

If you've been listening to the Make it British podcast over the last few weeks you'll have heard my thoughts on why we should be making Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in the UK.

Since the start of the coronavirus outbreak there has been reports of a national shortage of the PPE that front line healthcare workers need.

Many UK manufacturers have very kindly been making gowns, scrubs and masks and donating them to local hospitals, but this was never a long term solution. UK textile manufacturers needed to be paid in order to make it sustainable for the long term.

It was ludicrous, but inevitable, that the UK got itself in this situation in the first place. Years of procuring PPE for the cheapest possible price had led to virtually all of this vital life-saving kit being bought from overseas, mostly from China.

When the pandemic broke out every single country in the world was then looking for the same equipment, leading to a global shortage and a chance to look closer to home to see who could solve the problem.

Over the last 10 weeks I've been speaking to manufacturers, fabric mills and the government, and trying to help find solutions. It's been a slow, and at times, very frustrating journey.

A lack of understanding of the UK textile industry landscape by those who were handling the project at first meant that completely the wrong companies were approached from the 14,500 offers that they received for help.

Unlike other UK manufacturing industries, such as the car industry, the textile industry in the UK is made up of thousands of small and micro businesses. There is no Rolls Royce or Land Rover equivalent when it comes to clothing factories in Britain. Not any more. But there are thousands of little ones.

Burberry is one well-known brand name that does have a factory here, but it houses just a few hundred workers, not thousands.

So the solution to getting the PPE made in the UK was always going to be a Dunkirk-style rescue mission involving little ships rather than big ones. And to be able to do that they needed to understand where all of those small ships were moored.

I've been mapping out the UK textile industry landscape for the last 12 years now. It's been my passion project ever since I left my corporate career as a fashion buyer. I knew that we were becoming too reliant on China for manufacturing and wanted to ensure that there was a future for manufacturing in the UK because I had a feeling that one day we would need it.

With my knowledge of the UK textile industry I knew we had the capabilities in the UK to solve the nations shortage of PPE. I even wrote an email to Boris Johnson and Matt Hancock entitled 'A Local Manufacturing Solution to the PPE Shortage' - I never got a reply from either of them.

[And if you want to read the document that I sent them on 28th March when I was fired up and furious about why they were ignoring the UK textile manufacturers then you can find it here]

Two months later the _____

The disposable gowns will be made using a non-woven fabric manufactured in Scotland by a company called Don & Low and they will be cut and sewn at factories across the UK.

Could this all have come a lot sooner? Yes it certainly could have. But at least the manufacturers are now being paid for the PPE that they are making.

Whilst orders are now coming through for PPE made in the UK these only cover the next few months. What is the long term solution?

There needs to be a commitment to manufacture PPE in the UK, and disposable products, that are made and then discarded in their billions, are not a sustainable long term option.

Gowns can be manufactured from woven fabrics, made by textile firms such as Toray Textiles in Nottinghamshire and Heathcoat Fabrics in Devon, and then laundered and reused.

For every one hundred disposable gowns there needs to be just one or two reusable ones, and the UK easily has the capacity to make all of the gowns that our hospitals would need.

If there is one good thing that has come out of this awful pandemic, it is that we will come out of it with less reliance on China for manufacturing.

If that is the case then my mission over the last twelve years will finally be coming to fruition.