



UK: Hand car washes need licensing to prevent ‘modern slavery’

Hand car washes should require licences to operate to prevent exploitation of workers and water pollution, Members of the British Parliament on the Environmental Audit Committee (EAC) are demanding.

In the last 15 years, the rapid growth of cheap hand car washes has led to a drop number of automatic car washes on petrol forecourts of more than 1,100 in the decade up to 2016. Hand car washes now make up 80% of UK car wash sector, competing on costs and convenience of access.

It is estimated that 10,000 to 20,000 hand car washes are operating in the UK but there is no accurate figures.

Car washes are one of the most commonly reported sites of labour exploitation according to the Modern Slavery Helpline, which recorded 194 cases concerning the treatment of workers in car washes in 2017, representing 27% of the total cases of labour exploitation.

“Hand car washes are a common sight in our towns and cities. Yet they hide the widespread exploitation of workers through illegally low pay, poor working conditions and in some cases, forced labour. This is unacceptable,” said EAC Chair Mary Creagh MP.

The Report reveals risks to water quality through waste water being allowed to flow into drains that discharge directly into water courses.

Key Recommendations by the EAC

- Government should trial a licensing scheme for hand car washes that brings together all of the major compliance requirements, including on environmental pollution, into a single, more easily enforceable, legal requirement
- Government should review whether the Modern Slavery Act 2015 could be updated to cover businesses as small as hand car washes
- The Environment Agency should work with immigration, tax recovery and GLAA enforcement to ensure that unannounced inspection of hand car washes are comprehensively investigated for a full range of potential regulatory breaches