

TFG London: Strengthening supplier partnerships

Phase Eight, Whistles and Hobbs (premium womenswear brands, part of TFG London) worked with ETI between 2022 and 2024 to take significant initial steps to improve purchasing practices, reduce pressure on suppliers, and mitigate adverse impacts on workers.

Responsible Purchasing Practices

Research shows that short-term planning, last-minute changes in order specification or volume, inaccurate forecasting and late payments all have negative effects on the management of orders and financial stability of suppliers. This in turn can lead to heightened risks to workers including excessive overtime and lower wages.

Commercial pressures on both margins and time to market can result in last minute changes in volumes and design and oversampling, to meet customer demand and maximise sales. This case study explores how companies can overcome silos between the Sustainability/CSR and commercial teams by developing understanding, communication and joint decision-making across departments to facilitate the implementation of responsible purchasing practices and reduce adverse impacts on workers.

The Implementation Community

The Responsible Purchasing Practices Learning and Implementation Community ([LIC](#)) is a group of 36 garment brands from Europe and the UK, brought together by ETI, Ethical Trade Norway, Fair Wear, the German Partnership for Sustainable Textiles (PST) and Solidaridad¹. The Community had online meetings every two months for two years, exploring practical actions that can be taken to improve purchasing practices, structured according to the topics covered by the [Common Framework on Responsible Purchasing Practices](#)². Every other session also included break out group discussions with manufacturers. Both CSR/Sustainability and commercial/design team members have attended the sessions, to understand the likely risks and impacts of their purchasing practices in the supply chain, and to hear from manufacturers, experts, and other companies about practical changes that can be made. The MSIs followed up with their member companies between the meetings, to support with action planning and implementation. One of the companies that the ETI supported through this process was TFG London.

¹ The LIC was funded by the Initiative for Global Solidarity (IGS) implemented by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH (supported by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development) and the Sustainable Textile Initiative: Together for Change (STITCH) (supported by the Dutch Government).

² The [Common Framework on Responsible Purchasing Practices](#) was developed in 2022 by The [Ethical Trading Initiative](#), [Ethical Trade Norway](#), the [German Partnership for Sustainable Textiles \(PST\)](#) and [Fair Wear](#). The CFRPP is supported as the central reference point on purchasing practices in the garment industry by [ETI](#), [ET Norway](#), [Fair Wear](#), [PST](#), [Solidaridad](#), [Ethical Trade Denmark](#) and the [Fair Labor Association](#).

TFG London's involvement in the LIC

TFG London participated in the LIC, with a group attending each session from three of its womenswear brands, including CSR team, buyers and designers. They also had off-site cross-functional workshops for all three brands together, on each principle/topic to carry out the LIC exercises, embed learning, and brainstorm practical actions that could be taken. Hobbs has taken several practical steps to improve purchasing practices, which are outlined below, and Whistles and Phase Eight are seeking to learn from this and implement similar changes.

Internal cross-department communication and collaboration

Since the LIC, Hobbs has monthly meetings between their buyers across different product categories, to talk about their relationships with different suppliers. The topics of discussion include situations where there's an issue with sticking to the critical path, or if a supplier isn't getting the level of orders that were planned, how any negative impact on the supplier and workers can be minimised. The CSR team is involved in the six-monthly strategic review meetings and attend more of the regular supplier calls than before, so that communication is aligned.

Relationship with suppliers

Hobbs has also implemented a regular call with strategic suppliers every 2 weeks, a significant change, which has enabled a host of other positive changes. The call is fairly informal, with opportunities to openly raise any issues. Before the LIC this only happened occasionally but now occurs consistently. This saves a lot of time and emailing, enabling the supplier to explain the technical challenges and for a commercially suitable solution to be found, resulting in samples being approved the next day. Stevie-Lee Bird, Buying Manager at Hobbs feels that this is changing the power dynamic with the suppliers, so they don't just feel they always have to say yes, irrespective of the consequences.

Senior buyers across the three brands have also had face to face meetings with suppliers on trips to production countries in Asia, where they've talked about the importance of RPP. A head of technology was on a visit in China, discussing some quality issues with an order and understood that delayed approvals of lab dips from the buyers' side had contributed to the issues. This helped to raise the profile of RPP, ensuring that it's not about finding fault but about real listening and achieving desired aims together in equal partnership.

