



University of  
**Nottingham**  
Rights Lab

# Fashioning a beautiful future?

Supporting workers and addressing  
labour exploitation in Leicester's  
textile and garment industry

Rights Lab, University of Nottingham  
School of Law, De Montfort University, Leicester

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# Executive summary

This report presents the results of a four-month research study into systemic and locality-based factors underpinning labour exploitation within Leicester's Garment and Textile industry, with particular emphasis on the perspective of frontline workers. The key findings are summarised here, and an outline theory-of-change for future intervention and action is presented on pages 36-49.

## 1) What factors make people vulnerable to exploitation in Leicester?

This report highlights four key themes increasing vulnerability to worker exploitation in Leicester. **Financial precarity** is widespread due to the prevalence of low wages, uncertain or part-time hours, and specific cost-pressures that particularly impact upon communities with lower levels of English language skills, or who were recently arrived in the UK. Many workers identify limits in their **employability**, which constrain the choices available to them, due to a lack of job search skills, qualifications, proficiency in English and (particularly for women) cultural expectations associated with family and childcare duties. **Anti-exploitation** measures have proved ineffective due to the isolation of workers, low expectations concerning the impact of raising concerns, and insufficient multi-agency collaboration at local level. There are also continuing **disincentives to employers** to offer decent work, due to uncertainty about the financial returns possible within an ethical business model and a ready supply of workers with limited options.

## 2) What can major retailers and Government agencies do to improve things?

We have identified a range of potential levers for change, that emphasise the need for a concerted multi-agency and multi-sector approach to building resilience against exploitation. Key aspects of this approach include:

- Improving community-based support, advocacy and advice for workers.
- Establishing the proposed Single Labour Market Enforcement body, to simplify points of contact for reporting labour abuse and promote coordinated action in the medium to long term.
- Supporting a range of employability interventions to provide greater choice and opportunity.
- Co-operating with major brands and retailers to increase the supply of decent work and ensure that ethical practices are rewarded.

- Improving links between enforcement agencies and communities, to improve the flow of intelligence and identify risks and threats.
- Working with communities that suffer most from financial pressures to minimise costs and enable them to achieve a secure and sustainable income.

## 3) What other actions would improve the lives of garment workers?

Workers spoke to us in detail about their lives and aspirations. In common with many people across the UK, they described how financial pressures were becoming acute, particularly in relation to housing, utilities bills and as a result of under-employment or unemployment. In this context a secure and sufficient income was the over-riding necessity, as well as advice and advocacy services that could help them to access welfare support and avoid expenditure on poor-value intermediary 'agents' in applying for benefits or passports. Workers also expressed a wish to pursue additional training, particularly in relation to English language skills, IT skills, and practical topics such as first aid. They described their high aspirations for their children, who were frequently receiving additional tutoring or support for higher education. As one participant put it *'We want to make our children's future beautiful'* (FG5).

## 4) Why do people choose to work in the industry and do they have a choice?

Many workers had joined the garment industry because they perceived it as the only work available to them, often in connection with a lack of alternative skills, low levels of English language proficiency, or a desire to work informally 'cash in hand'.

Workers' experiences of the garment industry were not wholly negative. Many of the people we spoke to were keen to see jobs return to the garment sector, but with (at least) minimum wages, career progression opportunities and fair conditions. Women in particular needed more flexible, part-time, and local opportunities for work, and valued the social contact and financial independence it offered. However, workers also expressed a wish for fairness in the workplace and greater choice in employment opportunities.

## 5) How can garment workers be better enabled to exercise their workplace rights?

Evidence from our survey and focus groups showed that workers were aware of their right to the minimum wage and some other aspects of pay and conditions such as holiday pay and sick pay. However, in most cases workers could not identify a source of support that they would trust to help them if they had concerns about rights being withheld. Provision of community-based trusted advocacy services, and effective multi-agency follow-up on complaints could assist in raising expectations and trust in services to resolve workplace abuses.

## 6) Are factory owners listening to workers and responding with appropriate changes?

Our research indicated that although many workers feel able to raise complaints with their employers, manufacturers frequently respond that they are unable to change terms and conditions within the current operating models. 'Gaming' of compliance with audit and inspection measures, and a ready supply of vulnerable labour, provides a further disincentive for change. Continued multi-sector action is necessary, combining the efforts of regulators and brands to reward ethical practice.

## 7) How would workers like to be represented and by whom?

Our research participants frequently had little experience or knowledge of the benefits of being represented in the workplace. Some did not feel that trade unions would be of benefit to their situation, and others expressed concerns about the fragmentation of the workforce and a lack of unity between different worker groups. However, others expressed an interest to understand more about unions and how their voice might be better represented to employers. Progress on a local level would also complement - and be reinforced by - implementation of a Single Labour Market Enforcement body.

Although many important areas for action have been identified through this research, progress will not be achievable without long-term, coordinated action towards the systemic change required. Our research indicated that a programme of multi-stakeholder intervention is essential to resolve entrenched challenges. The success of action moving forward will - most importantly - rely upon effective community engagement and productive partnership between business, government and regulatory sectors, the voluntary sector, and workers themselves, coming together as trustful agents for change in Leicester's communities.



# 1. Introduction

In Autumn 2021 the newly-constituted Leicester Garment and Textile Workers Trust asked the University of Nottingham's Rights Lab and De Montfort University to undertake a systems review of the factors underpinning labour exploitation in Leicester's Garment and Textiles industry. The aim of the research was to produce evidence to inform the strategic direction and investment decisions of the Trust, by identifying significant factors influencing the risk of labour exploitation in Leicester. The analysis suggests a range of actions that could help to prevent exploitation and improve protections for workers and their communities. The study placed a strong emphasis on gaining the perspective of current and recent workers from the garment industry, as workers' voices had been under-represented in previous research and literature.

Fieldwork took place between November 2021 and March 2022, with valuable assistance in recruitment and data-collection being provided by local community-based partners Shama Women's Centre and Hope for Justice. Whilst the time-scale allowed for the research was comparatively short, we were able to engage a cross-section of stakeholders through 116 surveys with workers, 45 participants across five worker focus groups, seven in-depth interviews with eight workers, two workshops with wider stakeholders and a further 16 stakeholder interviews. This report represents a summary of the emerging findings and outlines a 'theory of change' to inform future actions and progress.

The research questions included:

1. What pre-existing factors may be impacting on vulnerability to exploitation in Leicester?
2. What can major retailers and government agencies do to encourage/enforce garment factory owners to provide the best possible working environment (conditions, pay, safety, development, well-being etc.) for their staff?
3. What other actions can businesses, government agencies, NGOs and communities undertake to improve the lives of garment workers?
4. Are people actively choosing to work in garment manufacturing or are they being forced, either through coercion, a lack of alternative employment opportunities, or other factors?
5. What is the most effective way to ensure garment workers are aware of and able to exercise their workplace rights?
6. To what extent are factory owners listening to garment workers and responding with appropriate changes to working practices? (i.e. training, flexible shift patterns, wages, health and safety concerns.)
7. How would garment workers themselves like to be represented and by whom? Progress on a local level would also complement - and be reinforced by - implementation of a Single Labour Market Enforcement Body.

Although the research was designed with funding from the Leicester Garment and Textile Workers Trust, the views and findings expressed in the report have been developed independently by the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Trust or its constituent members. We hope that our findings will also be of interest to a range of agencies and community-based organisations that work with garment workers and welcome further dialogue concerning how insights from this work might usefully inform future policy and practice.

## Acknowledgements

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We are indebted to the Shama Women's Centre and Hope for Justice for mobilising their community support teams at short notice, to help us recruit research participants and conduct surveys, interviews and focus groups. A huge thank you to their excellent staff and volunteers, who frequently went out of their way to support the research outside of normal working hours, and showed considerable skill and professionalism in helping us to reach diverse communities, using a wide range of languages.

We would finally like to express our thanks to the many stakeholders and – especially – the current and former garment workers, who were generous and frequently courageous in sharing their time, experience, insights and knowledge. We hope that this report accurately reflects their views and that it contributes in a positive way towards delivering the changes they want to see.

## A note on terminology

In this report we refer frequently to labour exploitation. We understand labour exploitation to include a continuum of practices (Skrivankova, 2010) from extremes such as forced labour, where work or service is not performed voluntarily but is exacted under a threat of some form of punishment; to breaches of labour law standards, such as non-payment of the national minimum wage. The UK government also views non-compliance with labour laws as a 'spectrum' which ranges from employers failing to understand or apply labour laws to criminal labour exploitation and modern slavery (Dept for BEIS, 2021). Although such abuses may vary in their impact, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish clear dividing lines between poor labour and employment practices and more severe forms of exploitation. Regardless of the type of abuse experienced, poor working conditions may additionally escalate to more extreme exploitation if not addressed. Promotion of 'decent' working practices is therefore fundamental for tackling all forms of exploitation across the continuum, and for this reason we highlight within the report a multiplicity of practices that fall below that standard.

'Decent work' is defined by the International labour organisation (ILO) as 'work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.' (Anker et al. 2003).

## Methodology

Our research design started from the premise of understanding labour exploitation as a systemic problem, and for this reason we examined a wide range of 'social determinants' that underpin resilience against exploitation in Leicester using both primary and secondary data. In particular, we sought to understand how worker experiences shed light on key structural, regulatory, cultural and institutional factors within the unique and specific context of the Leicester garment industry, which create both vulnerabilities and assets in relation to resilience against exploitation. We adopted a multi-method approach to data collection with a particular focus on qualitative, participative and dialogue-based approaches. Our research methods included:

- A literature review to summarise the existing knowledge concerning historical, social and political features of the local garment industry and provide insights about the specific characteristics of the workforce.
- Two stakeholder workshops (one online and one face to face, in Leicester) which included 18 stakeholders from law enforcement, businesses, local NGOs, national NGOs, industry associations and public services.
- 16 in-depth semi-structured interviews with stakeholders including political actors, public service professionals, NGOs, industry associations and manufacturers.
- 116 anonymous questionnaires undertaken face to face with workers, conducted by local NGOs in workers' preferred languages (including English, Urdu, Hindi, Gujarati, Bengali, and Bulgarian).
- Five focus groups including 45 workers.
- Seven in-depth semi-structured interviews with eight workers.
- Four further focus groups, reviewing findings with stakeholders.

We promoted the study widely through press releases and interviews with local and regional media outlets, as well as social media and local professional networks. Workers were also recruited via the established networks of two local community partners, Shama Women's Centre and Hope for Justice. We spoke to a cross-section of participants that was broadly consistent with the range of different stakeholder and worker communities identified by our literature review. (See worker survey demographic details below for further detail, however, we have not published detailed ethnicity breakdowns in order to protect participant identities and to prevent any negative impacts for particular communities). Most of the workers we spoke to worked in the cut make and trim sector of the industry.

Stakeholder workshops and interviews were conducted in English. Worker surveys, focus groups and interviews were conducted in the language of participants' choice, with translators present where necessary. Audio recordings of focus groups and interviews were also independently translated and transcribed to provide assurance that we had captured exchanges accurately.

Emerging themes from the qualitative data were identified inductively on a rolling basis using a rapid assessment method and weekly review sessions by the project team. Interviews and focus groups were coded for these themes using NVivo software. Different data sources were compared and triangulated to validate the points highlighted in the analysis.

This project's limitations included a low representation within our sample of Eastern European workers, although we were able to gain the views of nine Bulgarian participants via the survey. We also found it more difficult to access the perspectives of smaller sub-contracting manufacturers and business owners, and recognise that those that engaged with us were amongst those already taking steps to ensure that decent work practices were embedded through their business. However, insights into business practices and potential levers for change have also been drawn from the wider stakeholder group as well as the information provided by the workers themselves.

While we cannot claim that the survey sample is statistically representative of the Leicester garment workforce as a whole, due to the sampling method utilised, it broadly reflects the demographic characteristics of the local workforce, and findings are enhanced by triangulation with other sources. At the same time, as the workers surveyed were those who our community partner organisations were in touch with or could reach, we should recognise that the experiences of the workers not in contact with community organisations might differ. The overall sample size for the survey consisted of 116 completed questionnaires, but not all respondents provided data for each question. Percentages are calculated from those who have valid responses to the respective question.

### Survey demographic information

#### Ethnicity:

- White 16% (including British, Irish and Other white background).
- Mixed 1% (white and black).
- Asian 83% including Indian or British Indian / Bangladeshi or Bangladeshi / British, Pakistani or Pakistani British.

**Gender:** 71% female, 29% male.

**Age:** 18% were below the age of 35, a majority of 62% were 35-54, 20% were 55 or older.

**Religion:** Muslim 54%, Hindu 27%, Christian 16%, Sikh 4%.

**Highest level of education:** None 4%, primary education or equivalent 27%, Lower secondary education or equivalent 38%, and upper secondary education, NVQ Level 2, GCSE/CSE/GNVQ 27%, Post-secondary education, higher Education, AS/A2/A levels, NVQ level 3 3%, Tertiary education, NVQ level 4-5, degree or post-graduate diploma 2%.

When we asked respondents to self-assess their English language skills, 7% said 'very good', 28% 'good', 45% 'not good', and 19% don't speak English.

**Passports:** 60% of respondents held non-British passports (with the majority being EU nationals, many of whom held Portuguese passports.) 40% had a British passport.

**Immigration status:** The vast majority of workers that we interviewed reported that they did not have unresolved immigration status. 51% were UK citizens, 43% said they had indefinite leave to remain, 1% said they were asylum seekers, 3% said they were without leave to remain, and 2% answered 'other'. This was interesting as our sample indicates that labour exploitation is occurring despite regularised immigration status. However, it is also possible that irregular immigration status may have been under-reported.

**When asked whether they had the right to work in the UK,** 94% said yes, 4% no, 2% not sure

**In relation to experience in the garment industry:** 52% worked for less than 5 years, 20% for 5-10 years and 28% for more than 10 years.

**Number of hours worked per week:** only 2% of the sample worked more than 48 hours per week, 57% work 35-48 hours, and 41% less than 35 hours. This may have been influenced by the high number of women in our sample who often preferred part-time hours.

## 2. The Leicester garment industry and Leicester's garment workers

### The wider structural context of the garment trade in the UK

In recent years the United Kingdom (UK) has been able to re-position itself within the global economy as a viable sourcing location for fast and ultra-fast fashion supply chains. Fashion manufacturing has undergone a strong revival led by growth in clothing and footwear manufacturing (Oxford Economics, 2016). In 2013, the Gross Value Added (GVA) attributed to clothing and footwear manufacturing was £920 million, and by 2015 had increased 18% to £1240 million. By 2017, the fashion industry was worth £32 billion to the UK economy (BFC, 2018). The fashion industry's direct contribution to the UK Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is £28.1 billion (BFC, 2018). A further £22.6 billion is sustained via indirect and induced effects. Collectively these contribute to 2.7% of UK GDP.

The UK offers an established regulatory environment which provides base level statutory assurances of worker protection through the Minimum Wage Act (1998), Modern Slavery Act (2015), Health and Safety at Work Act (1974) among others. In theory, this context should provide lead firms (buyers) with a sourcing environment which is well regulated, and mitigates the risks of exploitative production practices, one of the key reasons attributed to the cultural kudos and renaissance of 'Made in Britain' sourcing (Make it British, 2013).

