated confidentially. Equally, you can submit your views to edmund.brown@leicester.gov.uk should you be unable to attend.

The information gathered will form part of a report that will be published by the Scrutiny Commission at a future date in 2025. The report will not name any individuals but may, in some instances refer to organisations. Please note, however, that anything highlighted to us as confidential in the process will be treated as such by the Commission and the research team and be appropriately protected in the report.

Name of your organisation: Wesley Hall Community Centre

What aspects of worker exploitation is your organisation concerned with?

We have had reports of people being paid less than the minimum wage in garment factories.

How do you gain access and/or gather information about this type of worker exploitation?

Through people coming to use the food pantry and asking us to help them find employment, as well as through outreach programmes and research for universities.

What aspects of worker exploitation, requests for support etc, do you track systematically? Do you keep records?

We do not have specific records, but we could most likely recall individual cases. We have some instances recorded in university transcripts.

Do you have indications that beyond your worker engagement activities, there is any further, hidden, worker exploitation?

We expect that there is activity that is not reported to us.

In your experience, are the forms of worker exploitation you encounter more prevalent in specific forms of business organisation (gig economy, supply chains, etc)?

We have experience of occurrences in supply chains.

In your experience, are the forms of worker exploitation you encounter more prevalent in specific localities, sectors, gender, ethnicity, etc?

We have had direct reports of poor conditions and low pay in the garment sector and poor conditions in food factories. We have also had reports of exploitation in the care sector through visa fraud.

Have there been any notable increases/declines in worker exploitation in your experience?

There have been fewer reports since the garment factory closures, following lock down in 2021, but this does not necessarily mean there are fewer cases, it could be that they are not being reported.

What, in your view, are the drivers of worker exploitation?

In the garment industry, unrealistically low prices are demanded by fast fashion retailers, orders are unreliable and it is an easy business model for people to exploit as there are plenty of willing workers, despite low pay and poor working conditions, due to restricted access to alternative options (language barriers, access to transport, immigration status etc).

How do you address the worker exploitation or requests for support you encounter?

We offer support accessing universal credit, housing benefits, our food pantry and ESOL classes. We also refer to training courses, job clubs and FAB-L.

Do you report any incidence of worker exploitation to other organisations/agencies?

We raise awareness through advocacy and work with NGOs such as Labour Behind the Label.

Do you collaborate with other organisations/agencies with regard to worker exploitation? Which ones?

LBL, Justice in Fashion, Shama Centre, FAB-L at Highfields Centre, FTA Workers Rights Training (promoted, but no enrolments so far) and Hope for Justice.

Is there anything specific the local Council could do to support labour market enforcement?

Incentivise good practice. Engage with factory owners and offer help and support for them to transition away from fast fashion manufacturing to instead produce apparel for customers with higher price points and long-term commitments. Help them to attract these customers through support investing in environmental innovations such as solar panels, circular processing, chemical free dye processes, regenerative fabric production and safe and comfortable working conditions. Help them to understand the benefits and to strive to achieve different accreditations such as B-Corp, SEDEX, Soil Association, and Fair trade certification. Help them to navigate incoming European and UK legislation and the necessity to comply to future-proof their businesses.

For those that continue to choose the fast fashion route, have stricter penalties for landlords who let factory buildings go into disrepair, and stricter penalties and policing of non-compliance of fair labour practices. Engage with brands and retailers to foster a collaborative approach to tackling workers rights and climate issues, working together with suppliers for mutual benefit.

Employ a local garment trade adjudicator and office to implement this.

Is there anything else you would like to add/we should pay attention to?

A local garment trade adjudicator would be beneficial in tackling the issues of exploitation in the garment sector as well as engagement with factory owners and workers themselves, not just retailers and brands, ensuring a collaborative rather than a top down approach to compliance.