

A LOCAL MANUFACTURING SOLUTION TO THE PPE SHORTAGE

Overview

There is a worldwide shortage of PPE equipment and the UK is rapidly running out of this equipment.

Doctors and nurses are turning to the press, local factories and organisations such as Make it British to explain their plight and to try and procure equipment directly from manufacturers as they have lost faith in the NHS delivering it to them fast enough through existing channels.

UK manufacturers are keen to help and are standing by ready and waiting to make these products but are not being given any clear instructions or orders.

We are wasting valuable time and action needs to be taken now to mobilise a local supply chain to manufacture and distribute these products.

The following document outlines the current situation based on the research of Make it British conducted during week commencing 23rd March 2020 along with an action plan for a PPE sourcing strategy using our UK textile manufacturing base.

1. Traditional Procurement Routes

Currently the majority of PPE equipment, including FFP1 and FFP3 masks and their components, are manufactured overseas.

The UK government cannot continue to rely on overseas sources for this equipment for the following reasons:

1.1 Lead-times are long and will only get longer

1.2 Every other country in the world is looking for the same equipment and protecting their own interests

1.3 Prices are rising rapidly, e.g. melt-blown fabric for masks has increased 10 fold since the coronavirus outbreak began

We need to mobilise UK manufacturers, and re-tool where necessary, in order for the UK to be able to provide our doctors and nurses with the equipment that they will need over the coming months.

2. Understanding the UK textile manufacturing industry

The UK textile industry is made up of 1000s of micro-businesses. One of the biggest differences between textile manufacturers in the UK versus those in China is that very few of those in the UK are vertical e.g. they do not produce the entire product end-to-end onsite. Instead they are specialists in a particular area of the supply chain.

It is not possible to find one or two manufacturers that can provide all of the PPE equipment that the UK needs over the coming months unless they are importing it or sub-contracting it, and that in itself has issues (see point 3.2 below)

Instead we need to mobilise a collective of these micro businesses, each with a specific set of skills.

We also need to utilise the expertise within the UK textile industry to quickly develop innovative ideas and alternatives to existing mask designs using the capabilities and materials that we have in the UK. This is an opportunity for the UK to show to the world that it can lead the way on textile science and innovation.

The UK textile industry is ready and willing to help and manufacturers are standing by to make PPE equipment, but already we have lost 10 days. These delays will cost lives as equipment runs out.

3. Concerns raised by UK manufacturers

A government callout form was distributed week commencing 16th March and Make it British sent the link to this form to 1000 UK textile-related businesses.

Since then I have spoken to many of these businesses and the following concerns have been raised.

3.1 - UK manufacturers have completed the government callout form but have heard nothing back

3.2 - UK garment manufacturers have been approached by third parties who are sub-contracting the work to them. The price they are paying is not sustainable as they are expected to make it for the same price as an overseas factory whilst paying UK minimum wage, so they are making a loss.

3.3 - UK garment manufacturers are being contacted by representatives from their local hospitals who are begging them to provide whatever they can in terms of protective equipment, even if it is not to the correct specification on the basis that 'something is better than nothing'.

3.4 - Manufacturers are not being given details of the specifications of products that are needed so cannot begin work. Consequently, their factories are sitting empty.

4. Action Plan

Make it British recommends the following:

4.1 One point of contact in the government that can provide all of the information required and to whom information can be fed back. This needs to be someone who has in-depth knowledge of the UK textile industry and supply chain management experience.

4.2 Make available full specifications of each product required, including but not limited to:

- (I) Specification sheets including product dimensions
- (II) Digital patterns and size grades for garments
- (III) Fabric specifications including composition, weight, finishing and testing requirements
- (IV) Specifications for trims eg elastics

4.3 Distribute a much more detailed callout form based on the specification requirements for each PPE product required, breaking it down into fabric, finishing, cutting, sewing and distribution

4.4 Put a callout for innovative ideas for alternatives to the FFP3 mask that can meet the required safety guidelines and that do not rely on components sourced from overseas

4.5 Produce a plan for how much PPE of each type is realistically going to be required over the next 12 to 18 months so that it is known how many UK factories / machinists might be needed. Provide order guarantees to UK manufacturers so that they can have the confidence to plan production and resources required.

4.6 Provide funding to cover the cost of researching, developing and manufacturing PPE equipment in the UK ensuring that UK manufacturers are paid a fair price that is commensurate with a UK living wage. This is to include re-tooling where necessary. Make this funding available now without delay.

4.7 Make testing specifications open source and ensure that required certification does not slow down the supply chain and delay products getting to hospitals by streamlining the distribution process and making it fair to all.

4.8 Deliver locally made products directly to local hospitals in as short a time as possible

Summary

The UK textile industry has the knowledge and capability to address the shortage of PPE equipment, but we need to think outside of the box and harness the correct expertise in order to make this work. Generic management consultants lack the necessary expertise to find the right solutions in the industry.

Given supply issues, transportation times and a general lack of availability worldwide, relying on any part of the supply chain to come from overseas is neither a short or long term solution. it will lead to much bigger issues in supply shortages as the coronavirus situation develops.

Do not under-estimate the power of the UK textile industry to come together and make this happen. Give them the tools to do so now and you will reap the rewards in the long run.