

Committee for Education

School Uniforms (Guidelines
and Allowances) Bill:
Oral Briefing by the Schoolwear Association

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The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I formally welcome Matthew Easter, who is the chairperson of the Schoolwear Association. We are very grateful to you for giving your time to the Committee. We apologise for the delay. We had an issue that we do not usually encounter, but perhaps it is just because of the timing of the meeting. We were not able to hit quorum today. Technically, it will be an informal briefing, but we hope that we will still be able to include the evidence in the Committee's final report and our deliberations in the Bill in the weeks ahead.

Again, thank you for your attendance. I am happy to hand over to you at this stage. You provided a written briefing, but I invite you to make any opening remarks or presentation that you wish to make. We will then move on to members' questions. It might be a shortened Q and A session, given the fact that we have reduced numbers at Committee this morning.

Mr Matthew Easter (Schoolwear Association): That is understood. Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to everybody this morning. I want to try to encapsulate as quickly and succinctly as I can my experience of what school uniform is, what it does, the benefits that schools get from having a sensible uniform policy, my understanding of the other considerations in relation to cost etc, and my personal experience.

I have been through several iterations of Government legislation on school uniform in England, Wales and Scotland. You may be aware that, particularly in England, the guidance, which is currently non-statutory in Northern Ireland, was taken from being non-statutory to statutory in 2021. I was very much involved in that process with the Department for Education and the Government at that time. I am also now involved in the part of the process of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which is going through Westminster at the moment. I have lived and breathed this issue. There are probably some really relevant things to talk to you about, such as what I see as potential pitfalls and challenges in the process, which might not be apparent on the surface. That is understandable, because you are not all living and breathing school uniforms every day.

First and foremost, to be clear, I run the Schoolwear Association. My role is voluntary. I have held it for the past five years. I also run a school uniform business called Trutex. We have business in Northern Ireland. We supply schools through retailers in Northern Ireland and have done so for many years. I understand the market. I am well aware of the balance of pressures on school uniform.

We are an industry of small businesses. We are not big corporates. There are no big corporates in our sector. Indeed, Northern Ireland has a lot of small businesses that support their local communities with year-round stock and that make sure that kids have uniforms throughout the year. That is a really important aspect, because those small businesses are quite integral to the high street. They also support schools and local communities.

Having said that, we have always taken a very clear stance on school uniform. We understand that school uniform should not be onerous. It should not be unacceptably complex or expensive for no reason. There should be a very sensible blend between the items that provide a uniform look and ensure that all the benefits of uniforms are upheld and those other items of clothing that can be bought across the high street etc and that give parents choice. Parents can choose to buy cheap items that, ultimately, do not last and need to be replaced more regularly or items that might be a little bit more expensive at a slightly higher cost but that last until the child outgrows them and can then be passed on. One of the key points that we have to consider is the fact that a school uniform is quite a unique

clothing item, because there are not many items that you will wear 195 days of the year, year in, year out. It does not need to be replaced until it is outgrown, and it does not change in design or style because it is uniform. There is, absolutely, a good reason to buy high-quality clothing that lasts and can be passed on. Indeed, that is the kind of school uniform that we, as a manufacturer, and similar companies in our trade make.

I appreciate that I have limited time. I will turn to the proposals and impart the experiences that I think will be useful to you. We absolutely agree that there should be a sensible policy. We feel that the current statutory school uniform guidance in England is broadly sensible. Schools have really looked at that and made sensible decisions on the back of it in the past few years; we have seen that process happen. The current English statutory guidance is, in practice, sensible, measured and balanced and has helped to make sure that school uniform is affordable for parents and, equally, does the job that it should do in the school environment.

I can see risks in putting a monetary cap on school uniform. The challenge is how and what to cap. The majority of school uniform items that are needed for school can be bought anywhere, so it is difficult to know how to cap that: what cost do you pitch, and what will happen to the cost of the garments each year? That is one thing that I urge you to consider.