In practice, however, fast fashion is still frequently associated with rapid turnaround of competitive, high-volume, low-priced products that respond to short-term trends. Whilst some claim clothing manufacture 're-shoring' signals an ethical turn of fast fashion, there are also economic advantages from sourcing in the UK. Whilst wage differentials with SE Asia still exist, they have narrowed, with Bangladesh, China and India all increasing their minimum wages by 219%, 119% and 74% respectively, compared with 18% for the UK (Hammer & Plugor, 2016). Additionally, a product's speed to market within Europe can be more rapid when sourcing in the UK, compared with further afield. The average total time to market can be up to seven weeks for garments which are airfreighted, and it can take over six weeks for sea shipping alone (Hammer and Plugor, 2016). In contrast, when lead firms are geographically more proximate to suppliers, such is the case when UK brands use UK manufacturers, lead firms can reduce their lead times to just under two weeks.

This dramatic reduction in speed to market has fundamentally changed the geographies of sourcing competition and reduced the proximity from which suppliers are able to similarly compete. UK manufacturers now compete with locations in Eastern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East who, despite their transportation costs to market, share similar landed prices to UK manufacturers. In this fierce competitive environment, lead firms opt for UK suppliers to exploit their additional non-financial benefits; ease of visiting and progress monitoring, ease of product development, and deeper relationships of practical design integration, whilst still retaining legal separation. To this end, the competitive advantage of suppliers is often governed by the buyer's considerations of lead time, landed cost, and practical production integration, as well as the quality of the softer working relationships, including progress updates, communication, quality review etc. that brands can share with their UK suppliers.

A common global strategy that manufacturers have adopted within fashion supply chains to drive down their costs and increase their efficiency is to outsource part or all of their received orders. This is known as tiering production, where manufacturers enter into agreements with other manufacturers to make product to satisfy part or all of the order for the original manufacturer. These agreements are entered into often unbeknownst to the original buyer, and can happen repeatedly, developing multiple tiers of manufacture, with each manufacturer at each tier entering into profitable agreements which squeeze labour costs further (Figure 1).



Figure 1: A stylised illustrative example of subcontracted tiering, common in global fashion value chains.

Figure 1 provides a basic, simplified, illustrative example of this process, but tiers may include multiple agreements with multiple manufacturers, with each component of a garment having its own tiered production agreements. On a functional level, the buyers (of the original agreement in Figure 1) often lack knowledge of the true extent of the productive relations they enlist with their commissioning orders, and their compliance considerations and measures often lack the full reach of the tiered production.

There is considerable downward pressure on sourcing within the clothing industries, which heighten price sensitivities and discipline production. Manufacturers often pass on these price pressures by striving to keep wages low and squeezing their labour forces to deliver orders faster and with greater efficiency, in the hope to secure future orders. Additionally, garment industries are heavily gendered; eighty percent of garment workers are women between the ages of 18 and 35, with garments globally being the second highest risk product category for modern slavery (Fashion Revolution, 2018). The specific socio-cultural roles of women relating to family and domestic life can limit their ability to choose alternative forms of work (Dicken, 2007). Factory work, particularly within the Global South is often viewed preferable to unemployment or under-employment and provide incomes which are crucial parts of family household incomes. These social, cultural and economic dynamics contribute pressure on workers to keep their jobs, despite their relatively low pay and poor conditions.

### Key features of garment manufacturing in Leicester

Over the last 50 years the UK garment industry has radically consolidated, compartmentalised, and specialised. What survives today is a smaller, nimbler, and more agile manufacturing base comprised largely of smaller units often housed in the same old factory buildings of the mass manufacturers who preceded them (O'Connor, 2018; Walsh, 1991)

Leicester provides an archetypal case. The city has a long and proud industrial heritage, historically renowned as the city which clothed the world (Heighton-Ginns & Prescott, 2019). Leicester's garment industry was both nationally and internationally significant, bringing great wealth to the city. It was a large industrial cluster comprised mainly of vertically integrated mass manufacturers, meaning that the entirety of the garment was made in one factory site, usually on a production line and to economies of scale. They were historically big employers, and drove the local economy.

Leicester's textile and garment industries are now much smaller. As Hammer *et al.* (2015) note, total employment within the twenty largest textile enterprises in Leicester during 1998 was higher than the industry's total employment in 2012. Leicester's apparel manufacturing declined by 69% between 1995-2012, and employment plunged by 84% over the same period. Similarly, its lead firms are no longer those with histories of production, but are instead retailers, brands, and exclusively online retailers. This speaks to regional trends which note that 85% of apparel manufacturers in the East Midlands have fewer than 20 employees, 13% employ between 20-99 people, and just 2% employ more than 100 (Hammer *et al.*, 2015). To this end, the contemporary garment and textile industries are dominated by small firms and small units which, in the case of Leicester, are densely co-located, informally networked, and clustered, to form a highly specialised and flexible production ecology.

These dynamics have cultivated a distinctive niche for Leicester's garment manufacturing that is potentially extremely profitable and commercially competitive. They have solidified Leicester's reputation as a key sourcing destination which consists of over 700 factories and employs some 10,000 textile workers. Leicester is key productive industrial contributor to the region, which helps sustain the East Midlands as the UK's largest apparel sourcing hub, which accounts for almost a third of apparel manufacturing turnover in the UK (2013). Of particular note here is the commercial sensitivity of Leicester's manufacturing cluster – the collective term for a geographic congregation of similar/interrelated businesses - which has some of the lowest factory gate competitions in the UK (see Hammer and Plugor, 2016). The ferocity of factory gate price competition (that is, the price the manufacturer offers to the next business in the supply chain) is particularly acute within Leicester because of the cluster's short-term supply relationships and price fluctuations.

The cluster is known to deliver 'low volume' orders (in this context 1,000 units or below) and service largely 'low end supply chains' marked by intense price competition and unsustainable orders (Environmental Audit Committee, 2019). These orders are often accepted on extremely fast turnaround, and at little or no margins, which can only really be sustained when they are contextualised within production arrangements with buyers who regularly repeat orders. Yet, given that buyers often enter very short-term production agreements, and the cluster is very price sensitive, repeat ordering is highly uncertain. Buyers are highly mobile and regularly switch from one supplier to the next should more efficient factory prices or terms of manufacture (such as turnaround times) be available. Thus, buyer relations tend to be acutely temporary, short term, and fiercely competitive.

This hyper competitive commercial environment cultivates tendencies amongst suppliers to overstate their production capacities with promises of making (ever) greater volumes, (ever) cheaper, and (ever) faster, in hope they are most competitive commercial partners which secure continual orders. In courting buyers with these production promises, suppliers sometimes do not take account of the costs inherent in realisation and operationalisation. This model of competition has 'locked in' suppliers into a form of price competition which is difficult to offset by mitigations in design quality, quality production and responsiveness to market. As more than a decade of investigations and inquiries have conclusively demonstrated, to stay in the market, many manufacturers have chosen to reduce costs by undercutting competitors by operations below legal minimums, exploiting labour in a manner which blurs the boundaries between the formal and informal economy.

### Demographics, spatial features and associated vulnerabilities for workers

Leicester City is in the 20% of Local Authorities in England with the highest levels of disadvantage, regardless of the measure used. In 2019, the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) was renewed, revealing the City had moved from 21<sup>st</sup> (of 326) most disadvantaged Local Authority in 2015, to 32<sup>nd</sup> (of 317) (BC CIC, 2020). 7% of Leicester's population reside in the most deprived 5% of areas nationally, 35% of the population reside in the most deprived 20% of areas nationally, and Leicester ranks the 18th most deprived local authority for income deprivation (LCC, 2019).

Many of Leicester's present-day suppliers to the fast-fashion industry are concentrated within the LE5 area with sizeable clusters also present in the neighbouring postcode of LE4 and LE1<sup>1</sup>. This corresponds neatly with the historical industrial areas for garment manufacturing in Leicester, concentrated around St Saviours Road, Highfields, Spinney Hill, North Evington and Belgrave (Heighton-Ginns & Prescott, 2019).

Reviewing only the education, skills and training deprivation indices, 50% of Leicester's population reside in the most deprived 20% areas nationally for education deprivation, with St Matthews & St Peters, Spinney Hill and St Saviours all featuring within this most deprived national quintile (LCC, 2019). When reviewing specifically adult skills, 28% of Leicester's working age population reside in the most deprived 5% of areas nationally, with areas within St Matthews & St Peters, Spinney Hill and St Saviours all featuring within this upper segment of the most deprived quintile (LCC, 2019). 21% of Leicester's population reside in the most deprived 20% of areas nationally for living environments (decent homes standard), with areas of Spinney Hill featuring within this top national quintile, and 9% of Leicester's population reside within the 20% most deprived areas nationally for barriers to housing (affordability and overcrowding), of which the areas of Spinney Hill and St Matthews & St Peters feature.

<sup>1</sup> No definitive census of the industry currently exists. However, supplier lists of 70 key manufacturers published by Boohoo Group in 2021, show 65% in LE5, 17% in LE4 and 14% in LE2.

A joint report by the Centre for Social Justice with Justice & Care (2020) used the constituency boundary of Leicester East, which incorporates the main industrial areas of LE5 and LE4, as their boundary of enquiry. Delimiting the geographies of study to Leicester East has practical benefits, in that demographic and labour market statistics collated by the ONS and the House of Commons Library correspond to this boundary. Half of the population in Leicester East are from South Asian communities, and more than a tenth of households having no one who speaks English as their main language (compared with 4.4% in England, nationally). Of the population of Leicester East, 22.1% hold no qualifications (compared to 7.7% nationally). Residents usually divide along linguistic lines-Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu, Gujarati- as well as religious lines- Sikh, Muslim, Hindu. Many of the houses are also multi-generational, a common feature within Asian communities in general, which accounts for their strong inter-generational integration and family ties.

The *Centre for Social Justice* report (2020) suggests that the industry is predominately run by, and employs, members from the Gujarati community. The report claims that, 'because of their close knit nature, and the racism and isolation that many have experienced' links between workers and factory owners are close. Widespread inability to speak English compounds the vulnerabilities of this community, along with precarities concerning immigration status, also noted as a factor which prevents complaints being raised. As Baroness Sandip Verma notes in the report:

*They do not know the language, their entitlements, they cannot even get proper care or medical help... [she had] seen letters saying that if the migrant pays £1000 per person, a 'consultant' would fill in the form for them to obtain working papers. The migrant didn't know that the process was in fact free of charge. (Centre for Social Justice and Justice and Care 2020:3)*

Reflecting upon estimates that one in three of Leicester's garment workers were born outside of the UK (e.g. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and increasingly Bulgaria and Romania), immigration status is highlighted as a factor that frequently increases workers' vulnerability. It has also been suggested that many garment industry employees lack entitlements to work Nationality is also an important dynamic; Romanian and Bulgarian workers are reportedly more likely to engage with informal and formal worker organisations to protect pay and conditions than workers from South Asia. (Labour Behind the Label, 2020).

The Labour Behind the Label (2020) report also noted the informality of the industry which was said to compound the difficulties monitoring compliance, such as the prevalence of garment industry homeworkers within Leicester East, paid as little as £2 per hour. Workers living in houses owned by their factory employer have been raised as an additional risk (2020, p.4)

The concerns noted in the Labour Behind the Label (2020) report correspond with the GLAA intelligence of the textile industry within the East Midlands, which focusses particularly on Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire, and notes that many workers are encouraged to recruit friends, while others pay fees to obtain employment. These workers, according to the GLAA, are thought to be between 20 and 40 years old, increasingly from Romania and Bulgaria, and often housed in residential addresses shared with other workers. A shortage in skilled machinists was reported in 2020 and this may be further impaired by the points-based immigration system (GLAA, 2020). These dynamics also corroborate evidence by Hammer *et al* (2015) which reported a general segmentation of labour exploitation and vulnerability specifically along lines of ethnicity, linguistics, and immigration status.

### Recent history, industry responses and the impact of Covid-19

Evidence of exploitation within Leicester's garment industry has emerged repeatedly since 2010 from both investigative journalism and statutory enforcement bodies including HMRC and the Director of Labour Market Enforcement, as well as the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee (Channel 4, 2010, 2017; HM Government 2018; O'Connor 2018; House of Commons 2019; BBC 2019; Heighton-Ginns and Prescott 2019; Pegden 2019, 2021).

Since 2018 the national Apparel and General Merchandise Public Private Protocol (AGM-PPP) has been working to improve labour standards through coordinating the actions of the many stakeholders on the ground, many of whom are active in Leicester. Its objectives underscore the recognised need for integrated working, and the promotion of good practice, with its signatories working collaboratively in strategic joint workstreams, and in the development of a protocol accord, which is an enforceable agreement with accountable commitments from its stakeholders. Its stakeholders include public enforcement agencies, brands and retailers, NGOs, and civil society groups, as well as universities and related stakeholders. Each are required to actively participate in one joint workstream, either on worker and community voice, intervention, business accountability, or regulation, legislation and political engagement. This alliance has been building confidence and understanding amongst the wider sector and is developing a new model of working, alongside the TUC, to place worker representation at the heart of stamping out malpractice and securing decent working conditions.

In specific regard to the AGM-PPP's work on Worker Rights' (Workstream 1), the TUC has proposed the adoption of Workplace Support Agreements (WSA), an agreement which brings together brands and their suppliers, to guarantee workplace access for unions, and a commitment from unions to represent individual and collective issues despite little or no membership (TUC, 2021). Their limited practical reach to garment and textile workers has also informed an intervention agenda by the trade union movement (GMB, Unite and TUC), who along with nine fashion brands have funded outreach workers to build trust and develop relations within the Highfields community. This includes trade union organising in the community, and forms part of a broader initiative of the Leicester Garment Workers Advice and Support Project (L-GWASP). The efforts of this L-GWASP culminated in the recent launch of the Fashion-Workers Advice Bureau, Leicester (FAB-L) which provides free advice and support for all fashion, garment and textile factory workers, on workers' rights, employment law, health and safety at work, housing, welfare, immigration, financial hardship and domestic violence, and provides access to interpretation and translation services (UKFT, 2022).

In addition, there has been a concerted effort, coordinated by Leicester City Council (LCC) and the LLEP, to build upon the skilled employment of the industry, and grow the industry to provide decent, local jobs. These efforts are date back to 2014, with the work of the Leicestershire Textiles Hub, which offered practical support and guidance to textile manufacturers in the region. In 2017, Leicester's city mayor formulated a textiles coalition event to galvanise and coordinate industrial improvement, and in 2019 the Leicester Labour Market partnership was formed including partners such as HMRC, HSE, GLAA and BEIS, setting out a plan to address exploitation based on the '4 Ps' approach of protect, prepare, prevent and pursue. (Leicester City Council, 2021) More recently, the LCC and LLEP have been working with training provider, Fashion-Enter Ltd, to open The Fashion Technology Academy (Leicester). This scheme hopes to 'push out' negative work practices in the industry, by offering apprenticeships and training for people who want to work in the industry, and those already in it (Patel, 2021). The academy will focus on the delivery of entry-level qualification in core industry skills, including patternmaking, fabric inspection, laying and cutting, as well as machine maintenance and stitching, and will also work closely with the City Council's adult learning team, to offer English courses at the academy, for speakers of other languages (LCC, 2021). This has been the product of a significant investment programme totalling £300,000, of which a £100,000 grant came from the Pooled Business Rates Fund managed by the LLEP (LLEP, 2021). Other projects associated with the Community Renewal Fund have also recently been established to promote skills development, women's enterprise, and improve access to English language

courses but these have relatively short time-frames for delivery (by June 2022). The Covid-19 pandemic also brought a critical juncture for enforcement when reports surfaced of many Leicester garment factories remaining open despite national lockdown measures, sustained by orders from retailers who were pivoting to selling leisure wear online and experiencing a high rate of growth (Labour Behind the Label, 2020). In response to the public health risks and documented labour abuses that were highlighted, the Leicester garment industry again became subject to sustained critical attention from the media and regulatory services from May 2020 onwards.