Through discussions with suppliers, TFG London identified production planning as the area where they could make the most positive impact with suppliers and give opportunity for improved outcomes for workers.

Production planning

- **Clear and collaborative critical path.** Before joining the LIC, Hobbs had a critical path template which was jointly completed with suppliers, but it was very complex and often not filled in correctly. They reviewed the process and asked suppliers for input. Together they developed a new template which is more user friendly and where both the supplier and the Hobbs teams input collaboratively. This means suppliers have clearer visibility, timelines that are genuinely collaboratively developed, and changes can be tracked more efficiently.
- **Pre-planning.** Pre-planning used to be shared with suppliers per season but is now done with merchandising on a more detailed level, earlier, to estimate units and options, per month and per style for key suppliers. The buyer and Product Director have a video call with the supplier to discuss any concerns with follow up calls where necessary. Every month, if there are significant changes, the plan is revised and shared with a follow up call. Feedback has been extremely positive from suppliers, especially small businesses, as it supports them to plan their capacity

effectively. It's also resulted in improved quality, because giving more notice means they get their products made on the premium lines with the best machinists.

- **Critical path adherence.** The critical path document now includes dates for approval deadlines and sign off, which means everyone involved can see if there was a delay and can find a shared solution. This facilitates shared responsibility, rather than pushing responsibility to the supplier, for example by Hobbs independently changing the production slots.
- **Reduced sampling.** Hobbs is now monitoring and tracking 'hit rate' (ratio of orders to samples), which is reviewed in the monthly meetings. Sampling is reducing as a result, which is good for suppliers but also more efficient for the brand and saves them time and money because suppliers can charge for samples not booked.
- **Left over fabric.** Senior buyers are meeting regularly with fabric managers to consolidate fabric buying within and across the three brands, which is reducing the amount of fabric that suppliers are left with un-used, which can be a significant financial burden.

“These changes in production planning couldn't have come at a better time. With worldwide issues with shipping times, Red Sea delays, and limited container availability, our new approach has been so helpful in providing clear visibility of what we can achieve in what timelines. We are now better positioned to manage these challenges, together with the suppliers.”

Stevie-Lee Bird, Buying Manager, Hobbs.

Enabling factors	Obstacles
Leadership buy-in	Market competition
ETI support	Shipping delays
LIC participation	

“Recently Hobbs has made improvements in planning ahead with their supply base. They now present us with a schedule six months in advance with monthly estimates, broken down into product types. This really helps the factories with planning and costing.

Unlike a lot of other brands, they are also really considerate and sensitive on sampling, with a clear understanding of hit rate. They are conscious of the impact of making changes on the manufacturer, trying hard not to cause difficulties and are open to suggestions for efficiencies. Even beyond the small changes they've made recently, Hobbs have always been an excellent customer in terms of having a true honest partnership – wanting to help the manufacturer practically and knowing that this will also benefit them in the long run.”

Howard Klepper, Business Head, PDS Tailoring Ltd, Morocco

Next steps

Moving forward TFG plan to:

Embed changes

- Working more as a group across brands, for example if volumes are lower than expected for one supplier, working as a group to give them better volumes.
- Holding an off-site meeting with all three brands- focused on the critical path and production planning improvements that Hobbs have made - so the other brands can learn and commit to a timeline for implementation.
- Revising policies, developing a '2-way Code of Conduct' (which also outlines TFG's commitments to its suppliers in terms of purchasing practices), reviewing incentives for suppliers, aligning the governance structure, and implementing ongoing internal training.

Take further actions on critical path and planning

- Identifying core colours in a library so that suppliers can have autonomy to self-approve on replicable colours e.g. navy. Also, pre-approving certain accessories for suppliers to choose from e.g. zips.

Review payment terms

- Bringing discussions on fair payment terms to the highest level of the business.
- Holding weekly meetings between senior buyers and finance to find solutions to any outstanding payments.
- Ensuring payment terms and T&Cs are consistent across the different brands, where they use the same suppliers.
- Discussing the potential for offering a supplier finance programme, to support suppliers in purchasing materials and paying labour where this is before payments are received for orders.
- Reviewing the length of their payment terms, aiming to reduce this, where possible.

TFG is committed to the ongoing journey of improving purchasing practices. With support from ETI and learning from the LIC, TFG are ensuring this new way of working is embedded and sustained. This work has forged an even greater sense of partnership with suppliers, realised in their day-to-day interactions with TFG's buying teams.