

IS MODERN SLAVERY INCREASING IN THE UK?

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Legal Briefings

Figures published by the UK National Crime Agency (the "**NCA**") reveal that there was a 35% increase in reported incidents of modern slavery and human trafficking in the UK in 2017. With [global estimates](#) indicating that approximately 16 million of the world's 40 million slaves are in situations of forced labour within the private sector, modern slavery should already be a key concern for businesses. These figures confirm that, in responding to modern slavery, businesses cannot overlook the risk that modern slavery might be taking place in parts of their business or supply chains that are wholly within the UK.

As part of its role to combat organised crime in the UK, the NCA keeps track of people identified as victims of modern slavery. Their latest annual [report](#) on the UK National Referral Mechanism ("**NRM**") Statistics for 2017 is a timely reminder that the UK is a key destination country for human traffickers. In total there were 116 countries of origin of victims of trafficking, with the significant majority of victims being Albanian, UK and Vietnamese nationals. Indeed the [Global Slavery Index 2016](#) ranks the United Kingdom as the 52nd most prevalent country (out of 167) for modern slavery and highlights a wide range of high-risk economic sectors in the UK, including agriculture, fishing, construction, manufacturing and domestic work sectors.

The NCA report warns that changes in the NRM recording methodology preclude direct comparison with previous years. However, it indicates that there was a potential 35% increase in referral of potential victims in 2017, with adult exploitation accounting for 59% of victims and children 41%.

In light of the above, it is important for businesses in the UK to be aware of the risks in their business and supply chains and to ensure all relevant procedures and policies are put in place to respond to those risks. Indeed, businesses do not just have a moral duty to combat modern slavery via internal mechanisms, they are also under increasing legal obligations to do so.

In particular, the UK Modern Slavery Act 2015 imposes an obligation on organisations with business presence in the UK and annual global turnover exceeding £36 million per year to produce [a slavery and human trafficking statement](#). The statement should cover, inter alia, the organisation's supply chains and its due diligence procedures that are intended to identify risks of forced labour. In addition, certain categories of companies must include information about policies put in place in order to protect human rights to the [annual strategic report](#) required under Companies Act 2006.

Consistent with its [UN Guiding Principles](#) responsibility to respect human rights, the starting point for a business is to embed the respect for human rights at its core. It is important to ensure transparency throughout the supply chain and establish effective due diligence procedures allowing early identification of forced labour or trafficked workers. A human-rights based approach is not optional and is not a cost to the business. Rather, it can help to build a sustainable business that can benefit from increasing financial, commercial and legal opportunities.

KEY CONTACTS

If you have any questions, or would like to know how this might affect your business, phone, or email these key contacts.



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