Responding to concerns around allegations of unsafe working conditions and worker exploitation in Leicester in the context of COVID-19, Operation Tacit was launched, a multi-agency drive by enforcement agencies led by the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA). Alongside Leicester City Council and Public Health England (PHE), Operation Tacit agencies conducted unannounced visits to factories in the cities and distributed information on rights and reporting pathways to garment workers. Although many stakeholders saw this operation as an example of successful multi-agency co-operation, there have been queries as to the impact of the initiative, particularly in terms of prosecutions (Hastings 2021). The Council has expressed frustration at fragmentation within the enforcement response and its own lack of enforcement powers over working conditions and pay in factories (Leicester City Council 2021). Further actions taken by brands have included tightening audit and inspection measures and streamlining supply chains with a significantly reduced list of manufacturers (Leveson, 2021). However, market volatility, the reduction in orders and additional cost pressures arising from the increased emphasis on regularising pay and conditions has also meant that many factories have closed since the pandemic, with a reduction in the availability of part-time work and a corresponding growth in the unemployment or under-employment of the garment and textile workforce. These issues have combined with other complex social and economic factors to increase financial pressures for the local workforce, and this research explores this wider context in detail, from workers' perspectives.

In the next section of this report, we draw on our primary data analysis to provide a summary of the situation currently experienced by Leicester garment workers.

# 3. Situation summary: Labour exploitation and workers' economic autonomy

## Working conditions within the Leicester garment cluster

The contemporary problems that the workers who participated in the study most commonly described included pay-related abuses (in particular being paid below minimum wage). Some respondents also reported being pressured to work long hours (up to 13-14 hours a shift) or at great intensity; being subjected to bullying or other negative behaviour; and experiencing problems with the physical factory environment and health and safety.

In our survey of workers, 72% (of the 108 respondents who answered this question) indicated that they had experienced problems in their current/most recent workplace, as per Figure 2 below. The most common issues reported were payment below minimum wage (56%), lack of holiday pay (55%) and lack of sick pay (49%).<sup>2</sup> Approximately 1/3 of the respondents indicated not receiving a work contract or not receiving payslips. 28% reported that they had no concerns to raise.

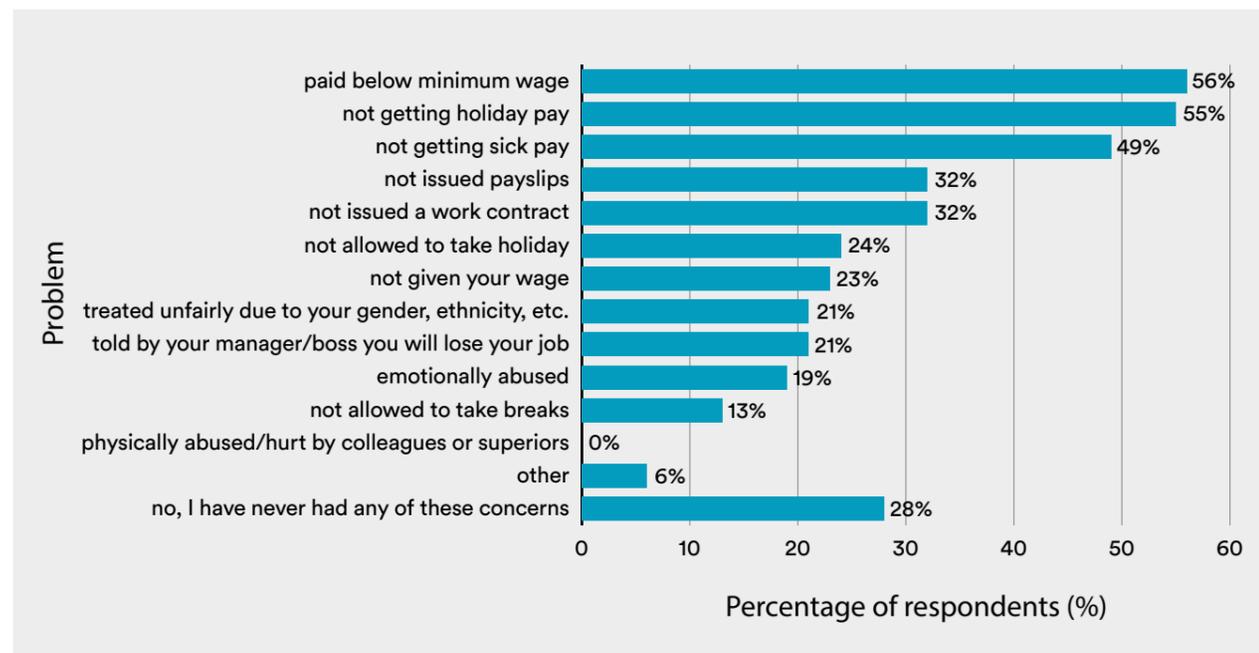


Figure 2: Problems experienced in the workplace

<sup>2</sup> Whilst these results confirm that these issues are occurring in the local industry, they do not indicate the relative prevalence of such issues.

The labour abuses described in the open questions of the surveys predominantly refer to payment related issues, which is reflective of the most common problems as identified in Figure 2.

When asked about their pay and working hours, of the 112 who responded to these two matters, 29% described their pay as good, 34% viewed their pay as poor, and the remainder of the sample did not characterise it as either good or poor. Concerning their working hours, 27% reported that their working hours were good, while 37% described them as poor. When workers were asked about working conditions (such as hygiene, ventilation and temperature), 45% of the 107 who responded regarded them as good, and 20% viewed them as poor. While we cannot draw substantive conclusions from this survey, these sets of results indicate some diversity in the quality of working conditions in factories in Leicester with some workers reporting these matters as in a creditable light, but others offering the view that pay and conditions were poor.

### Pay-related abuses

Workers complain that payment is below minimum wage or delayed, part of the wage is clawed back by supervisors and employers, and in some cases that they are not provided payment for the numbers of hours contracted when the company does not have work for them.

A worker described her/his experience:

*My previous manager used to take money back once it was paid in my account. I wasn't happy, I have told him I am not happy. He said "If you don't pay then our factory will close down and you will lose your job". Therefore, I had no other option but to continue without a fuss until that factory closed down. (SR095)*

Many of our interviewees regarded pay as the main problem they faced:

*Worker: The main issue is that they don't pay us minimum wages. Some bosses and supervisors are good. There are some factories where they behave badly. But most of them are good. The only problem is they don't pay us minimum wages. That's it. (FG2)*

*Worker: What I mean to say is that they give us 3 or 4 pounds per hour. When they give the payment in bank account according to the law of minimum wages, then they show the minimum wages of 24 hours. But they don't count the extra hours that they have forced me to work. Thus, they pay less. (FG2)*

*Worker: They said that our machine remains idle after you leave the factory. We can't keep people like this. As we are making clothes here so that you have to work from 7 o'clock in the morning till 7 o'clock in the evening. (FG3)*

There were a number of different ways that workers reported (minimum) wages being withheld:

- Wage slips show payment of the minimum wage, but workers have worked additional undocumented hours, averaging a lower rate of pay.
- Wage slips show payment of the minimum wage and funds transferred to the workers bank account, but the worker is then pressured to withdraw a proportion for refund to the employer in cash.
- Wage slips are issued after the company is declared bankrupt, meaning the payment to employees is never made (but leaving employees liable for tax).
- Late payment of wages.
- Back-payment of wages withheld, if employees leave the company.
- Holiday, sickness, maternity and paternity benefits withheld, or alternatively paid and subsequently re-claimed by the factory managers.
- Furlough pay withheld.

Other workers with contracts specifying working hours complained that they were not actually getting the amount of work (and hence the amount of pay), specified, as the factory hours had reduced, but because they had a job on paper, they could not claim benefits. Workers told us that where written contracts and other documentation was provided this was usually in English, even where workers were unable to understand the language.

Furthermore, Covid accentuated some of the payment issues that were already occurring – several respondents reported not having received their furlough money: "During Covid lockdown we never got any pay for staying at home so I struggled to pay the bills and celebrate Christmas with the grandbabies" (SR053).

### Employer-employee relationships

Some interviewees described managers or factory owners using shouting, bullying or intimidating behaviour to accomplish forms of exploitation such as underpayment of wages, long working hours, or the intensification of work. This could be more pronounced if there was pressure to have an order completed on time:

*We have to work from Monday to Friday to produce. Then on Saturdays, they delivered them. So, they forced us to work on Saturdays. They used to say, "You have to come on Saturdays as we have to deliver our products on Saturday evening. So you have to work till 12 o'clock at least." (FG5)*

*Interpreter: "As you have said, they want you to work forcefully, what does happen when you don't want to work? Or if you don't want to return them that cash back, then what does happen?"*

*KA01: Then they don't help us to work.*

*KA02: They misbehave with us. (FG2)*

Managerial behavioural issues were also raised by a few survey respondents. "Once or twice they threw garments on me when I made a mistake, the boss was so rude. He used to tell us go away if you don't like it. I had a very bad experience. We [workers] were not allowed to speak English" (SR014). Another respondent reported that, "I am suffering from colitis, I need to use the toilet frequently. Therefore, my manager used to tell me off all the time. I was really scared of him." (SR002)

A number of workers also indicated that employers were aware of their limited alternative employment options and were able to exploit this vulnerability; their strategies seem to be based on the assumption that the workers will prefer to have less well-paid hours than no hours at all and by making them feel disposable, as exemplified by variations of the phrase "if you don't like it, you can go". One worker described being grabbed by the throat after he complained when his employer withheld wages (Interview AG005).

Our survey responses provide a small amount of information on the relationship between employers and employees – sometimes supervisors are depicted negatively because they put pressure on workers to work faster and take fewer breaks and are not responding positively to demands for minimum wage payments. However, the survey also noted positive experiences with employers, including cases where managers either developed workers' skills to enable them to progress in their career or told supervisors to treat workers with respect.

#### Health and safety issues

The health and safety concerns described ranged from concerns about the lack of safety measures, such as fire risks and a lack of protective equipment; to substandard physical working conditions such as unhygienic (e.g. vermin), poor ventilation, dirty toilets, over-crowded premises, unheated premises; to exposure to chemicals and serious workplace accidents where neither first aid nor any recording of the accident took place.

*Worker: "In my workplace, there was water leakage. In the place where water used to leak, there was an electric switch under the leakage". (FG2)*

*Worker: "Sometimes when there was heavy rain, the water used to get in the factory and we have worked in the factory by sitting on the water. We had very bad experiences. We used to walk in the water, like a flood".(FG3)*

Lack of health-related measures and entitlements such as maternity pay were rarely reported by survey respondents; however, this might be attributable to workers' lack of knowledge regarding health and safety standards and bears further investigation. Of those who negatively described their workplace, it was quite common to refer to the cold conditions, with a lack of proper ventilation "no heating in cold [weather] and no air [conditioning] during hot weather" (SR019), as well as dusty and noisy conditions. One worker also reported that "They have no safety cloth shoes gloves. I think safety is very important for work. They have no safety rules" (SR012). Another person asked for maternity pay but this was denied on the basis that she was a part-time worker: "so I left my child with my mother in law and went back to work" (SR087).

#### Unequal experiences of work

A person's social group or ethnicity was described by some interviewees as affecting how people were treated at work: some workers said they were treated less favourably than other workers because they were from a different ethnic group than the employer.

*"That's what I am saying. We are [community Y] and they are [community X]. So we don't have any priority. [community X] serve the factory all day long. So, the boss is happy with them".... (FG2)*

There also seemed to be the indication that European or British workers may be better treated because they can speak the language and stand up for themselves:

*"They treat Eastern Europeans better than us because they can speak for themselves and we are scared to lose our job that's why we don't say anything". "I want part-time work because I have a child but the manager doesn't allow me, whereas he allows Bulgarian worker to go early at home". (SR100)*

In some accounts differential pay was also linked to a person's ethnic group and/or immigration status. Illegal workers were reported as being paid less, 3 or 4 pounds an hour.

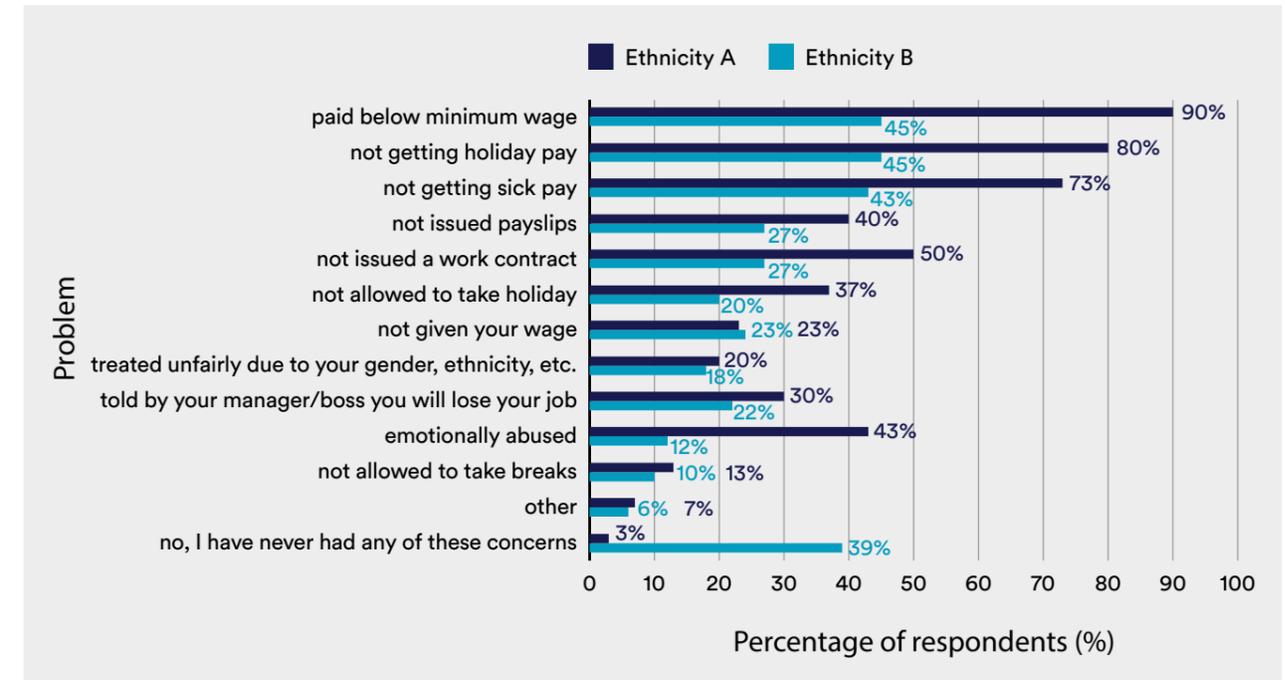


Figure 3: Ethnicity and problems experienced in the workplace. Percentages are calculated from how many within each of the two selected ethnicities experienced each problem. 'Ethnicity A' includes 30 respondents, 'Ethnicity B' includes 49 respondents.

Survey findings also demonstrate how certain issues are unequally experienced by workers, depending on their ethnic group. For example, when we compared different ethnic groups from our survey, we found that 9 in 10 of 'Ethnicity A' respondents reported having been paid below minimum wage, compared with just under half of 'Ethnicity B' respondents (45%). Considerable differences can also be seen regarding not receiving holiday and sick pay, not being issued a work contract, and having experienced emotional abuse by colleagues or supervisors in the workplace. A particularly stark finding is that only 3% of 'Ethnicity A' respondents said that they had not experienced any of the problems suggested by the survey, whilst this rose to 39% of those in 'Ethnicity B'. This may indicate that for some communities, experiencing these problems within Leicester garment factories is a more established norm than for others. Whilst these differences might be attributable to other factors apart from overt discrimination – for instance, workers from one ethnic group may be more likely to perform particular jobs – it is still a clear indication that some parts of the workforce may be more acutely affected by labour exploitation.