I also urge you to consider the unforeseen consequences of restricting specific school uniform to a point at which parents can buy it from anywhere. On the surface, it looks as though it would save parents money to choose where they buy uniform — the supermarket or wherever — but we have seen the reality in England. On the basis of the current guidance, schools, for all the right reasons, made decisions to do that. Sports kit was a casualty that we repeatedly saw. Schools said, "We want to reduce the cost for parents" — hang on to the word "reduce" — "so we will say that children do not need a school sports kit any more and that parents can buy it anywhere". You would think that opening the market to competition would drive cost savings, but, in reality, in a number of such cases, parents were forced to buy branded sports kit for their kids. That creates a real inequality in schools between the haves and have-nots: the people who can afford it and the people who cannot. Fashion sports kits — Nike and Adidas-type garments, good as they are — are significantly more expensive than the school sports kit that they replaced.

We have seen almost a full-circle process in England whereby some schools that took out school sports kit, having thought that they were doing all the right things, reintroduced it two or so years later. They did not understand that, in reality, children are more aware of brands and influenced by external factors such as social media influencers. That puts pressure on and drives more inequality in the school environment. There is a real case for being measured and balanced in considering what schools can and cannot do. We are all in the same boat, saying "Do not make it overly expensive. Do not make it too onerous for parents", but there has to be a real balance, and it is important to strike the correct note. Do not think that opening the market and making it a free-for-all will save parents money, because it will not.

The other thing is that fashion garments and garments from supermarkets are not engineered in the same way as specialist school uniform items that have been designed over many years and built to last. Those are the items that get reused. There is, generally, an active second-hand market for uniform, even if it is just handing down uniform to siblings. If garments that are designed for schools were to be replaced with garments that are not, then that would not happen. Again, in England, as a result of the current guidance, we have seen that situation whereby there is not that replenishment. Of course, one of the benefits of school uniform is that it does not change, so it can be handed on. I will give a practical example. I have two girls. They are going through the same school, two and a half years apart. My youngest has not had any items of new uniform, because her sister has already worn them. If they did not have the same items of clothing — if they were not uniform — then you would end up re-buying stuff or buying stuff for both children, which is an ongoing cost.

School uniform is a multilayered subject and is far more nuanced than it appears on the surface. I am more than happy to provide further support and advice on the subject, based on my experience, so that the Assembly can make the right decisions that will manage all the stakeholders in the process.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you, Matthew. I appreciate your running through that. Your written briefing has also given us plenty to consider.

I will start with a question on branded items. You highlighted that issue in the context of England. Legislation is going through in England that looks to put a specific limit on branded items. The Committee is looking at that. The Department is not taking that forward through the Bill at this time,

although it is putting a power into the Bill that would allow it to do so at some point in the future, if it chooses to do so.

You seemed to suggest, leaving PE kit out of it, there would not be any major issue for the school uniform itself if the number of branded items were to be capped at a certain level — when I say branded, I mean something that bears the school logo, rather than a manufacturer brand; that definition is important — and that a reasonable approach to branded items probably has benefits everywhere. Your main concern seems to be with PE; if we were to cap branded items, it seems that that is where you see there being unintended consequences. Have I understood your point correctly?

Mr Easter: Yes and no. Let me expand on that. The point about day uniform being taken out is the same throughout. What we have seen, and what our research in England has shown, is that, if schools are forced down a route where they have to restrict the number of items to below the number where they consider they can cover both the day uniform and the sports kit, they are more likely to take the sports kit out, because the day uniform is worn five days a week, and the sports kit is worn a couple of times a week. If they have to make a decision that results in there being a casualty, it is the sports kit that would probably go first.

