

Fashion and coronavirus: ensuring a sustainable recovery

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This briefing is part of the RSA's series of short briefings on how to respond to the coronavirus now and build bridges to a better future as part of the recovery. For more information, see [here](#).

Key points:

- **Fashion is emblematic of the challenges and opportunities which we face in ensuring that the recovery from coronavirus creates an environmentally and socially sustainable future economy;** fewer than one in five (19 percent) of people believe that the industry should return to business as usual, and 50 percent think that industry should do whatever it takes to become more environmentally sustainable.
- **Forced changes to behaviour during lockdown are leading people to plan long-term changes to their fashion consumption;** with 35 percent of women stating that they intend to purchase fewer items of clothing in future.
- **People are concerned about the impact on workers within the fashion sector** and want to see more responsibility taken by industry to improve pay, conditions and job security (51 percent) and to help retrain workers (39 percent) where necessary.
- **Nearly half of the public want to see the fashion industry change its supply chains so that more is manufactured within the UK** (47 percent). The industry and government should investigate opportunities for reshoring this sector.
- **There is support for greater government regulation to improve environmental and social outcomes** (58 percent). Government should take action on several fronts by:
 - Creating a dedicated green resilience fund to support burgeoning circular economy innovation within clothing and textiles in order to enable greater regional resilience, to stimulate local demand and create high skilled local employment.
 - Ensuring that any job and training support programme announced by the government later this year supports growing circular economy jobs within fashion.
 - Incentivising waste reduction and improvements in design for durability and repair via an extended producer responsibility scheme, akin to the one being developed for packaging.
 - Exploring tax changes to incentivise greater repair and reuse within fashion, for example through reducing VAT on services which offer repairs.
- **And the fashion industry should respond by:**
 - Investing in developing business models and products which use safe and renewable materials, design for durability and repair, and help facilitate reuse and repair of clothing.
 - Signing up to the Sustainable Clothing Action Plan commitments.

- Upskilling marketing, advertising and journalism creatives on the environmental and social impacts of fashion in order to help the public to make more informed choices.

Introduction

Over the last few weeks, the RSA has set out ideas which provide essential responses to coronavirus in the immediate term and bridge to a positive future. These bridges to the future are essential for creating the longer-term systemic changes that are needed if we are to address the threats of climate change and inequality.

Our survey reveals a desire for an environmentally and socially sustainable future for fashion as we emerge from the crisis and demonstrates the commitment that citizens themselves intend to make to help bring it about.

As we emerge from the crisis, we must embed outcomes which are socially and environmentally sustainable

The fashion industry is a significant global industry, in terms of its economic might, its share of the international jobs market and its environmental impact. Its global supply chains and business models are emblematic of a form of capitalism which has driven GDP growth through externalising costs to society and the environment. In reaction to this, concerns amongst the public about poor labour practices, pollution, carbon emissions and waste production have been rising for years and there has been increasing pressure on the industry to undertake radical change.

On top of this, the Covid-19 pandemic has caused significant disruption to the fashion industry: global supply chains have been affected and lockdown has sharply reduced demand.

Our survey finds that only 19 percent of people feel that the industry should return to business as usual after this crisis. Instead, there is widespread support for industry to focus on improving social and environmental conditions. 69 percent agree that garment workers should receive better pay, conditions and job security and 50 percent believe that the industry should do whatever it takes to become more environmentally sustainable.

Covid-19 has necessarily created change within the industry. Government, industry and citizens should now act to ensure that as we emerge from this crisis bridges are built towards a long-term, socially and environmentally sustainable future for the fashion industry.

We find that 47 percent of people feel that the fashion industry should change its supply chains to manufacture more in the UK. The importance of responsive and flexible UK manufacturing capacity, not only within fashion, has become increasingly clear during the Covid-19 pandemic. Positive stories of manufacturers stepping in to produce hand sanitiser, scrubs and ventilators have been conversely met with stories of poor procurement practices from authorities and offers of help from local producers going unanswered.

Recent research from the RSA and partners, Cities of Making, highlights the role that light industry and manufacturing plays in creating inclusive, thriving, innovative and sustainable economies. As we emerge from this crisis government and business should focus on supporting the UK's manufacturing sector to embrace circular economy models which contribute to lower carbon emissions and improved resource use. Burgeoning businesses and employment in this area is likely to have been hit hard by the economic downturn caused by lockdown and it is critical that it receives support.