#### To what extent do workers describe choosing to work in the garment industry?

Participants described different motivations for entering the garment and textile industry. For some, gaining employment within the garment industry was more a product of looking for any available low-skilled or unskilled work. In this sense, it was not the garment industry specifically, but simply the availability of the work that motivated their entry into the industry. Some workers described entering the industry in terms of not knowing about other jobs, or not being able to do other work:

*"But as we have come to this country, we don't have anything else to do. We need some income for our livelihood. So, people have to enter this job. As they have no other choices". (FG2)*

Reflecting the highly gendered dynamics of the industry, some women workers explained that garment work in the factories near their homes was the work they could do that fitted around their caring responsibilities, asking us where else they could find work for only the five hours between dropping off and picking up children from school?

Whilst motivations for working were primarily related to making a living, these were not the only considerations workers described. Some women workers also talked about wanting to do something more than stay at home, and about enjoying both the social environment and financial autonomy that work provided. Some women described wanting to have money of their own rather than depending on their husbands, and wanting to show their children they were not dependent:

*"If we do not work then our children will think that our mothers are useless. Rather than if we do some part-time job then they will give us the importance and obey us. Besides, doing a part-time job will help us to take care of our children as they are growing up in a different culture with different types of people". (FG3)*

Workers also described more aspirational financial goals, such as wanting to save money to buy a house, have a holiday, or savings.

However, some workers described having skills that had influenced their choice of garment work. Some workers had relevant skills from sewing at home, or they had worked in the garment industry abroad.

Whilst we detail below the unhappiness of workers with pay and working conditions, it is also true many of the workers we interviewed had taken jobs knowing in advance the true rate of pay, terms and conditions that the employer was offering. Generally, employers honoured this understanding, as a form of verbal contract. In some cases, these verbal contracts were preferred, particularly where work was occurring on a cash basis. As we will discuss in Section III, it appears that workers are making choices, but that these choices are constrained to varying degrees according to their financial needs and the lack of alternate opportunities available to them.

There was a tacit suggestion in a number of interviews that workers benefitted from informal contracts as this allowed them to supplement State benefits with part time work. This was also essential as the precarious nature of garment work and zero hours contracts often did not afford sufficient security to rely on the income. One woman told us: *"We cannot guarantee the job, what job we can do. As a woman I can't do contracted hours' and 'I want to work,' but 'we have to pay for everything, it will be hard for us if we do not get the benefits"* (AG002/3).

Some older workers explained that - at one time - the pay and conditions in Leicester's denim factories had been very good. One male interviewee explained that when he arrived in 1979, he had chosen the garment industry over his qualified profession (accountancy) as the wages and conditions were excellent. Even in current times, although workers had many complaints, a significant number of our participants indicated that they enjoyed working in garment factories and felt that they had learnt new skills. Others commented that they would continue to work in the industry if employment remained available.

Workers also said that it was difficult to give up jobs due to the growing unemployment throughout the sector, which had worsened considerably in the wake of higher focus on inspection and regulation, and lower volume of orders following the Covid-19 pandemic. When coupled with concerns about the rapid rises in basic costs of living, workers felt that they had limited options to contest poor conditions or seek alternative employment (WFG5).

Some women workers, faced with a lack of other carer-friendly employment opportunities, prioritised childcare flexibility at the expense of working conditions, which in some cases resulted in workers enduring poorer conditions for longer periods of time. Workers spoke of weighing up their exit from the industry with broader considerations of the effect this would have on their home life and caring for their children. Yet, as the working conditions deteriorated, some decided to exit the industry and look after their children full time.

### Challenging labour exploitation: workers' experiences

Both in interviews and our survey of workers, many workers demonstrated an understanding of some of their employment rights, although levels of knowledge varied. Some interviewees displayed this knowledge through listing to a series of violations by their employer. However, some rights seemed to be less known than others. For example, out of 111 survey responses, most people sampled (87%) know that they are entitled to minimum wage, which also came through strongly in the open ended questions where workers complained about being paid below minimum wage. Many workers also knew they were entitled to receive regular payslips (79%) and paid annual holiday days (77%). However, other rights are less known to the workers, for example, free health and safety training and protective equipment were also some of the least known, with only 57% and 64% of the workers being aware of them. As we will discuss, this inconsistent and imperfect knowledge of rights may be related to lack of access to formal sources of advice or information.

Just as our survey indicated there were workers with both good and bad experiences of working conditions, survey respondents reported mixed experiences of responding to problems at work. There was considerable diversity of experience amongst survey respondents, with some finding it easy and some difficult to raise issues at the workplace. Some reported positive attitudes and saw their managers or business owners as enablers of change. A worker explained:

*"At my workplace, our employers do things to improve the working conditions. Like disabled toilets, bigger eating areas, prayer room, fag station outside the factory for Eastern European workers, complaint boxes, supported chairs, air condition, heaters and so on". (SR092)*

However, survey responses, focus groups and interviews contain reports of workers not being able to successfully resist labour abuses. As one survey respondent commented, the problem wasn't always not being able to raise concerns but, rather, having those listened to by the employer:

*"In my previous work, I was not getting minimum wage. I told my manager many times, but he said, Boss has given the orders, anyone asks for more than £5 .50, let them go. So it was easy to tell them but they never listened. Afterward in 2020 factory got closed then I have found work in this factory, now things are better". (SR093)*

Focus group accounts also included descriptions of managers involving workers in concealing instances of labour exploitation: managers would move staff to avoid detection of irregular workers or coach them in order to pass inspection:

*"If we were more people, then they would let us go through the back door."*

*"When someone comes to check if everything is okay in the factory, then we were told to tell him that we are getting everything. We are getting minimum wages and holiday pay". (FG5)*

When some interviewees described taking action against exploitation, they described speaking to a husband, supervisor or employer – with either no or a negative result – or, as mentioned above, solving the problem of exploitation by leaving for another job or no job. Other workers said they had not taken any action at all, apart from speaking with the researchers.

In our survey, many respondents reported the risk of losing their job as a factor that prevented them from taking action to address problems identified at work. Similarly, some interviewees told us they did not report or complain about unfair or exploitative practices because they feared losing their jobs if they did.

Amongst workers responding to our survey, we noted some differences between men and women when it comes to willingness to take action if there are problems in the workplace, suggesting this as an area for further investigation. From the 72 women and 30 men answering this question, 40% of women survey respondents said that nothing would prevent them reporting an issue in the workplace, compared with 23% of male respondents. Furthermore, nearly three-quarters of the men said that being afraid of losing their job would prevent them from reporting problems, compared with 43% of women. This may possibly have been linked to gender roles, whereby men possibly perceived themselves as the main source of household income.

Focus groups and interview participants described the difficulty in reporting violations anonymously, with some saying that other workers would tell the employer that they have reported them or describing surveillance within the factory. In one case, a worker told us that after he reported his employer to HMRC, an employee from that office contacted his employer and gave the employer his name.

When asked what prevented them from reporting problems, the two most common reasons given by the 104 respondents who answered this question were being afraid of losing their job (52%), and having no job alternative (38%). 25% of the survey sample perceived language skills to be an impediment, 24% were afraid of losing their wage, 24% had to cover basic necessities, 17% were fearful that they would be shamed/threatened, 13% had to pay a debt, 8% were reluctant due to other colleague's negative experiences, 7% worried that it will negatively affect their benefits, 4% were influenced by unpleasant original home country experiences, and 5% didn't know how to report issues. Not working legally (8%) was clearly also an impediment in raising issues at the workplace.



## 4. Drivers of exploitation

Local conditions increase or decrease the risks of labour exploitation in a community by influencing the behaviour of different actors in the community. In this section, we discuss what both workers and employers may be more or less likely to do, and what agencies tasked with preventing exploitation may be more or less likely to do, as a result of local conditions. This discussion draws on the accounts of workers, manufacturers, and modern slavery stakeholders, who described a range of different factors as influencing what either they themselves or others were either motivated to do or able to do.

In the discussion that follows, it is important to note that interviewees were describing their views of the contributors to or influences on people's behaviour in cases where exploitation is occurring. How commonly exploitation occurs in the Leicester garment industry is outside the scope of this study.

Research participants described a range of community-level and individual-level factors that constrained the economic autonomy of workers, either pushing workers to initially acquiesce to exploitative labour situations, or making it difficult for them to subsequently leave such situations. A range of individual and local circumstances contributed to workers experiencing financial precarity, limited employment options, and isolation, in turn limiting their ability to have control in their working lives.

### Barriers to economic autonomy

As previously observed in relation to the Leicester garment industry, 'if workers can leave, if they have sufficient economic agency to exercise their outside options in the labour market', this limits the ability of potential exploiters to exert control on workers. Conversely, whilst everyone within the Leicester industry will be subject to some limits on the economic choices they can make, if there are sufficient limits on workers' economic choices, the door opens for others in the community to engage in coercive practices (Byrher, Cranshaw and Hill 2021: 193).

Barriers to economic autonomy	
<b>A1 Financial precarity</b>	No sources of support in the face of rising or unexpected costs
	Instability: irregular income, low pay, sudden job loss
	Migration or non-integration related costs: high costs of agents, not knowing entitlements, or sponsoring family members
<b>A2 Limits on employability</b>	Workers can stabilise household income by depending on / maximising their benefits
	Lack of job search skills, business skills
	Lack of suitable employment skills and qualifications
	Lack of English language skills, IT skills
	Barriers to accessing available work (no transport, lack of suitable shifts)
<b>B1 Worker isolation</b>	Workers cannot access 'official' work
	Language barriers make interactions from outside community problematic
	Workers report limited knowledge or use of sources of support in the locality.

## Financial precarity

As discussed previously, most workers described their primary motivation for working as financial. In cases where financial need is acute, vulnerability to exploitation can increase. It is therefore important to understand the degree to which workers were facing economic hardship. Interviewees and survey respondents reported different experiences in this regard. Amongst our 113 respondents answering this question, 44% said they were never behind with bills, 35% said they were behind 'a few times', and 15% reported being behind 'many times' or 'often'. 6% indicated that they could not remember.

Financial needs were often related to workers' family needs. Some interviewees described struggling to satisfy basic needs, including needing to pay rent, electricity, gas, and council tax bills. One mentioned his co-worker was working to move out of overcrowded housing. Some workers described being unable to deal with unexpected household expenses – such as when an appliance breaks down. Some workers said they had to regularly rely on food banks. A very young worker described under-age working to contribute to the household budget (Interview KA001). Parents also described needing money to finance the educational needs of their children, including providing computers and mobile phones, religious education and supporting children in university.

Many workers told us that there was less work than there had been prior to the pandemic, and interviewees described being out of work or that they were working, but not getting the hours that they had expected or were contracted for (FG4). Some interviewees told us they were now worried about how they would manage household finances. Workers currently in work told us that the Christmas shutdown of factories was longer this year than in previous years. In a few cases female interviewees mentioned that they had previously taken piece work to complete at home (FG5, Interview AG002/3) but that this was no longer happening due to the slow-down in orders.

## An 'Isolation -Tax'

Some financial needs were related to additional costs incurred due to a lack of language skills or other fees associated with migration. Migration-related financial needs included needing to maintain the household income at a certain amount to satisfy Home Office financial requirements to allow a close relative to come to the UK; wishing to pay for private tutoring to help migrant children catch up or succeed in school; and needing to send remittances to family members abroad.

*"My daughter who is going to the university, has come to this country when she was in class 4. She couldn't do well if I didn't support her. I realized that she is talented. She needs support. But I don't know English. My husband is not well educated. But she wanted to study. She said, "Mom, please give me tuition [pay for private tutoring]." If I didn't give her tuition, then she won't be successful". (FG2)*

Moreover, both a lack of English and knowledge concerning, for example, systems of support in Britain increased financial need for some workers. For example, one woman described how, when her boiler broke down, her lack of English meant that she did not realise that repair was included in her rental contract. Workers also described relying on 'agents' to accomplish tasks, such as passport applications; these agents charge workers fees for doing paperwork that the person does not have the information and language skills to do themselves. In some cases, these charges are highly inflated: one worker described paying £500 to complete a benefit application form, another said they had been charged £300 for applying for a passport.

## Limits on employability

A recurring theme when workers described entering the garment industry, and why (when dissatisfied with pay and conditions), they continued to work there, was a perceived lack of options or limits on their own employability.

Workers described not being able to obtain other work for the following reasons: a lack of English-language skills; a lack of skills or qualifications; not knowing about other jobs or how to find other jobs; not having transport to other jobs; and personal circumstances such as parenting responsibilities that limited the hours they could work. Some interviewees also commented that workers had little choice but to opt for the informal and cash-in-hand roles that the industry offered because they needed to work in addition to receiving benefits (AG002, AG003, AG004) or did not have current permissions to work under UK immigration law.

## Limited job search skills or resources

Workers described their social ties or social group as the means through which they had entered the garment industry, with people obtaining jobs through family and friends. Workers also described hearing about job openings through word of mouth or advertising boards in their community, and by going and speaking to the factory supervisor. Without competence in the English language, workers had difficulty finding out about or training for other work.

## Skills and qualifications

Workers told us that a lack of skills or qualifications stopped them from gaining other work. A few told us that they had been trained by the factory (in one case a worker described two weeks of training), or that they had some skills from having done sewing at home. Sometimes workers described having worked in the garment industry abroad, but others had only moved into the industry upon their arrival in the UK. Other workers told us about professional qualifications they had achieved in their country of origin, but that they had been prevented from pursuing this work in the UK due to a lack of language skills.

At the same time, workers saw learning and qualifications as the route for both themselves and their children to have better work. A range of training was identified as a means of gaining access to a wider job market. Within this, learning English and being able to practice it day-to-day, including at work, was mentioned most frequently. IT training was also a popular suggestion "Some basic things like filling forms, sending emails, and so on. To do these basic things we have to seek help from others or ask help from our children" (FG5).

Participants also mentioned careers training, first aid training, childcare training and IT skills. It was important for courses to run at a range of times, and with childcare to facilitate attendance.

## English-language skills

For some of the workers we spoke with, lack of English-language skills was the primary barrier to getting alternative employment; in comparison, Leicester's garment factories were some of the easiest workplaces for non-English speakers to enter. Factories were described as operating in a range of languages which sometimes included English but often did not. Stakeholders have told us that factory supervisors don't always speak English, and in focus groups we encountered two young men in supervisory roles that did not have sufficient English to speak with us without translation.

Older male workers who had been in the UK since the 1970s and 1980s were happy to speak with us in English, but they noted that younger migrants were not learning English.

*"In our tea time, I advise them, please, please go to the evening class for English, because you want to stay here, you want to live here. I said no, you are not going back to Bulgaria or Iraq or Iran or Afghanistan, you are not going. Why are you not learning English, which is very important for you". (AG004)*

Some workers explained that they worked where they did because they did not have the language skills to work in a factory that operated in English. Workers described a number of other ways in which poor or absent English-language skills limited their employment options. Workers had difficulty applying for other jobs – with one worker describing obtaining another job only with help from an English-speaking friend on his application form. Poor English also limited their ability to travel to other work opportunities, as they couldn't obtain a driving licence.

