



Dame Sara Thornton DBE QPM

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3 September 2020

The Rt Hon Liz Truss MP
Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade
King Charles Street
Whitehall
SW1A 2AH

Dear Secretary of State,

Human rights and modern slavery in UK trade agreements post-Brexit

I am writing to you in connection with my statutory responsibility to encourage good practice in the prevention of slavery and human trafficking offences.

The UK government has long demonstrated strong international leadership in the global fight against slavery. At the 2017 UN General Assembly, Prime Minister Theresa May launched a “Call to action to end forced labour, modern slavery and trafficking” as a commitment to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 8.7.

Our government has been at the forefront of collaboration with Five Eyes nations¹, demonstrating a commitment to raising and harmonising international standards in public procurement. Subsequently, in March 2020, the UK became the first government in the world to publish a modern slavery statement, setting out efforts towards eradicating modern slavery from its operations and supply chains. This commitment, signed by the Prime Minister, sends out a strong signal to businesses and other nations and it is vital that, even during such uncertain times, we continue to keep up the momentum as we move into a new era of global trade.

In 2017 the Joint Committee on Human Rights encouraged the government to use Brexit as an opportunity to set higher human rights standards in future trade agreements². I am acutely aware that, as talks intensify, this is a crucial period for UK trade negotiations. This is an opportune moment to reflect on principle 9 of The UN Guiding Principles for Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), which includes specific reference to states’ obligations to protect human rights when pursuing economic agreements with other states³. I am pleased that the UK led the way in producing a National Action Plan to implement the UNGPs and very much hope to see these principles reflected in new UK trade agreements.

I look forward to receiving your response. In the interests of transparency, I request that you respond in a way that enables me to publish your letter on my website.

Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner

¹ Home Office (2018) [UK agrees principles for tackling modern slavery in supply chains](#)

² Joint Committee on Human Rights (2017) [Human Rights and Business 2017: Promoting Responsibility and Ensuring Accountability](#)

³ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2011) [Guiding Principles for Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations “Protect, Respect and Remedy Framework”](#)



Department for International Trade

The Rt Hon Greg Hands MP
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Our ref: MCB2020/04366

15th October 2020

By email: Sara.Thornton@iasc.independent.gov.uk

Dear Dame Sara,

Thank you for your letter of 3rd September to the Rt Hon Elizabeth Truss MP, Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade, regarding your desire to encourage good practice in the prevention of slavery and human trafficking offences. The Secretary of State has asked me to respond.

The UK has a strong history of safeguarding rights and promoting our values globally and we are clear that more trade does not have to come at the expense of human rights. The UK's position is to commit to working with international partners and businesses to tackle modern slavery in global supply chains. It is vital that increased trade is not based on the exploitation and abuse of workers and we are considering how we can shape future trade policy to ensure this.

The UK is playing a leading role and is the first country to require businesses to report on how we are preventing modern slavery in their global supply chains. As more countries introduce their own legislation, we are working closely with partners to harmonise approaches and promote responsible business conduct. This week the UK government published its response to the Transparency in Supply Chains consultation, and we have committed to taking forwards an ambitious package of changes to strengthen the Act's transparency legislation. These include:

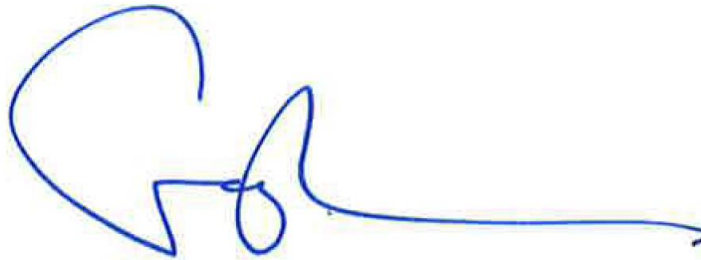
- Setting a single reporting deadline on which all modern slavery statements must be published
- Mandating the specific reporting topics statements must cover
- Requiring organisations to publish their statement on the new Government digital reporting service

- Extending the reporting requirement to public bodies with a budget of £36 million or more
- Taking enforcement options forwards in line with the ongoing development of the Single Enforcement Body for Employment rights.

As you highlight in your letter, the UK was the first country to produce a National Action Plan for the implementation of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. This demonstrates our commitment to human rights. We will seek to uphold UK values in trade agreements and will not compromise on our high standards.

I would be keen to hear your views and would be happy to offer a meeting between yourself and officials in the Department for International Trade and the Home Office.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'G Hands', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

THE RT HON GREG HANDS MP
Minister of State for Trade Policy
Department for International Trade