



Standards Without Borders

Executive Summary

Global ethical standards alignment for amplified impact:
textiles reuse, export assurance and EPR readiness

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Executive Summary

TRUST is the UK standard for traders in secondhand textiles and household products. It certifies 33 companies, supporting more than 4,000 UK jobs and covering much of the UK's textile exporting capacity. Its charity retail support is significant: signatories representing at least a third of the sector, and more than 3,000 shops.

This report summarises the work of the TRUST Sprint Group and sets out how TRUST should evolve in 2026 to remain credible, practical and policy-relevant in a changing reuse, export and Textiles Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) landscape.

- understanding TRUST's position relative to comparable international standards
- strengthening thinking on visibility across reuse and export chains
- evaluating TRUST as a quality-control, reporting and EPR-readiness mechanism

The central conclusion is that global reuse markets are under severe pressure, especially at the lower-value end. EPR can help by funding better collection, sorting, reuse, recycling and reporting, but it will only address the real risks if it is designed around existing reuse and export systems, includes destination-market evidence, and it recognises credible voluntary standards such as TRUST.

The Sprint Group drew on seven sprints between February and June 2026, including benchmarking conversations, a Belgium and Netherlands study tour, and comparison with international standards. The work drew direct input from **28 organisations and contributor groups** across the UK, Europe, Australia, Canada, Ghana and Kenya, including reuse networks, charities, PROs, recyclers, standards bodies, policy specialists, downstream market actors and sector associations.

Headline findings

1. **TRUST has a credible base.** It already provides independently audited ethical and operational standards for UK charity retailers supplying to certified traders.
2. **The wider assurance landscape is fragmented.** Comparable schemes overlap, but none yet offer complete end-to-end traceability.
3. **Market pressures and upstream quality are now central risks.** Rising volumes do not guarantee more reuse if average quality is falling, outlets for lower grades are weakening and usable goods have negative value at the point of collection. Some large European reuse operations already dispose of anything they cannot sell in local markets, others report that wearable goods values no longer cover the cost of handling, sorting and onward placement.

4. **Textiles EPR can support domestic reuse, but governance is variable.**
France and The Netherlands show that EPR can formalise reuse and recycling targets and create funding routes for domestic systems. But governance and inclusion remain uneven. Strong re-use sector engagement and voluntary standards (as in Flanders) build confidence, capacity, investment and innovation.
5. **EPR does not automatically solve export risk.** France and The Netherlands show that funding and reporting can improve system visibility, but downstream assurance can remain weak unless governance, reporting and market incentives explicitly address reuse quality and export suitability.
6. **There are practical, scalable examples to draw on in key end markets.**
Traceability pilots and collection and clean-up initiatives in Ghana show how destination markets can generate evidence on quality and residual burdens within graded goods, while demonstrating practical routes for remediation and livelihood support. Kenya adds a complementary example of how statutory EPR can connect PROs, recyclers, aggregators and informal-sector waste pickers in recovery networks.
7. **Goods circularity and footprint should sit alongside material circularity.**
Improved capture rates and recycling are important, but they should not become central metrics on their own. Textiles EPR should prioritise reuse, repair, and the avoided social and environmental footprint of keeping goods in use.
8. **Downstream feedback is the practical next frontier.** Bale-level checks, trader feedback, trusted buyer approaches and clearer destination categories offer realistic progress without over-claiming full traceability.
9. **International alignment is more useful than proliferation.** TRUST should help build a shared core standard for audit and accreditation, traceability, reporting and EPR recognition.

Priority actions for TRUST

Action	Purpose
Go deeper – sample goods and verify pre-sort/sort quality assurance	Strengthen export assurance by checking that goods, paperwork, pre-sorting controls and sorting outcomes match in practice.
Differentiate – build tiered assurance levels	Keep the baseline practical while rewarding stronger evidence, traceability and performance.

Go further – connect quality controls with downstream insight	Use destination-market feedback to improve grading, market fit and responsible export.
Be clearer – standardise reporting and communications	Improve data capture first, so reporting is more consistent, comparable and useful for EPR readiness, auditability and public confidence.
Go wider – build a shared core standard and mutual recognition	Phased stakeholder engagement plan with international partners, Producer Responsibility Organisations (PROs), policy makers and regulators to include full reuse chain in future systems, not retrofitted later.

Recommendations for governments, PROs and policymakers Textiles EPR should be designed to build responsible reuse systems, not simply to deliver producer compliance through a recycling and waste-management template.

- Prioritise prevention, reuse, repair and high-quality recycling across borders, rather than treating capture rates or material circularity as the only central metrics.
- Build in visibility from the start, including clear reporting on destinations, non-reuse outputs, reject rates and residual burdens.
- Involve charities, social enterprises, voluntary standard setters, aggregators, recyclers, market traders and informal-sector waste pickers in producer responsibility scheme design.
- Use funding to improve quality, traceability, destination-market evidence, remediation and livelihood protection where exported textiles create burdens.

Recommendations for charities, social enterprises, traders and the wider value chain Organisations that handle the goods and manage the waste, but do not usually set policy, should align around shared evidence and action:

- Align standards and assurance approaches, including quality-control metrics for traded products, destination-market feedback loops, bale testing and shared audit criteria.
- Improve data collection and visibility across the value chain to evidence destinations, quality, residual outputs and responsible handling.
- Use collective advocacy and active dialogue to ensure charity reuse, social value, export responsibility and downstream realities are recognised in take-back schemes, EPR design and international standards development.

Executive message

In the face of fragile markets and increasing scrutiny, standards and accountability become more relevant, not less. TRUST should be EPR-ready, not EPR-dependent: a voluntary pathfinder for sector standards, better evidence, export assurance and international alignment while policymakers design more inclusive textiles EPR. Further delivery should recognise TRUST member capacity and consider additional resourcing where sustained pilots, coordination or standards development are needed.

This summary is drawn from the full TRUST Sprint Group report, prepared with the generous input, time and expertise of the TRUST Sprint Group and wider contributors.



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