Citizens' desire for change must be supported by industry and government

The impacts of coronavirus and the lockdown have led to people purchasing fewer items of clothing than usual during this period (58 percent). As well as impacting their current behaviour our survey finds that this experience has led to people intending to change their consumption of clothing in the long-term (52 percent), including buying fewer items of clothing, repairing clothing, buying second-hand and buying better quality.

Indeed, half of respondents (50 percent) told us that during lockdown, activities including exercise, spending time outdoors, and hobbies such as reading have replaced the need to shop for clothing.

The fashion industry often cites the need for consumer behaviour to drive change within the sector. Clear intentions such as these from citizens, combined with their desire to see better quality production, more opportunities for repair and reuse (68 percent) and less pressure from advertising (62 percent) and social media (65 percent) to buy clothing, should be respected and enabled by industry and government. Around 83 percent agree that clothing should be designed to last longer and be repairable. The same percentage agree that fewer plastics should be used in clothing production.

Young people are increasingly conscious of sustainable fashion. Those between the ages of 18 and 24 (27 percent) are planning to support brands with strong social and environmental policies, and 35 percent of 18-24 year olds intend to buy fewer items of clothing after the lockdown has ended.

The fashion industry should respond to this by:

1. Developing circular economy models which ensure that they use safe, sustainable materials, design their garments for durability, and explore reuse and repair services to keep clothing in use for longer.
2. Signing up to the Sustainable Clothing Action Plan in order to act on industry wide commitments to improving their impact.
3. Upskilling across fashion marketing, advertising and journalism in order to better meet their responsibility to help inform and engage citizens on the impacts of fashion and to support them to make more informed choices.

In 2019 the government rejected all recommendations from the Environmental Audit Committee's Fixing Fashion report. But this survey demonstrates public support for greater regulation in order to achieve improved environmental and social impacts (58 percent).

The government should:

1. Create a dedicated green resilience fund as part of a major Beyond GDP stimulus package in the second half of 2020 to support burgeoning circular economy innovation within clothing and textiles, food and other sectors (including medical supplies) in order to enable greater regional resilience, to stimulate local demand (including from major local buyers such as hospitals, universities, colleges and local authorities) and create high skilled local employment.
2. Ensure that any job and training support programme announced by government later this year supports growing circular economy jobs, including a focus on clothing and textiles, along with food and other sectors, as an additional pillar of the GDP and beyond stimulus.

3. Incentivise waste reduction and design for durability and repair within fashion by introducing an extended producer responsibility scheme, akin to the one being developed for packaging.
4. Explore changes to tax in order to incentivise greater investment in, and take up of, repair and reuse of clothing, for example through reducing VAT on repair services.

Industry and government must take responsibility for impacts on jobs

The period of lockdown has already seen several high street fashion retailers going into administration. At the same time reports have highlighted the devastating impacts that cancellations and non-payments for orders placed by UK brands are having on communities in countries such as Bangladesh.

The industry is already known for poorly paid and insecure work. As a result of Covid-19 and the need to create a more environmentally sustainable industry, it looks likely that jobs in both the UK and further afield are likely to be significantly affected.

It is imperative that impacts on workers and communities are carefully considered and that industry and governments, who have benefitted from the labour, now take responsibility for ensuring a just transition for workforces.

Along with other sectors such as oil and gas, changes to jobs within the fashion industry are necessary, both to improve social conditions for workers and as a result of the sector necessarily becoming more environmentally sustainable.

Our survey finds that people agree that garment workers should receive better pay, conditions and job security in the future (69 percent) and believe that industry should take responsibility to help retrain those whose jobs are at risk (39 percent)

As an industry with a need for large labour forces, fashion is increasingly exploring responsible automation as a potential route to mitigating supply chain risks. However, we find that only 8 percent of people support the industry investing in automation in order to reduce the need for labour. As industry explores automation opportunities within supply chains it should therefore commit to responsible implementation and come with support and retraining packages for workers.

For the full polling data, see [here](#).

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Appendix I. Survey Methodology

Populus conducted an online sample of 2,125 16+ adults on the 27th to 28th April 2020. Data is weighted to be representative of the population of Great Britain. Targets for quotas and weights are taken from the National Readership Survey, a random probability F2F survey conducted annually with 34,000 adults. Populus is a founder member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules. For further information see <http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/>.