When asked why they wanted to learn English, women workers talked about getting better jobs:

*Interviewer: "Give us some suggestions about some work which you can do. Does anything come to your mind that we want to do this kind of work? Any official work?"*

*First worker: "Who will give us any official work?"*

*Second worker: "If we improve our English then we can get better jobs like a receptionist or in the supermarket". (FG3)*

Moreover, when they experienced problems at work, lack of English limited workers' ability to take action:

*Interviewer: "Suppose you have any problem. Then don't you know to whom to go?"*

*Worker: "We don't know. Our English is not that good. My husband also doesn't know but his English is better. He sometimes becomes frustrated and feels very bad, he wanted to report to someone that these people are doing so bad with you, but he couldn't". (FG3)*

At the same time, workers thought that learning English would bring about changes in their lives overall:

*Worker: "The main reason [for needing English language skills] is we face problems everywhere. We face problems in the community of the kids. Sometimes there are parents' meetings. We face problems there. There are other problems like sending emails, reading letters".*

*Worker: "Sometimes we can't explain our problems properly to the doctors". (FG3)*

It is not clear how many of the workers who lacked English-language skills had been unable to access English courses, but interviewees did describe some barriers to learning English. Some workers described a Catch-22 situation, where once they were in a non-English speaking workplace, they felt that they could not move out of it.

*Worker: "Although we wanted to do [English] courses, they won't let us go. If we want to do courses, then the boss will shout at us because we needed to go to the courses 2 or 3 days per week. They won't give us any holiday for this". (FG3)*

This was not the only barrier to improving their English, as some workers also said that they wanted to take English language courses but that these were not free.

### Gender roles

Personal circumstances related to gender roles also acted to limit the employability of women workers. Female workers described having few working options because of their childcare responsibilities: they wanted work that would allow them to be home with their children after school, with some saying this would be the case even if childcare was available to them. At the same time, some women workers pointed to changes that would enable them to both look after their children and have different or more work: one pointed out, for example, that if she could drive then she would be able to start work as soon as she had dropped her child off at school.

The work that people were willing or able to do was often strongly associated with gender norms. Many workers expressed the view that women were responsible for managing the household and bringing up children, and this shaped their expectations about the types of work and working hours that women were able to access (with the general preference being for part time hours, within walking distance of home, that fitted around the school day). Many workers do not drive or own cars, and one female worker told us that standing in the street to wait for public transport was not culturally acceptable (FG4). Men generally indicated that they had greater flexibility to travel and to accept longer working hours.

### Limits on anti-exploitation activity

Alongside circumstances that limited workers' economic autonomy, research participants identified a number of factors that constrained action to detect and stop exploitative activity when it occurred. Research participants described how their circumstances deterred workers from reporting abuse; did not sufficiently deter exploiters from continuing bad labour practices; and created a challenging operating environment for enforcement agencies.

Driver group B: Barriers to identifying and intervening in exploitation	
<b>B1 Worker vulnerability and isolation deters reporting</b>	Divided workplaces and workforces, including on ethnic lines
	Workers lacked trusted sources of support and advice
	Workers lack confidence to or knowledge of ways to report
	Financial precarity and fear of job loss for self or group
<b>B2 Low expectation of detection and enforcement; normalisation</b>	Workers are unsure of or are breaking rules (e.g. benefits, immigration)
	Audit processes and auditors may provide diagnostic clues as to possible wrongdoing but have no investigative powers to get underneath false documentation, coached workers, phoenix firms etc
	Illegal pay, conditions are normalised, in an independent firm ecology, so there is little business peer reporting
<b>B3 Insufficient agency networks at locality level</b>	Historical low resource for detection/compliance work
	Lack of coordination or joining up of enforcement
	Enforcement powers siloed. Require specific, high threshold triggers for entry
	Few intelligence routes to and from the local communities

### Worker vulnerability and isolation deters reporting

Where anti-exploitation activity relies to some degree on the worker to report or disclose labour abuses, workers who either do not know how to do this – or who perceive the risks of doing so as too great – can themselves represent a limit on anti-exploitation efforts.

When describing whether or not to report labour abuses, some workers demonstrated an understanding of reporting routes. A limited number of workers in our survey had followed formal channels and asked for assistance from local organisations and regulatory bodies including ACAS, Citizens Advice, GLAA, HMRC, Hope for Justice, Fairpay, Bangladeshi Community Centre and social workers.

*"My previous factory owner hasn't paid me. I have spoken to him, he still wouldn't listen, so I told my social worker and she contacted project fair play, the project manager called my factory owner, he then paid me my outstanding amount. I think he realised he will be in trouble by authorities". (SR082)*

We should bear in mind, however, that workers who completed our survey were, by definition, in contact with at least one of our community partner organisations, so this is not entirely unexpected. Although under 5% of survey respondents (i.e. 5 of 104) indicated that not knowing how to report problems prevented them from reporting problems in the workplace, other questions which asked about raising issues they experienced with unions or NGOs suggested that there was a lot of uncertainty from respondents regarding what role a union or NGO could play. Moreover, although not frequently given as an explicit reason in our survey, some interviewees said they did not report exploitation because they didn't know where they could go to do so. However, discussion revealed that this was not simply a matter of knowing an office they could visit, but rather, being able to raise it with someone they could trust and being reassured that the information remains fully confidential.

A number of workers described a lack of trust amongst workers as hampering their ability to challenge employer practices, explaining that they could not trust other workers not to report them to their employer if they took action. Some workers described this as being linked to differential pay or differential treatment:

*"Sometimes most of us think to ask the boss "Why do you pay so less?" But there is no unity between us. Some think that I am happy, at least I'm getting paid 5 pounds per hour so why I should bother if someone else is getting 3 pounds per hour". (FG2)*

When asked what would make workers less fearful of reporting issues at work, some of our interviewees prioritised the need to have someone in the workplace they could trust to tell. Hence, not only knowing where to go with a problem, but also having trust in that source of help, could affect a worker's decision on whether to take action on labour abuse.

### Low expectation of detection and enforcement

Stakeholders referred to criminality within the garment sector as an embedded problem, where an extensive spectrum of malpractices are normalised and tolerated in Leicester's textile community.

*On their [factory] outside, they advertised what a wonderful employer it was. It was, "[Whatever] company, national minimum wage and other benefits". Let that sink in. National minimum wage and other benefits. Now that is being advertised on your site, that you pay minimum wage, you are a good employer. (S027)*

Few viewed most non-compliance practices as the results of business owners not fully understanding the legislation. Yet, most stakeholders we interviewed acknowledged that such tolerance to malpractice and criminality has, in part, been prompted by the (perceived) ineffective or non-existent law enforcement response to the problem, coupled with no meaningful changes resulting from previous interventions.

According to one manufacturer (M002) the audits are passable because they "... don't actually get into the [detail] of what's going on in a business, they just look at the outside, the paperwork, so it's completely possible. Not that I've done it. But it's completely possible to evade the scrutiny from audits". The manufacturer commented that the audits were "paperwork" based, adding that "they [auditors] will come and say, 'Where the hell's the safeties?' You show them a big health and safety booklet folder, they're happy, they think everything is okay." Auditors, the interviewee argued, "don't know enough about the factory to be in that position, so they're just, they're coming from an office to an office to look at paperwork." In a similar vein, several stakeholders commented on illegal practices and criminality in the sector being overlooked, with one interviewee referring to 'fraudulent accountants, fraudulent lawyers' (S012). Some workers also described existing enforcement or compliance arrangements as ineffective, with one worker saying that factory owners were 'smart'. They described inspectors arriving and observing violations, e.g. a factory was working outside of its hours, but told us that when this happened, the employers appeared not overly worried. In another instance, a worker commented that much more actual surveillance of factories needed to happen, saying that abuses were there to be revealed if there were observers.



Coupled with descriptions of a lack of detection were comments on the effects of this on people's behaviour. One stakeholder argued that 'the big bosses have to be held criminally accountable' (S011). As another observed, in an environment where bad practice is widespread and normalised, the likelihood of abusers being reported – for instance, by other businesses – could be expected to decline.

Some workers also described existing enforcement or compliance arrangements as ineffective, with one worker saying that factory owners were 'smart'. They described inspectors arriving and observing violations, e.g. a factory was working outside of its hours, but told us that when this happened, the employers appeared not overly worried. In another instance, a worker commented that much more actual surveillance of factories needed to happen, saying that abuses were there to be revealed if there were observers.

There is a concern that in close-knit communities, irregularities tend to quickly become the norm, and the failure of the authorities can easily spread through the word of mouth and lead to defeatist views.

Stakeholders commented that the expectation that efforts to stop exploitation will fail may have discouraged workers from taking action, and some worker accounts appear to support this "But once when they [inspectors] came, they put some posters on the walls that it was saying, if you're not getting minimum wage, like, less than that, call this number, but nobody ever called" (KA06). As one worker put it, "Never raised any issue. I knew it was what it was" (SR072).

Stakeholder and manufacturer accounts of how the lack of experienced auditors, regulation and governance of the sector is leading to misbehaviour throughout the sector naturally points to the need for improvements in these areas.

Workers described both negative and positive changes in manufacturer practices post-pandemic. One worker speculated that the increased level of scrutiny over some factories may explain their experience of positive change, in terms of manufacturers' perceptions of the likelihood of being caught: "Before COVID, the manager used to treat us very badly, now they are scared of inspections" (SR105).

#### Insufficient agency networks at locality level

When we interviewed stakeholders, there was a general impression of a lack of connections between agencies and workers in the community, and agreement on the need to target the problem at a community level rather than exclusively within the workplace. Many also viewed community engagement as more effective than enforcement when identifying non-compliance issues.

*"Not paying people the correct wages or not paying them on time, or not recording the hours correctly, not having contracts in place, maybe tax avoidance by the owners. But you're not going to get to any of those things until you've got the trust of the access to the workers themselves, and I think that's where some of the challenges lie. As I said at the beginning, you hear about these things happening, and a lot of it is word of mouth because the workers themselves won't or can't speak out". (S020)*

Those who identified audits as a practice to ensure transparency and accountability in the supply chain viewed them as effective only when linked to regular contacts and building relationships with employers and workers.

*"What we find is that you still need to go in all the time into the factories to do spot checks probably two, three, four times a year, but also to build that relationship with the factory owners, because quickly you can do that, and also the workers then start to trust you, because you're in there, you talk to the workers. We have an auditor who's worked with us for years, who's brilliant, and she builds a really strong relationship with the workers, and we've had a lot of sort of whistleblowing over the years". (S022)*

When we examine workers' accounts, we see that their experiences of reporting abuse is, in some cases, described as having a successful outcome, but in others is described in terms of not being heard or responded to. Accounts are also suggestive of workers having to go to multiple agencies:

*"I have an outstanding £4000 within my previous factory, I have contacted my boss and manager many times, they don't answer me. We have contacted HMRC and GLAA. Nothing happened. That factory is still operating with a different name. I have contacted HfJ, and show them all evidence, they are working with GLAA. They told me they will let me know the outcomes. However, nothing happen yet". (SR009)*

*"My Furlough money was outstanding, and I got it after a long time. If there is a system that factories can follow then people don't have to beg them for their wages and outstanding money. They need to be answerable to someone. or one body, where we can report. HMRC and GLAA are not good they never come back to us or anyone. Many people including myself have reported to them. They need to take their job more seriously and give results to the public who rely on them. They say report to us and then they don't do anything". (SR059)*

A Single Labour Market Enforcement Body, as proposed by the government, could potentially provide opportunities both for simplifying reporting and ensuring action is co-ordinated in response to the full range of abuses encountered in Leicester.



## Disincentives to adopting and maintaining fair labour practices

As described in the previous section, limits on detection and enforcement were described by some research participants as in turn affecting the expectations of people in the industry that abusers would be caught and punished. In this last section, we discuss how the (perceived or real) low risk of detection, coupled with the circumstances of more vulnerable workers in Leicester and the particular economic conditions of the local garment cluster, can all provide disincentives to manufacturers to engage in fair labour practices.

### Supply of workers with limited opportunities and options

As previously discussed, many workers in the study described their decision to work in the garment industry in the context of their otherwise limited options for employment and financial need. The limits and needs described varied from worker to worker, but peoples' opportunities were constrained by their ability to find out about and apply for opportunities, by their skills and qualifications including English language, and by the limits their personal circumstances placed on what work – from the available options - they could take on. In relation to the later restriction, this was a notable dynamic for women with childcare responsibilities.

#### Driver group C: Disincentives to adopt and maintain fair labour practices

<b>C1 Supply of workers with limited opportunities and options</b>	New arrivals are recruited via social ties. Such social ties can provide peer group pressure to conform to norms and dominant paradigms
	Migrants lack support, networks, skills to access better opportunities
	Garment workers chasing fewer jobs in context of high unemployment
<b>Low risk of detection</b>	Local limits on anti-exploitation activity (Driver 2)
<b>C2 Low certainty of return on investment in ethical models of business</b>	Precarious and short-term relationships with brands
	Acute factory gate price competition
	Buyers do not practice open book procurement/know manufacturer costs

Some worker accounts suggest that manufacturers believe they have access to an unlimited supply of cheap labour, so that current employees can be viewed as expendable. Both interviewees and survey respondents commonly reported that the response to complaints about working conditions was that the worker could leave if they were unhappy, e.g. 'if you don't like it, you can go.'

Moreover, one discussion suggested competition amongst workers, with a dynamic of some migrant groups of workers undercutting another:

*Worker: "They found people from [country X] who are quicker and experienced and they work for 2 or 3 pounds per hour. They are available to work for less wages. That's why they are not worried about others [leaving]". (FG3)*

In the post-pandemic environment, there is some evidence from workers' own accounts that the availability to manufacturers of a ready supply of workers with few alternatives will continue, and in fact, worsen. For example, prior to the pandemic, women workers sometimes had home working arrangements with factories, which, whilst it could leave them vulnerable to exploitation, was a work opportunity for women constrained by childcare, transport, and cultural restrictions on what work they could do. Our conversations with both workers and our research partners indicate that this had largely stopped, further constraining employment options for some women workers.

As well as some of the workers we interviewed reporting that they were now out of work, survey respondents and interviewees mentioned the need for more working hours, often accompanied by the need for permanent work or more consistent hours. Study participants described factories closing or slowing down. Both survey respondents and interviewees reported not getting the working hours they needed to make ends meet, in some cases even when their contracts stated working hours:

*"Before we never get payslips for the hours we used to work only 16 hours or 20 hours where slip was issued, afterward cash in hand £5.00 an hour. However, they were many hours of work. Now we only have 30 or 35 hours of work on minimum wage. Therefore, we used to claim benefits as well. there was good money before, now hardly pay rent and bills. I do struggle for food sometimes as well. Rent is so high in Leicester". (SR098).*

*"They never pay me furlough money, and sometimes never give me the original copy of P45 P60. However, there were always enough working hours, whereas now we have fewer working hours than it was in the contract. Less working hours is a real problem. ...sometimes we get food from the food bank". (SR004).*

It is notable that whilst some workers described recent improvements to working conditions that they in some cases attributed to increased inspections, in other instances some workers felt that the situation now is worse than it was before, due to scarcity of work.

### Low certainty of return on investment in ethical business models

Interviews with stakeholders, manufacturers, and workers themselves suggest that a key barrier to more manufacturers maintaining fair labour practices were the pressures manufacturers themselves were under. For example, some workers we spoke with attributed their exploitative treatment to the demand for evermore speedily produced garments. Workers said owners pressured them to work faster because they too were also pressured and needed to squeeze as much output from them as possible to operate profitably.