Looking at England as an example, you are quite right that the current Government are looking to introduce a cap. We are still trying to convince the Government that the cap that they have chosen is not appropriate. Why do I say that? The cap that is currently being proposed in England is three items in a primary school. That is absolutely fine. They are saying, however, that, at secondary school, it should be three plus a tie, and we are saying that that should be six. There are multiple reasons for that, one of which is that, at primary school, there tends to be a less formal uniform, children do not do competitive sport and are generally picked up by a parent or a carer, so there is not the same issue with them getting to and from school. Also, younger children tend to be less brand-focused and brand-aware, so the inequality point that I mentioned is less prevalent. Primary school is absolutely not a problem, and we have been clear with the Government in England that we think that that is sensible and fine. For secondary school, the average number of items is currently just under six, although you cannot have half an item, so we are saying that six is the right number of items. The Government are saying four — three plus a tie. We urge —

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Sorry to cut in, Matthew. As a retailer, you obviously engage with schools. What are the six branded items that you say are necessary for a uniform? In the day, I would struggle to see much beyond three or four.

Mr Easter: Exactly. It is typically three and three, actually. You probably have a blazer, tie and jumper or sometimes a blazer, tie and specific skirt, which is a whole other area that we have not discussed and I am not sure that we will have time to, although I am more than happy to talk about that.

Schools do different things depending on the school environment but it is typically three items of day uniform, and then three items of sports kit, which would be a long-sleeved top, a short-sleeved top and a short or track pant. Practically speaking, you need a long sleeved-top for the winter months and a short-sleeved top for the summer months. That is two items, and you probably need short or long trousers. We are not talking about a lot of items.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): It is helpful to understand what you are referring to. Not to cut across you, and just to follow up on that, in the context of Northern Ireland we have been hearing evidence of where the costs really start to rack up. There are outliers that have extremely expensive options for what you refer to as a day uniform — really high-end items such as woollen blazers with specific trims and jumpers with crests woven onto them. In the main across the board and across different school types and sectors, the evidence seems to be that it is the PE kit that really ramps up the cost. Not only are those items often branded with the school crest, a logo or school colours but they are branded by a sports brand as well. We see the likes of Kukris, O'Neills and Canterbury's coming in that are mandated. Once you get into manufacturer brands being required, those three or four items that you suggested for PE kit become incredibly expensive, often well in excess of £100 for the PE kit alone.

In England, do you have evidence of how the numbers that you are suggesting can be brought in in a more affordable range?

Mr Easter: One hundred per cent yes. There is no need to spend hundreds of pounds on school-branded sports kit or day uniform. When I talk to schools, I explain that the best thing to do is work with the supplier to get the best cost and product mix for day uniform and sports kit. There are a lot of options that are not nearly the sorts of prices that you just quoted.

We conduct a big survey across the UK of about 390,000 students, which is a significant sample. I suspect that you have a copy of in your pack. It has been a while since it was sent across but I am sure that you will have it. We survey the retail cost of a basket of items for day uniform and sports kit because we need to understand what those look like every year. We know that the average cost of a basket of items for day uniform and sports for a state-funded secondary school is £92. That is buying one item of each of the school-branded day uniform and PE kit that you would need. We understand that parents have to buy, particularly when a child starts school, and that is another point to mention from your point of view when thinking about the framework of the legislation.

There are two, if you like, pinch points for parents when their children are joining schools. One is from the point of view of cost when they join a primary school; the other is when they join a secondary school. Why is that? It is because when they join the school, the parents have to kit the children out with all of the required school equipment. The uniform is one part of that. My eldest daughter has just gone into secondary school and we had to buy her an iPad, because the school has iPads. Stuff like that comes up, which costs significantly more than the uniform.

The key point to mention there is that when you buy a secondary school blazer, for example, it lasts multiple years on average. We know from our data that, on average, parents will buy a blazer 2-4 times whilst their child is at school. In other words, it can last for up to two or three years before it is replaced because it has been outgrown. There is a cost when they start secondary school, but it is not repeated annually because there is no need.

To go back to your point, however, I think that if schools work with the manufacturers and look at what can be bought, they can get a practical, long-lasting, school-branded uniform and they do not have to spend a fortune on it. To give you a very practical example, my business can provide a good-quality, machine-washable blazer with a braid and a school crest on it, if you want that, that retails at around £45. If you do not want the braid, it would be a bit less.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That is helpful.

