

# MODERN SLAVERY

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## Closer than you think, but what can you do?



In 2014, the Home Office launched a high-profile campaign to raise awareness about modern slavery. The slogan "modern slavery is closer than you think" appeared on posters and television adverts. The message was clear: these terrible things are happening right here in the UK, today.

What reactions did the campaign provoke? Surprise? Horror? Disbelief? Many retail and consumer businesses knew that issues existed in their supply chains overseas and – to a greater or lesser extent – were taking steps to tackle them, but were perhaps unaware of the extent of the problem in the UK.

### Case study

We were told of a recent case involving a UK agri food business. The business hires significant numbers of unskilled labour to work in its operations, and believed that it was generally operating within best practice when it came to the conditions in which the workers lived and worked. However, it became apparent that during routine drugs testing at one particular site, workers from a certain community grouping were not coming forward to be tested as required, with a variety of reasons being given.

Quite rightly, this raised alarm bells. A reluctance to interact with those in authority can indicate that an individual is fearful of the consequences of speaking out. Realising that there may be deeper problems, at this point the company brought in a team from investigations company Kroll, led by managing director Benedict Hamilton, to investigate further.

Initially, the investigators discreetly met with members of the community but it was difficult to get a clear picture. When asked about conditions, individuals gave inconsistent and incomplete answers. The investigators heard reports of extortionate rents, passports being withheld, poor living conditions, and activity by unlicensed gangmasters.

Next the investigators gathered intelligence and analysed company data and records. They interviewed local management, some of whom withheld key information and provided false accounts. The signs pointed to exploitation. A breakthrough came after the investigators identified and began working with the de facto community leaders. Their detailed and verifiable accounts proved vital in determining whether serious wrongdoing had taken place. It emerged that site managers were subverting the induction process. They were housing workers, mostly in multi-occupancy dwellings, but did not provide workers with information about their tenancy rights, or the living standards they were entitled to expect. The local management had failed to communicate adequately with the community, and did nothing to address the significant language barrier. These failings created an environment of fear and confusion, poor work relations, absenteeism and high levels of staff turnover.

Ultimately, although no slavery or trafficking offences were proven to be taking place, the company took disciplinary action against some of the site management team. Following the investigation, the company conducted an extensive outreach programme with the whole workforce at the site, and implemented new policies and procedures across their organisation.

## What can we learn?

Large businesses are now familiar with the requirement (set out in the Modern Slavery Act 2015) to publish an annual statement setting out the steps they have taken to ensure that modern slavery and human trafficking are not taking place in their business or supply chains. However, how can they assess the success of the measures they have taken and tackle any issues that they find?

### A few themes have emerged:

**Indicators:** as the Home Office campaign pointed out, these problems are often hidden from view. Companies need to know how to identify the facts which could indicate that they may have a problem. These may not be obvious, and include, for example: more than one worker having the same bank details, individuals who appear to have few personal possessions, and individuals who appear unwilling to engage with other workers.

**Putting policy into practice:** the "paper" stage of compliance is important (for example, putting in place written policies and robust contract terms). But policies alone do not stop problems occurring. Senior managers need to have a handle on the day-to-day reality for the company's workers and suppliers to ensure that the business is meeting the standards it has set itself, and adjust policies and procedures as the business and its workforce evolves.

**Holistic approach:** businesses will need to draw on all parts of the business in order to investigate any suspicious activity. Practical concerns include ensuring that HR and finance records are well-maintained and easily accessible, and that the company has the ability to access managers' emails and phone records. Similarly, businesses should ensure that they have audit rights in their contracts with suppliers to enable them to investigate or call for information which could identify the kind of indicators mentioned earlier.

**Values:** whilst all business must comply with the law, strong values are important in shaping a company's strategy and policies on things like labour standards. Also, it is important for those values to be communicated and regularly reinforced to the whole business from the top to the bottom.

## Who to contact

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