One of the significant areas to arise was the squeezing of manufacturer costs by buyers. One manufacturer interviewee highlighted the need for training for buyers to understand the cost ceilings for manufacturers and that per unit prices cannot get cheaper when material prices are rising. A manufacturer needs to cover the cost of the piece produced, but buyers want to pay a price less than production cost. Seen in this light, the practice described by interviewees of manufacturers paying below minimum wage and workers subsidising this wage via benefits fraud suggests that what is sometimes being paid to suppliers is not a market price but a state-subsidised price.

*Manufacturer: "And when I say to them [buyers], "Okay, this is going to be £5, with my 10%, or £4.75 with my 5%", if the buyers turn round and say to me, "Well we're getting it for £3.75 from somebody else", they won't mention the supplier name, but they'll say, "Somebody else". Then it begs the question, how is that possible, because the cost of that is £4.50". (M002)*

Within this context, both operating in compliance - and demonstrating this - presents additional costs to Leicester manufacturers already operating at low margins. One manufacturer we spoke with pointed out that increases in costs from operating ethically were not offset by manufacturers' being able to rely on a longer-term commitment from brands. This interviewee pointed to the need for factories to be able to run at capacity and have longer-term commitments from customers. Auditing provided no assurances that brands would order on better conditions, nor guarantees their orders would repeat. In this sense, there was little certainty manufacturers would get a return on their investment worth the costs of implementing their ethical business models.

Anecdotal evidence corroborated this, as stakeholders on the ground suggested these measures resulted in little transformative change in manufacturing practices. Instead, they allowed already capital-rich manufacturers to demonstrate their already practiced compliance, whilst other offending manufacturers operated outside of them, and continued to work with brands who continued to order from them regardless of their compliance standards.



## 5. Workers' goals and priorities for change

We asked both survey respondents and interviewees about what they would like to change, and their priorities, both in relation to problems they had experienced at work, and for their wider lives. Workers described wanting improvements in their working conditions and in the enforcement of labour regulations and the representation they thought could ensure this.

However, they also spoke to us about wider priorities. These included the work opportunities they wanted for the future, and things that they thought would help them to have these opportunities. At the same time, workers with children also spoke to us about the futures they wanted for their children. In some of our conversations with these migrant workers, it was clear that a primary goal for them was ensuring that their children's work would be better than the negative experiences many of them had recounted.

### Stopping exploitation and improving working conditions

#### Better pay and working conditions

Unsurprisingly, as many workers described not being paid minimum wage, better pay was one of the main changes that workers said they wanted. The change most frequently mentioned by survey respondents was the minimum wage. There was also some dissatisfaction among some workers regarding not only the lack of pay rises in factories in general, but lack of pay in relation to their skills and experience. Interviewees talked about being paid according to their experience, highlighting that some workers deserved higher wages (FG5). Others said that whilst more experienced workers at their factory had been paid more, all workers were being underpaid (FG3).

Workers also told us their priorities were not only pay, but working conditions such as hygiene, work intensity, and how they were treated in the workplace by supervisors and employers.

#### Better enforcement

Some workers asked for more government checks to be carried out on factories to ensure they comply with legislation. Some workers described the need for inspectors to be at the factories. Specific improvements in regulation and inspection suggested by participants included one interview highlighting the pivotal role of accountants, and more follow-up by HMRC from employers avoiding taxes and national insurance.

Stakeholders interviewed also asked for more enforcement actions. While they recognised the difficulties to gather intelligence and identifying severe forms of exploitation, few of them felt that more effort could be taken with the intelligence they receive from brands and other stakeholders. However, views were also raised on the difficulties and potential problematics of interpreting (and treating) a civil matter as a criminal offence:

*The moment that you have any indication that there is a modern slavery offence going on you immediately move from that being a civil matter to being potentially a criminal matter and all of a sudden you have a complication in your enforcement process because you have to be really careful that information that has been gained under a civil power is then used advertently or inadvertently in a criminal investigation. So it becomes very complicated very quickly because of one word in an intelligence report. And nine times out of ten or even 99 times out of 100 nothing will come of that so actually that forced work is just an expression used by the person providing the intelligence. In which case the resource you've committed certainly from the GLAA side wasn't proportionate at all in the end but how did you know. (S024)*

#### Support for worker voice

In our survey, what clearly came through was a need to be heard and understood, and not just ignored: "compassion and understanding from manager" (SR050), "having a union to go to" (SR053), "manager to listen to me" (SR054), "better support from boss" (SR055), "I want someone to understand my point of view" (SR063). However, interviewees and focus groups expressed a range of views on unions, with many doubting their feasibility, and others not knowing about them but being open to having more information.

Stakeholders also identified the need to provide workers with mechanisms to voice their concerns and problems. Disagreement was found among stakeholders regarding the suitability of unions to represent workers' voices. Concerns were raised around the lack of workers' and business owners' understanding of unions and willingness to be unionised. As one stakeholder reflected:

*I think there's two issues here. Firstly, the management are not keen on the unions going in, but I think also the workers are not really, you know, looking to be unionised. I think, you know, a lot of the workers are from Bangladesh, from India, and historically the unions in these regions are probably quite corrupt, and so the workers are not really looking for that route (S022)*

However, the main barrier identified by stakeholders for unions to succeed was unions not representing the workforce and the most vulnerable:

*the challenge for the trade union movement is that they do not offer - they do not have a coherent organising policy towards the most vulnerable in our society, and I go from undocumented workers, to those in unregulated industries, to predominantly migrant workers working in cleaning, in catering, in manufacturing, in agriculture, in waste processing, in construction (S012)*

Yet, the new initiative proposed by the Trade Union Congress (TUC), consisting of unions being recognised (and granted access to the workplace) by brands - rather than responding to membership demands, was viewed by many as promising in supporting workers. The potential of the initiative lies first in the reliance on outreach workers to support/complement the unions movement through the engagement of outreach workers with the workforce:

*I think that the unions have more work to do in convincing a worker to talk to them. I don't think workers really understand what a union is, what the benefits to them would be. I think there are additional barriers if the union representatives are not from the workers' own community. I think that's where the Highfields project would potentially have an advantage is that the people who have been appointed are from the area, they know the area, they're part of that community. I'm not saying it would be easy, but those are things that they have in their favour that would help the workers to maybe build up trust quicker than with somebody who might be a union representative. (S020)*

And second, in building workers' trust in unions and understanding of how they can benefit from them before being asked to pay a membership:

*What we're doing this time is saying before that membership is there, before people are paying in, if they say, "There is something wrong over here, can you come and sort it out?" we'll go and sort it out in the hope that after we've sorted it out, people will turn around and say, "Unions are doing this for us. They're the right thing, therefore we're going to join and we're going to have a union presence in this sector. (S026)*

### Providing workers, their families, and their communities with more opportunities

#### More and better work opportunities

Many workers talked about wanting to secure more or better work. Whilst this sometimes was simply about fixing existing issues at work, workers also talked about the need for a wider variety of job opportunities. Some participants emphasised the importance of encouraging a return of garment industry orders to Leicester in order to stimulate more work and greater choice for workers. In one focus group, participants expressed exasperation that more wasn't being done to manufacture in Britain, with workers remarking that they could be making the clothes here that were now being made abroad (FG2).

Some workers wanted to start their own garment businesses. For example, a younger worker told us they were applying to study at university and then wanted to go into business. Other workers wanted to start their own businesses specifically in the garment industry.

Female workers who needed flexible hours so they could both work and raise their families asked why the government couldn't set up such a factory. Survey respondents complained that employers don't accommodate their requests for time for children or other family commitments, whether it is because "I wanted break because I was pregnant" (SR061) or "I wanted holiday to go to India" (SR063) or "wanted to work 9am to 2pm for children" (SR064) or simply "wanted holiday but I never got it" (SR066).

Various survey respondents also reported the need for more working hours, often accompanied by the need for permanent work or more consistent hours.

### Access to information and advice

Many participants felt they would benefit from free confidential legal advice (FG3, FG5). Topics that were mentioned included immigration, benefits, and housing. Cost was currently a barrier to legal advice on immigration, with one individual (who had been resident in the UK for more than 20 years) finding charges for immigration advice an insurmountable hurdle to regularising his status. It was also important that advice should be from organisations that understood the community:

*It would be better if he [advisor] is from our community. Because we can't speak English properly. So if he's from our community then he can help us. Otherwise, we won't be able to make him understand our problem properly. (FG5)*

### Learning and skills

Workers requested a range of training. By far, the most common request was English language skills. This was mentioned by many interviewees, and was mentioned by 19 individuals in the survey's open question, and two others who referred to "education" in more generic terms. Participants also mentioned careers training, first aid training, childcare training and IT skills. It was important for courses to run at a range of times, and with childcare to facilitate attendance. In some cases, there was existing training in the community but it wasn't free.

In most cases, training was clearly linked to improving employment prospects. However, some requests for training such as first aid were described in relation to helping their families, and as discussed earlier in the report, workers described English language skills as helping them in their lives as a whole, as well as helping with work.

### Help for children, young people and communities

Many workers described their priorities as their children and wanting to do things to help their children to succeed in their education and later their careers. It was clear that for some parents accessing an English-speaking education had been a significant driver behind their wish to move to the UK, and support for education had a high priority: "We want to make our children's future beautiful" (FG5).

Multiple workers spoke about children who were already in university or aspirations to send children to university. An older worker talked about their daughter going to university; another said he was happy to continue working in a factory, and his goals were for his children to succeed and do a different job. As well as wanting to earn money to pay for children's tuition, when we talked to workers about courses or advice, they identified wanting things that would help their children and families:

*Interpreter: There are various kinds of advice. Particularly in which type of advice are you interested?*

*Worker1: How we can do better in our career.*

*Worker2: How we can secure our and our kids' future.*

*Worker3: We all are worried for our kids. How we can do better for them. We have been raised in our culture, but our kids are going to the school of this country. They are learning the culture of this country. How can we teach them our culture? (FG3)*

One focus group also mentioned the importance of advice and youth work for children and young people, due to concern about the influence of drugs and crime:

*We want that the crime rate should be reduced. Mainly we have come here for our children's future. We want to raise our children properly. But if they grow in crime then they cannot be good human beings. (FG5)*

Stakeholders also raised the need for more holistic support targeting different community vulnerabilities, commonly referring to training and courses to learn English, professional skills, and labour rights as necessary community-level interventions. Some of them referred to existing and previous work being undertaken in the community with the involvement of different agencies:

*I've been working closely with Leicester City Council and a number of NGOs and charities who are looking to engage and build relationships with workers in the garment sector to make them more aware of their rights, and to understand better the experiences that they've had working in the garment sector in Leicester (S001)*

*So I have been working really closely with partners like charitable organisations, some enforcement bodies but not on the enforcement side but on the awareness raising side, as well as local initiatives to get links with the hard to reach community. And that is the subject of non-compliance and exploitation within the textile industry in Leicester. And we have been looking at ways of reaching them, building trust with them, and finding initiatives that we could introduce and run for oppressed, for the people that would improve the lives and condition of those people affected by the textile non-compliance (S031)*

## Conclusions and recommendations: the limits of existing interventions and ongoing needs

The unique place and community characteristics of Leicester's garment and textile industry add complexity to any initiatives for labour market improvement and intervention. This research echoes previous studies which highlight economic and socio-cultural factors underpinning labour exploitation in Leicester, such as the highly gendered workforce, and limited English language skills of workers. These combine to compound workers' vulnerability to exploitation in a highly price-pressured industry.

In reflecting on the outcomes of this research with partners and stakeholders, we also encountered a widespread sense of powerlessness, fatigue, and frustration at the persistence of well-known and interlinked problems that seemed to remain entrenched despite the best efforts of individual agencies and actors. As one stakeholder put it "it seems to be bigger than anybody else, joined together, can manage or find a way through" (S020). Many of those that we spoke to had been attempting to address these issues beyond the scope of their responsibilities, despite limited resources, over more than a decade. It was also clear that progress on any of the areas outlined in the surveys and interviews was likely to be limited unless it was approached as part of a systemic change programme.

Stakeholder respondents to the study reflected upon Operation Tacit, seeing it as the galvanising moment when national enforcement agencies placed Leicester's textile industry as a top agenda priority. Respondents also reflected upon the efforts by agencies and stakeholders subsequently, in raising local awareness of reporting routes for worker abuse whistleblowing (Crimestoppers, 2020). These included a six-week campaign with Crimestoppers, and a four-week campaign run by Unseen, in conjunction with the local authority, which worked to signpost a 24-hour helpline available in more than 200 languages. It also provided a campaign video, social media content, and a material campaign used for community engagement (Unseen, 2021). These efforts were coupled with organisational capacity building within the local authority, and included training delivered by Hope for Justice to all front-line staff working in prevention, to inform their practices and understanding of the issues of the industry. To this end, some stakeholders recognised real improvement in their capacity and their understanding of the problems, but also highlighted the need to continue to promote reporting channels to workers to improve effective compliance efforts (S024, S026, S022, S032).

The efforts of the L-GWASP intervention also complement the findings of this report, and broadly attend well to the existing appetite of workers and stakeholders for providing better access to advice on rights through community outreach (S012, S017, S020, S022, S024, S026, S027), but it also importantly recognises the real socio-cultural disconnect workers have with unions, and places importance on the long term need to generate trust within the community before traditional models of union organising achieve effective buy-in (S001, S012, S020, S022, S024, S026, S027, S032).

In addition, the efforts of Leicester City Council and the Leicestershire Local Enterprise Partnership to generate decent work via initiatives such as the fashion technology academy (S032), complementing the importance worked on placed on continued work; and having options to leave exploiting factories, to find better work. However, there is a need to ensure that such interventions are placed on a long-term and sustainable footing.

In this context, investing in a refreshed long-term vision for local multi-stakeholder intervention appears more necessary than ever. Although some problems may take a generation to resolve, important progress can be made in the short and medium term through expanding initiatives that increase workers' economic autonomy, addressing the factors that prevent intervention in exploitation, and promoting fairer labour practices. The detailed areas for change underlying these challenges are set out in the tables above and the recommendations below. The focus here is on action that the Leicester Garment and Textile Workers Trust and partners can deliver at the local level. Nonetheless national-level government initiative, including sustained investment in Leicester's skills, enterprise and economic development, and the establishment of the Single Labour Market Enforcement Body – is also essential. The success of action moving forward will – most importantly – rely upon effective community engagement and productive partnership between business, government and regulatory sectors, the voluntary sector, and workers themselves, working together as trustful and long-term agents for change in Leicester's communities.

The purpose of this report was furthermore to identify and suggest a theory of change that could underpin a cohesive programme of future interventions, and the next and final section of this report addresses this in greater depth.

## Recommendations

1. Improve worker access to English language provision, both at work and in community settings, with sessions available at different times of the day to enable the attendance of part and full-time workers.
2. Provide a single 'front door' contact point for workers wishing to make a complaint to enforcement agencies and offer ongoing support and case management for those who raise issues. Link this unified contact to the Single Labour Market Enforcement Body, once established. Ensure that successful outcomes are communicated to raise levels of confidence.
3. Establish trusted support to advocate for workplace rights. This should engage with existing trades union initiatives but should also explore additional options for representation of worker voices, drawing on the experience of organisations that have experience in representing migrant workers.
4. Connect workers with sources of community-based legal advice and support, available in a range of community languages. This support should cover immigration, housing and welfare rights in addition to workplace rights.
5. Improve access to local educational services for workers and their families, particularly related to further education, and language support for younger children.
6. Connect workers with sources of employment support, training, information and advice to enable them to access different types of work.
7. Continue to engage closely with employers to create high-quality jobs that are accessible to a wide range of workers (including those with caring responsibilities or limited transport options).
8. Explore further ways to promote sustainable practices in businesses. This should include establishing forums for further dialogue with small manufacturers.
9. Establish locally-based multi-sector and multi-agency partnership arrangements to co-ordinate ongoing action and review progress against short, medium and long-term objectives.