Mr Easter: It does not have to be onerously expensive.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I apologise for coming in again, because we are short on time. I have one quick question on that, and other members may want to pick up other aspects. I just want to make sure that I have understood your position on the legislation. Is it your feeling that if the departmental guidelines that are provided to schools are clear and allow for a clear framework around what is reasonable for uniform items, that is an effective mechanism to bring costs down?

Mr Easter: We have seen that in England. The current guidance has shrunk the market, to be blunt about it. It has shrunk our market as a manufacturer and supplier and we can see that in our data around the number of items that schools specify. The other thing is that, in general, in my experience, the head teachers are very cognisant of the school's cohort of parents. I will hold my hand up and say that this is more England-based than Northern Ireland-based, to be quite honest with you. In my experience, however, schools in England do not do things that they know are going to be uncomfortable or unreasonable for parents. They do things for the right reasons.

I read some of the comments that were made by the Committee. The key point is that we worked with the Department for Education on the current statutory guidance in England. We said that we understood the competition point: we got that. If you are going to make school uniforms structured and the same for everybody, however, so that they do what they need to do in a school environment — provide a social leveller and a sense of belonging — that takes away the brand pressure of fashion brands, etc. It gives security in and out of the school gates and promotes the team element when schools are playing competitively — all those good things that schools do. Everybody understands the benefits of a structured uniform policy.

Make the competition element for the school-branded items at the point that the school is selecting the retailer or uniform supplier, and then let them distribute it. In other words, the current statutory

guidance says that schools must review and tender for their uniform at least every five years. The complexity of that procurement or tender process is dependent on the size of the school or the school group. The bigger groups procure in a more formal tender process, the smaller groups less formally. Schools have to do that every five years and, within the current guidance, they have to put cost at the heart of what they are thinking about. That, I think, allows competition — I have seen that in action in the past few years, in England — and, ultimately, gives parents the best value option, but it also allows uniform to do what it is supposed to do and to be upheld in the school environment.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I am going to cut in because I am conscious of the fact that members want to come in with other questions. The time pressure is kicking in. That is not your fault, Matthew; it is due to our timings, this morning. I will bring in the Deputy Chair and then Michelle, if she wants to come in.

Mr Sheehan: The Chair has covered most of the questions that I was going to ask. You are saying that the average cost of a uniform in England is around £92.35. If we had a similar average, we would not be talking about bringing forward legislation. From the evidence that we have taken, it appears that uniforms in many schools are a lot more expensive than that. In some cases, the PE kit is twice that cost. We have heard evidence of blazers costing £140 or £150, and up to £170. I am fairly ignorant about the school system in England — I apologise for that. We have a very segregated education system. Most people assume that that is on just the basis of religion — that does exist — but it is also on the basis of socio-economic background. We have segregation between selective and non-selective schools. By and large, the grammar schools are the major problem here with regard to the cost of uniforms. Some children are effectively excluded from those schools, because their parents know that they would never be able to afford the uniform, never mind if it was for just one child. If there were a number of children in the family, the parents know that they would not be able to afford the uniform. You are talking about amounts between six hundred quid and eight hundred quid for the fancy blazers and the overcoats, never mind the PE kits that we have been discussing. I am sympathetic to the position that you have outlined, but I see some flaws. The Chair raised one issue around the PE kit and six branded items. There will be consequences if we do not put a cap on the number of branded items — a number lower than that. For example, if you say six, that allows for three items for the day uniform and three items for the PE kit. If a school insists that it wants PE kits with not just the school crest but made by a particular manufacturer — some schools use Kukri, Canterbury, O'Neills or other brands — that will increase the cost immeasurably. The Chair has said by over a hundred quid: I suggest that it would be closer to one hundred and fifty quid, if you take a long-sleeved top, a short-sleeved top and branded or crested shorts, leggings, track bottoms or something like that, if that is what you are talking about.

One of the other problems here is that some of the school uniform suppliers have monopolies for certain schools. They have sweetheart deals with schools. Does that situation pertain in England?

