

Modern slavery - your risks and duties as the next deadline approaches

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The number of recorded victims of modern slavery in the UK last year jumped by 40 percent compared to the previous 12 months. The Home Office considers that there are in excess of 10,000 potential victims of modern slavery in this country. In the last three years, the number of reports of modern slavery made to the Metropolitan Police increased by 242 percent. One in eight NHS professionals have been in contact with a patient they knew or suspected to be a victim of modern slavery.

Modern slavery is the term used to encapsulate the crimes of slavery, servitude, forced or compulsory labour and human trafficking. The Modern Slavery Act 2015 (the 'Act') is the first of its kind in Europe, and one of the first in the world, to specifically tackle modern slavery.

The Act requires in scope organisations to publish a slavery and human trafficking statement, approved by the board and signed by a director, within six months' of each financial year end and to publish it on its website with a link in a prominent place on the homepage.

The statement should include various pieces of information and set out the steps the organisation has taken in the past year to ensure that modern slavery is not taking place in the organisation itself or in its supply chains regardless of where they are located.

Any organisation, in the public or private sector, in any part of a group structure will be required to comply if they:

- are a body corporate or a partnership, wherever incorporated/formed
- supply goods or services in the UK
- have a total annual turnover of at least £36m.

Turnover includes that of any subsidiary regardless of where they are based.

It remains to be seen whether compliance will improve as the second tranche of statements are due to be published by 30 June 2017.

The Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner is on the record as being less than impressed with the low number of statements published to date and with the quality of most of them. A tick box approach is not good enough.

Looking at your organisation and its supply chains objectively and showing you took a proportionate due diligence approach to combating modern slavery is key.

Unless compliance improves significantly the government is almost certain to start publically naming and shaming non-compliant organisations in order to encourage the rest. The practice is perceived as being effective (and is inexpensive) in relation to employers who paid below the National Minimum Wage.

Protecting your organisation by complying with laws introduced to combat such heinous crimes and breaches of human rights is highly recommended.

Author

Raymond Silverstein
Partner

raymond.silverstein@brownejacobson.com

+44 (0)207 337 1021