## 6. Levers of change: Addressing drivers of exploitation

This section of the report outlines an initial Theory of Change for the prevention of labour exploitation within the Leicester garment industry. In other words, it identifies potential ways to influence the locality level factors discussed in this report – such as factors limiting workers' abilities to leave or report exploitative situations or encouraging manufacturers to seek to intensify work on the factory floor – that contribute to labour exploitation.

Although we identify, in the main, changes that local statutory, private sector, and voluntary actors can work to bring about, this is not meant to imply that broader structural factors should not be addressed – simply that they are not the focus of this report. For instance, the isolation of vulnerable migrant workers must be seen in the context not only of local support available, but also of wider public policy on the support for newcomers to access the social, educational, and employment opportunities needed to ensure their successful settlement, and the resources and powers that are or are not available to the city in which they have settled.

In the diagrams below, the light blue sections of charts refer to the drivers or enablers of exploitation discussed in section IV. The dark blue sections of the charts indicate identified changes that could contribute to addressing these factors.

### Connect and support: Increase worker access to sources of support in the community



Many of the reasons that workers described not feeling able to leave, or to challenge exploitative situations, or to secure decent work, relate to the isolation of workers outside their particular social group. Many workers described being in touch with a limited number of services, with limited trusted places they could turn when something went wrong. Addressing this will require changes in the capabilities of workers – most notably, in their English language skills. However, it also requires changes to how existing services and agencies work: there is a need for additional support such as information, advice, and guidance that will help workers, including newcomers, to navigate through local sources of help and services.

In relation to the workplace and labour abuses, two related changes might well contribute to enabling workers to report: trusted sources of advocacy support and increasing the channels of two-way communication between agencies and community members, so that people can easily access agencies, but also, so that agencies have multiple means of communicating with workers and other community members, helping dispel the belief that challenging exploitation will not change anything.

#### Local lever for change: Improve worker access to English language provision

A lack of sufficient English language skills has the effect of isolating workers from myriad different kinds of support: it hampers finding and being able to perform better jobs; seeking help for hardship; seeking help for labour exploitation; and accessing a host of services that would improve their lives and their employability. Although community groups seek – when funding is available – to offer advice and other services in community languages, better access to appropriate English language support would help enable workers to access the services that are available to other residents in Leicester. Prior research with migrant workers in the EU found that lack of knowledge of the country of work was one of the most important factors identified by workers themselves as enabling labour exploitation (FRA, 2019). When discussing ESOL (English as a second language provision), stakeholders mentioned a number of measures including: English courses that were funded so they were free to the worker; having English courses in factories as workers did not have time outside of work; and having English language instruction of sufficient duration to make a difference.

#### Local lever for change: Reduce vulnerability and isolation by connecting workers to community support services

Workers' accounts suggest that, in some cases, workers' experiences of financial precarity – and hence vulnerability – were exacerbated by lack of information on and links to agencies and services that could assist them, either directly with material support, or indirectly by enabling them to avoid unnecessary costs through greater awareness of their entitlements and available services. These factors point to interventions such as information, advice and guidance that can help workers to link to existing suitable support. Stakeholders suggested that community centres and other service hubs should carry out outreach and marketing to garment workers. Lessons could be learnt from effective community initiatives in locations with similar demographic characteristics which have similarly targeted social exclusion to empower communities, particularly women, to undertake activities for their own socio-cultural advancement.

## Case study: Community interventions to raise the quality of life for women and empower communities

Bury Asian Women's Centre (now Bury Active Women's Centre) provides an illustrative example. Established in 1996, the centre has a long running relationship with the community it serves. With a mission to raise the quality of life for all women regardless of backgrounds through education, employment, training, and volunteering, it provides wrap-around services which are both culturally sensitive and socially integrated (BAWC, 2022). It has been a recipient of National Lottery Community Funding for some time, receiving £499,892 as part of the Reaching Communities Grant Programme. This has funded a bi-phasal project, the first running from October 2010 to June 2011, and the second from January 2020 to February 2023, which has focused on improving the health, skills and wellbeing of Black Minority Ethnic (BME) women in Bury and Bolton. The first phase of the project worked on establishing an independent advice service which could advise on housing, welfare rights, legal support, healthcare, and domestic abuse. The second phase worked to expand this service, to provide English language courses and one-to-one support to aid employability and social inclusion. In 2015, reporting on the first phase of project, the Centre reported it had successfully reached more than 2,000 women, 1,200 of whom accessed advice, 200 received one-to-one support, and another 200 benefitted from group support sessions. In addition, more than 350 women became involved in broader social inclusion initiatives, such as cookery, health and exercise groups, 142 benefited from English language courses, whilst 75 accessed other forms of well-being courses (Thomson, 2022). This holistic provision resulted in high community engagement, and established trust within the community.

### Local lever for change: Providing a trusted source of support for workplace rights

No workers self-identified to us as union members or described involvement or interaction with a union. Despite this, some interviewees told us they were open to the idea of unionisation but told us they needed to know more about it or told us it would depend on characteristics of the union. Whilst some stakeholders told us that workers would not be interested in the idea of a union due to either fees or cultural or social identity differences (ethnicity and gender) between the workers and union organisers, some worker interviewees explained that they simply had no understanding or information about unions. Some interviewees, for instance, said it would depend on who the union leader was; others were interested in the idea of a union specifically for garment workers. Similarly, some stakeholders reported that there was no understanding amongst workers of trade unions' role, but also, that trade unions were not effectively representing vulnerable groups such as migrant workers. One stakeholder suggested, therefore, that there be education on unions for workers delivered by people with similar backgrounds.

Some stakeholders also said there was a need for training courses on workers' rights, with a couple mentioning the current trialling of a workers' rights qualification in Leicester. There were different views on how to increase worker knowledge of rights, with another stakeholder (S017) cautioning that trying to give workers large amounts of information on legal rights, rather than those pertaining just to their individual situation, could be confusing. Another stakeholder (FG7) argued that wider support for migrants to help them settle should include education on workers' rights:

*How many very big money, lump sum, to communities and to the local governments for the migrant communities resettling programmes, but is this money used wisely? That's number one, my challenge is. And if it is, then these people shouldn't be in exploitation... is anyone teaching, I mean teaching our children, even, in the school, that what is the wage slip...this is some sort of puzzle that needs to be connected from everywhere. So, if our child knows that there's a wage slip, there's importance of wage slip, he will go and tell his parents, or her, but that never even happens.*

There was some preference expressed in one focus group for having someone from their own community to offer support, if they could trust this help would be confidential: participants asked if they could go to a local community centre/association to report problems at work. This highlights the importance of trust in any worker representative or advocacy intervention, and the importance of the identities of those who administer it.

### Local lever for change: Provide single contact points and support to workers who report abuse

In the account below of a worker who successfully reports, where an outreach worker (the Hope for Justice worker) provided an ongoing relationship and support, it is notable that they describe 'nothing happened' (to their knowledge) until the contact with the outreach worker:

*My manager was taking money back (cashback) from my salary that was paid directly in my account by the factory owner. He used to manipulate and control us. Used to bring religious rituals in the factory which made us very happy, he used to say I am the man who is keeping you in these jobs. I am fulfilling your religious wishes in the factory. Bring some money back from your bank, so I can keep this factory going and it will secure your jobs. Altogether we were 20 women all from Gujarati speaking and Hindu background, working under his care. I never liked it that £ 270 were taken every month from the salary of £1200. I told my husband, he has spoken to my manager nothing happened, he then, wrote letters to MP, boohoo, the local councillor, GLAA, but nothing happened. He then contacted citizens' advice, they have referred us to Hope for Justice. HfJ supported us throughout the remediation period. (SR007)*

Further work should be undertaken to explore how community-based workers can help workers to navigate through the different statutory bodies to report abuses to, and who can also ensure that information flows both from workers to agencies, and vice versa. One stakeholder commented that reporting was relatively easy compared to what followed: that once a complaint was made, workers did not subsequently always get information on what has happened to their complaint, or the feedback is not given in a way they can understand; for example, taking into account limits on literacy.

When we spoke to stakeholders, they raised the need to build trust and connections within the community through individuals (e.g., community leaders, outreach workers) who have cultural awareness and understanding of people's experiences and situations. This was considered critical to access workers. However, workers' accounts would suggest that the benefit such individuals might offer is to ensure that workers had a single point of contact and source of information and feedback, rather than assisting in 'cultural awareness'. Most stakeholders we interviewed acknowledged the need to create referral networks and channels that workers and community members can have access to.

### Local lever for change: Increase joint working between statutory bodies, manufacturers, and community organisations

Whilst connecting workers to support should enable more worker reporting, local anti-exploitation strategies should not place heavy reliance on reporting by the victim. Victim surveys show that reporting of crime is consistently less than half of that which occurs, due to a range of factors, many of which are difficult to address. Increased cross-sector working between enforcement agencies, the private sector and communities should aim to support more intelligence sharing, so that enforcement can be better targeted, as there will always be insufficient resources for broad brush monitoring. Whilst change is expected with the Single Labour Market Enforcement Body, we are still at least two years away from its introduction (and we still do not know what its powers will be). An opportunity for local public/private/community partnership initiatives therefore exists.

Stakeholders suggested potential interventions in this vein, encouraging ongoing relationships and increased interaction amongst different groups of stakeholders. One suggestion was to organise regular intelligence sharing and referral meetings, involving different statutory, community and industry bodies, modelled along the lines of the MARAC (Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences) or MASH (Multi-agency Safeguarding Hubs) meetings that enable agency joint working to protect those at risk of domestic abuse. Such meetings share intelligence amongst organisations and identify actions that different agencies can take in response to particular cases. Related to this was another comment on the need for a specialised officer to deal with abuses. (FG6).

It was also suggested that as well as enforcement agencies penalising manufacturers, there should also be support or capacity-building for manufacturers, including a forum where they can raise concerns about buyer practices, awareness-raising, peer-to-peer mentorship, training, and supported improvement plans – the latter was described referencing what happens to health providers or schools following an inspection (FG6).

A final cautionary note is to be made, however, on strategies and initiatives to prevent exploitation. It is well understood both in practice and in the literature that measures taken to prevent transgressions can merely lead to their displacement. That is, when confronted with barriers to exploitation, those determined to continue wrongdoing will seek alternative means to exploit (whether through, for example, actual or phony sub-contracting, phoenixing, false accounting or other methods to conceal their illicit activities). As such, while shared intelligence may bring further responses to counter exploitation, it does tend to mean that the approach is largely reactive. Examining the intersectionality between exploitation and social, political and economic factors that lead to worker exploitation becomes vital.

### Build workers' employability



As discussed previously, workers described how their limited employability had in some cases contributed to their entry to (underpaid) garment factory work, and also, to their inability to exit or challenge exploitative situations. There is considerable evidence that both low skills and lack of qualifications are important predictors of both unemployment and poor employment (Devins et al. 2011).

A number of interviewees amongst both workers and stakeholders viewed the provision of skills development, including training, as enabling workers to have better employment options, enabling them to leave exploitative situations and secure good jobs. Moreover, providing learning and training opportunities would directly respond to the aspirations expressed by some workers for different types of training and skills development.

However, more work will need to be done to understand the particular nature of the skills gaps being experienced by garment workers, and what types of support and services, would best address these. For example, skills support in areas ranging from confidence building, business mentorship, and more advanced technical garment manufacturing skills were described by different participants in our study. A systematic review of employment training evaluations found that only around half of the evaluated training programmes contributed to positive employment outcomes for beneficiaries: the review authors emphasise the importance of appropriate programme design (What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth, 2016). A next step would therefore be to identify whether and what kinds of training will best help workers to gain skills and qualifications that boost their employability.

Moreover, if our focus is on preventing exploitation, it is important that attention is focussed not only on providing help for existing Leicester garment workers, but also on ensuring future members of the Leicester communities can access support that improves their employability in their new community. Providing wider assistance to the community as a whole would also directly address the aspirations expressed by workers for a better future for their children and young people.

### Local lever for change: Increase access to English and IT training

In addition to limiting workers' access to support and services in the community, the multiple ways in which the lack of English-language skills limited workers' employability – from limiting their ability to apply for jobs to their ability to train or even to drive – likely accounts in part for the priority given to it by workers. English-language provision should be recognised as an important component of improving employability not only in the workplace, but in being able to know about and apply for job opportunities. Similarly, workers talked about needing IT skills and access to IT, including email addresses, both to do better jobs but also to know about and apply for them (FG4).

### Local lever for change: Connect workers with support, information and advice on job search

Several stakeholders also thought there would be value in having employment advisers or job clubs situated in the community. As well as help for workers to find and apply for other work, one interviewee talked about the need to help workers understand more about work they might be able to do, including helping them to gain the confidence to move into work outside of what was familiar to them and their community (FG7). One local stakeholder described a 'place and support' approach they had used in other projects (FG6), where they assisted community members to find secure work, and once placed, maintaining contact with the employer and the worker for the first three months to ensure that the placement was going as expected. This is not the only initiative using such approaches: both existing and past programmes within Leicester and Leicestershire have provided assistance to disadvantaged residents to move into work and learning, with holistic support sometimes including working closely with local employers. (See, for example, the National Lottery Community Fund for evaluation reports of the Building Better Opportunities programme: <https://buildingbetteropportunities.org.uk/evaluation-findings>).

### Local lever for change: Improving access to local employment and education services

The low level of knowledge amongst some of the workers who participated in our study regarding local service organisations suggests a lack of awareness of or inability to access existing employment and education provision. One stakeholder suggested that despite money being spent on both local training and wider provision to integrate newcomers, this expenditure was nevertheless not giving community members the skills and knowledge they needed to resist exploitation (FG07). A Joseph Rowntree report exploring the different employment outcomes for ethnic groups between English localities, identifies a particularly acute disparity in outcomes for migrants, and tentative evidence that migrants' relatively poor knowledge of the labour market and educational systems may be a mediating factor in their poorer employment outcomes. It recommends that providers of educational and employment services act to reduce these differences in awareness and knowledge for specific local ethnic communities (Lalani, et al., 2014). As discussed previously, more than a tenth of households in Leicester East have no one who speaks English as their main language (compared with 4.4% in England, nationally), and 22.1 % hold no qualifications (compared to 7.7% nationally).

How local services might be improved in this respect will require further research. For example, partnership working has been deployed in other settings with a view to local provision better responding to the needs of migrant populations (Pero, 2017), but the existence of such initiatives is by no means evidence for their effectiveness and suitability. Local stakeholders should be involved in assessing and selecting interventions to increase the employment and educational support available to migrants. An example of public-private partnership in training, highlighted within the Leveson reports is given in the following case study:

### Case study: Improving access to training

The Leveson reports (2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d) suggest that the boohoo Group's Agenda for Change Programme has made progress in some of the intervention themes outlined in this report, and complement some stakeholder suggestions for intervention, such as working with community outreach (S027, S012, S026, S022) and supporting workplace training (S017). One of the ways they have done this is through working with suppliers and their workers to deliver an externally accredited pilot training programme. This intervention has been rolled out in partnership with KTL Training who specialise in garment worker NVQ accreditations, who have worked on a small scale, with five suppliers, each with six workers, to deliver an NVQ in Manufacturing Textile Products (Level 2) pilot. This training has been delivered free of charge to suppliers, and after positive feedback is being rolled out to new workers, although it is too early to assess its impact. The Leveson Report for September (2021) provides updates on the substantial plans to establish a model factory on Thurmaston Lane, (now open) which is used for benchmarking, training, and sharing best practice. The report also highlights broader promising ambitions for supplier engagement beyond monitoring and auditing, which express clear desire to centralise worker voice.

## Increase worker opportunities by increasing the supply of decent work



Many of our stakeholder interviewees pointed to the wider economic and public policy factors shaping and constraining the actions of buyers, manufacturers, and workers in Leicester – these are myriad, ranging from immigration policy to public investment in labour inspection to the dynamics of global supply chains. Whilst this wider environment will continue to shape or constrain the actions of buyers, manufacturers, and workers themselves, as we have described, the Leicester garment industry has distinctive characteristics, including a hyper price-sensitivity, operating in communities with higher-than-average unemployment. There thus remain opportunities to influence the local business environment.

Interventions of this type include expanding the employment opportunities available in these Leicester communities via job creation, and interventions specifically aimed at exploring measures to change the cost-benefit equations of fair labour practices for manufacturers, based on worker and stakeholder accounts.

### Lever of change: expanding worker opportunities by (re)constructing jobs alongside building employability

When considering how to expand the opportunities available for workers, one obvious lever is to build people's employability, with initiatives such as training in English language skills and basic work skills such as IT skills. However, there have also been, both in the Leicester and Leicestershire area, and further afield, projects that aim at intervening in the labour market by, for instance, putting employers in touch with vulnerable people who are seeking work, as well as seeking to change what jobs are available to vulnerable workers by working with potential employers on issues such as transportation to the worksite.

There is a growing body of learning on how to engage local employers so as to broaden the employment opportunities for different vulnerable groups (see, for example, reports on this from the National Lottery Community Fund's Building Better Opportunities initiative [Employer-Engagement-Learning-Paper.pdf \(tnlcommunityfund.org.uk\)](#)). Local stakeholders should consider piloting appropriate support in this area for garment workers' communities.

## Case study: Expanding worker opportunities

Building Better Opportunities (BBO), a match-funded scheme by the National Lottery Community Fund and the European Social Fund, provides another illustrative example, of a national scheme which funds community-based labour market intervention. Funding projects between 2014-2020, BBO has supported projects administered at regional and local levels, to tackle the root causes of poverty and social exclusion. This intervention work aims to provide locally inflected administration and engagement, which drives local growth and labour market improvement (TNLCF, 2022). Its roll out within Leicester and Leicestershire, defined by the scheme as the geographical remit of the local enterprise partnership (LEEP), has focused on holistic inclusion, promoting active social inclusion and combatting poverty. As part of this, supported projects have worked to promote early holistic and integrated community-based working and activities. The remit of the scheme suggested by the local BBO tender document (TNLCF, 2016) included work on improving the provision of basic skills and ESOL training, pre-work programmes, and supporting networks and groups to access learning and job clubs. Those most at risk of social exclusion were listed as the schemes target participants, including BME communities, those with caring responsibilities, women who are returning to the labour market, and those with English language needs. Brighter Futures is just one example of funded initiative, which commissioned community partners to work with people over 16 to provide free assistance to access education and training. This included helping candidates with CV writing and job searching and preparing them for interviews (Emmaus, 2019, BYCS, 2020).

Another scheme is 'Work. Live. Leicestershire' (WiLL). Run centrally through the charity Vista, and working through specialist community partners, it offers accessible advice on work and training for those in rural locations across Leicestershire. It works through a networked rural-based support service, to deliver one-to-one support by a nominated key worker. The key worker personalises participant support to help them overcome the various circumstances limiting their employability (WiLL, 2022). The scheme not only assists participants with locating work and training, but also addresses the underlying issues to labour market exclusion, and supports participants overcome unique barriers, such as transport and childcare access.

Whilst the rural nature of WiLL clearly does not provide a directly transferable rubric of intervention for Leicester's textile and garment industry, the operationalised model of intervention is insightful. It helps participants engage within a regional labour market with structural challenges, but tailors participant support to meet individual needs and challenges. The success of this model is reflected in the reported progress made by WiLL's participants: in addition to participants moving into work or training, significant numbers of participants reported improvements to their health and wellbeing, their life stability, and their confidence, motivation, and aspirations. The programme provides an illustrative model of the importance of approaching labour market improvement through strong assessments of the underlying needs of participants, and the importance of keyworkers in improving participant wellbeing, engagement, and success navigating the programme (WiLL, 2019), which was identified as important by stakeholders to support workers (S017).

Additionally, there are efforts to broaden the employment options open to garment workers, both here and abroad, so that different choices are open to them, and they have more control over their working circumstances. Below we provide a case study of another type of initiative used to expand the employment options open to workers – worker cooperatives. Several of the workers interviewed also expressed the wish to start their own businesses, including garment businesses within Leicester.

## Case Study: Cooperative ownership structures

Cooperatives have been described by the International Labour Organisation as key organisations which promote and strengthen decent work. As 'autonomous associations of persons united voluntarily to meet common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise', they can play a key role in the social and economic inclusion of marginalised and vulnerable populations. Cooperatives also have a proven track record of being catalysts for women's empowerment, not only because they provide women opportunity to improve their labour market condition, but also because they facilitate access to and provide services which complement and support their continued market access, such as running childcare services and educational support for their children (ILO, 2019).

Apparel producing cooperatives have particularly made advances towards more equitable, decent work within developing countries. This is evidenced in the formation of cooperatives by home-based workers, who have benefited from greater economies of scale aiding the access of financing and better piece-rates, and have productively contributed to the formalisation of their work, pooling resources and establishing clear standards of their own terms of employment (Jhabvala & Tate, 1996) (WIEGO, 2022). As an example, the Minh Dhuontg Textile Cooperative, which was supported by a small loan, has improved the standard of living amongst its members, who have grown from 10 workers to 25 members, and 35 part-time workers in two years, providing members with a source of competitive but flexible work they can fit around other obligations, such as farming (COOP ICA-AP, 2014).

This model of workplace improvement has also been used by NGOs, supported by private investment. This can be evidenced by the Center for Development in Central America (JHC-CDCA) and their work in Nueva Vida, Nicaragua, supporting the establishment of Cooperativa Maquiladora Mujeres de Nueva Vida (COMAMNUVI). Levering connections with a retailer, Maggie's Functional Organics, its contracts were given to workers in Nueva Vida on the proviso they produced through a cooperative model. They were supported by the NGO with a loan to do so establishing an unprecedented prototype of fair trade and cooperative garment production, extendable to other communities. Although successful, studies of it also identify important capacity issues, with workers not having developed the competencies to effectively manage the cooperative on their own. This suggests that any such intervention must consider the longevity of their support, and suggests need not only to commit financial resource to set it up, but also longer-term capacity building (see Ellersick, 2009).

Worker cooperatives are also increasingly recognised as a means of maintaining the productive capacity of sourcing locations hit by economic crises. Faced with economic pressures, viable businesses which lack liquidity often are forced to close. In taking over these bankrupted businesses and converting them into viable cooperatives, workers have been able to pool resource and recapitalise failing workplaces. They achieve relatively high survival rates, labour forces which work better, smarter, and more productively than is the case in conventional businesses, and they achieve more stable employment (Perotin, 2018)

'Adopting a manufacturers collective model, one initiative, Community Clothing in the UK, provides evidence of a cooperative's workability. In 2016, it launched its manufacturers' collective as social enterprise offering a 'new form of co-operative' that exists to sustain and create jobs and skills' (Carlson, 2016). Working with approximately 19 factories from across a diverse range of British textile making communities, by 2018, it was able to claim it had created over 12,849 hours of skilled work'.

Whilst external organisations like charities and trade unions can accompany and assist workers in the development of cooperatives, for sustained success, the drive must come from the workers themselves (ILO, 2014). Despite their evidenced effectiveness in improving the wellbeing and livelihoods of producers and workers, cooperatives remain marginal within garment supply chains (ILO). ILO research suggests their further integration is now reliant upon establishing commercial linkages with other businesses in traditional supply chains, such as large brands.

### Level of change: Explore ways to ensure manufacturer return on investment in ethical practices

Discussions with stakeholders and manufacturers serve to highlight the potential for exploring measures to both decrease costs of audit measures and safeguard the margins of ethical factories.

**Changing buying practices.** Interviewees suggested the need for creating an anonymous reporting mechanism for manufacturers (to report pressures for lowering costs). Some also referred to the need for an ethical manufacturers' group, given the limited power and voice manufacturers have over brands and buyers. Others highlighted the need for a joint brands' agreement on minimum prices and standards to enable brands to change buying practices. It was mentioned that factory owners would not work with brands that require high standards as long as other brands do not ask for them.

**Reducing the cost of audit to manufacturers.** In taking orders from multiple brands, manufacturers work to multiple grade rules, order specifications, workbooks and compliance measures (MIB, 2019). Audit and improvement initiatives like Fast Forward provide training, guidance and resources to strengthen practices within this space (Fast Forward, 2022). Whilst many brands use this scheme to audit and assure their supplier practices, informal discussions with stakeholders highlighted frustration that audits could only be commissioned by Fast Forward brands, and in order to be audited to these standards, suppliers must sign up to the Fast Forward Supplier Engagement Programme, at the cost of £285+VAT (Fast Forward, 2022).

Technological solutions aimed at addressing issues of speed and fostering greater production transparency were known and implemented by some stakeholders. Online systems such as Galaxius document the journey of the garment in real time as it moves through the factory. Systems like this enable greater monitoring of the quality of output and afford greater transparency around worker performance and performance related pay. In their successful implementation, these systems were shown to incentivise speedy production through the earning of bonus payments for efficiency, but penalised poor-quality production by deducting accrued bonuses (Fashion Capital, 2022). This system enabled speedy production to be rewarded, without jeopardizing product quality or compromising minimum wages. There was anecdotal evidence that some manufacturers had an appetite for exploring these solutions but had questions regarding the feasibility, including concerns about their potential costs on already low margined businesses, and the infrastructural demands they would place on businesses already operating with poor quality infrastructure.



## Selecting and prioritising interventions

### Stakeholder priorities for action

Four final focus groups were held with stakeholders and community partners to consider the factors contributing to labour exploitation, and what interventions should be prioritised. Discussions with participants identified a number of common criteria for preferring particular interventions:

- Some stakeholders prioritised services or activities that would build the capabilities of workers to then use other services or opportunities. These included English-language and IT skills, as well as training that boosted workers' confidence. English language skills were commonly described by workers and stakeholders as enabling – or hindering – workers to do many other things.
- Activities or actions to make workers aware of or help them access existing services were a priority. For example, marketing existing services in places in the community where workers went, e.g. community centres, takeaways, places of worship, parks, and surgeries. Services themselves also needed to be situated in the community, in places workers could reach. This included in factories themselves: both some workers and some stakeholders described workers as unable to use services delivered outside of the workplace due to time constraints. In a similar vein, some mentioned the need for support to be culturally accessible; that is, delivered by people with similar lived experiences to that of workers, including support for women being delivered by women.
- As well as identifying additional activities or services, stakeholders also discussed the need to change organisations' existing ways of working, as existing policies or approaches deterred workers from seeking help or accessing opportunities. For instance, one comment on enabling workers to report pointed to the need for enforcement bodies to treat the worker as a victim, rather than as someone breaking the rules. Another suggestion was for compliant factories to consider job share arrangements, so as to enable workers with caring responsibilities to have access to these jobs.

- The need for improving the local partnership between different stakeholders was described a number of times. This applied both to improving local multi-stakeholder engagement to drive forward co-ordinated action, and to connecting different sectors more effectively around specific actions, for example, enforcement agencies working with an employer over a period of time to support them to improve, similar to inspection regimes for health or education. The stakeholder workshops also pointed to some new potential areas for partnership action, for example working with accountancy professional bodies to improve standards of accounting in smaller businesses. There may also be an opportunity to work more closely with banks and financial services to understand whether there are opportunities to track illicit cash-flows associated with observed phenomena such as claw-back of wages, and de-normalise the use of cash within the sector. Whatever form partnership work takes in the future, it needs to be effectively resourced to ensure that joint action is well-coordinated and supported.

As a result of these discussions the following outline theory of change (see table overleaf) was discussed and agreed to be broadly representative of key points of strategy that could promote both medium and long-term changes. Although the theory requires further elaboration in terms of the precise actions commissioned to underpin each intervention, it is offered here as a framework for future joint action and monitoring of progress by stakeholders in Leicester. It is hoped that by building on past experience, this research, and pooling resources, joint action will enable a better future for workers in the garment industry, and the prosperity of the city as a whole.

## Summary theory of change: Table of proposed interventions, outputs and outcomes

Interventions	Expected outputs (proximate outcomes)	Intermediate outcomes	Longer term outcome
Appropriate, accessible English language support.	Improved English language skills.	Workers know how to access help in the community. Workers use support and services in the local community. Local conditions enable worker reporting.	<b>Workers have fewer barriers to economic autonomy. Local conditions encourage detection and prevention of abuses.</b>
Marketing and promotion of community services to workers. Provision of information and advice services to workers.	Workers receive information on available services and support.		
Education on unions. Education on workers' rights. Establishment of improved representation for migrant workers within union structures. Union organising. Community-based workers' advocacy service.	Workers have increased knowledge of how to exercise their rights, and confidence in doing so. Workers have a trusted source of support on workplace rights.		
'One-stop' shop or advocacy service for reporting workplace violations. Establish Single Labour Market Enforcement Body.	Workers have a single point of contact or designated office for workers to report labour abuses. Workers get feedback after they report abuse.	Increased intelligence-led enforcement. Increased preventative work. Decreased reliance on worker reporting.	<b>Local conditions encourage prevention and detection of abuses.</b>
Partnership working arrangements amongst statutory bodies, industry firms, wider partners such as financial sector, and the community sector e.g. interagency risk and referral meetings. Initiatives to provide more preventative support to firms, e.g. 'improvement plans', manufacturer education and training, professional standards.	Increased and more timely sharing of intelligence across agencies and sectors, and reporting to communities and the public to increase confidence. Manufacturers have increased awareness of compliance requirements. Manufacturers can access support to help them address compliance issues.		
Appropriate, accessible English language support. Increase access to training in IT skills, work related and job specific skills.	Workers have better English language skills. Workers have more basic and work-related skills.	Workers have the skills and information to find and secure good jobs (increased employability).	<b>Workers have decreased barriers to economic autonomy. Local conditions favour adoption and maintenance of fair labour practices.</b>
Job clubs and employment hubs based in the community. Employment schemes that provide placement and ongoing liaison with employers. Improving the access of garment workers, and their families and communities, to existing local employment and education services.	Workers receive support to secure a job. Workers receive support when entering the workplace. Local communities, including minorities and newcomers, have more equal access to support and services that improve their employment outcomes.		
Support to workers for social enterprises and business start-ups. Employers working with the community to construct more inclusive job opportunities and promote good practice e.g. flexible working/job share. Research into feasibility of schemes that decrease audit costs for small manufacturers and interventions into buying practices.	Increase in social firms and/or worker-run firms in Leicester garment industry. Increased number of factories offering family-friendly shifts, transportation, etc. Increased understanding of barriers to adoption of audit schemes. Increased information on feasibility of interventions targeted at buying practices.		
		There are more good job opportunities in the local garment industry. It is easier for manufacturers to adopt good practices. Pricing reflects costs of compliant/fair wage manufacturers.	<b>Local economic conditions favour adoption and maintenance of fair labour practices.</b>  <b>Big brands have sufficient confidence to return to Leicester.</b>

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