Mr Easter: I will take both points. I understand what you are saying. I reiterate that, in my experience looking across the whole of the UK, there are many options for good-quality school-branded day uniform and sports uniform that do not cost the figures that you are quoting. Those options are there. For example, many years ago now, I grew up in the south of England and went to a grammar school. We still have grammar schools in the south of England. I left school in 1994, and my uniform had a wool blazer with a braid on it. It was a classic grammar school blazer, and it cost over £100 then, in 1994. As an old pupil, I keep in touch with that school, and, as a result of the current guidance in England, it has switched that blazer to a very smart one that is not made of wool flannel but is polyester-based. That is much more practical because it is washable and is really long-lasting. With the braid, it looks really smart. That blazer is now less than half that price. We have to work through how we can get to a place where the school is still getting the number of items for the kit that it needs but at a much more sensible price point.

The second point is on the sole supply. We argued strongly for sole supply in England, and the current guidance upholds that. It says that, if there is a sole-supply relationship with a school, the school must demonstrate that, at least every five years, it has reviewed and gone out to a competitive process to ensure that it is getting best value for parents. Why does a sole supply work? I will answer that very quickly because I know that I have limited time. It is quite a nuanced thing in a school uniform environment. Sole supply works really well from a school's point of view because, if you are a sole supplier to a school, you have absolute responsibility and accountability to make sure that every child, regardless of shape, size or whatever, has access to the uniform 365 days a year. If you do not have the uniform then, you do not deserve to continue the contract. It also allows for smaller schools to have good quality supply throughout the year. With some of the smaller schools, for example those in

remote areas, if they have an intake of 30 or 40 pupils, it is just not economical to do that unless you have sole supply.

Forgive my ignorance because I am not sure how commonplace this is in Northern Ireland, but, in England, sole supply almost always goes with a responsibility on the retailer to help with an aspect of the uniform provision. I know this because we have a retail arm of our business. We have sole-supply contracts in practice where, as part of the contract, we will make available a pot of money to the school to help with the uniform costs for the parents who are in most need of that help. The school will identify parents that really need discounted or free uniform, and we give that as part of a fund. That, practically, is a really positive thing, where a sole supplier helps. Without being a sole supplier, you cannot do that sort of thing. I agree with you 100% that you have to manage and make sure that, if there is a sole-supplier relationship, it has to be competitive. As I said before, make that competition at the point of selection of the uniform provider rather than at the point of distribution because it has lots of other different benefits for the schools and the parents and the pupils to be in that position.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks for that, Matthew.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you, Deputy Chair. Michelle, do you have anything that you want to come in with?

Mrs Guy: No.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I will ask one other question. This is the one that I wanted to make sure we picked up. Please can I have a very brief response on this? I want to ask it, given your retail experience. We heard evidence from retailers here in Northern Ireland around some of their concerns about, with whatever change is implemented, their capacity to turn that around in a way that would not cause massive disruption to their businesses, given the amount of stock that they hold. Do you have a sense, if a change is implemented, of what a reasonable turnaround is for a school uniform retailer to be able to deliver a new uniform supply arrangement with a school?

Mr Easter: Absolutely. I promise to be brief. School uniform retailers make 80% of their annual sales in eight weeks over the summer. The other 20% of the stock is sold over the rest of the year. As part of their service to schools, parents and pupils, retailers will hold stock all year round to make sure that parents and pupils have access to uniform and that schools can rely on that fact, because, if the uniform is not there, it is not uniform in the school.

A typical school uniform retailer may hold a year's worth of stock, if not more, at any point in the cycle. That scales up in the run-up to the summer, and retailers order in the autumn, which means that retailers will order this autumn for next summer. When we worked with the Department for Education in England on the current statutory guidance, we agreed that the guidance would go to schools in November 2021 and schools would have to be compliant by the back-to-school period in 2023. That allowed changes to be made, stock to be flushed through and a sensible transfer to be made.

A similar time frame would be pragmatic. If you do not do something like that, retailers will struggle to survive financially, because they tie up a lot of stock. If a school changes its uniform before that stock is adequately run down, the retailers have no other outlet for the stock, and it becomes totally valueless. Again, that is a nuance of the industry and of the way in which school uniform works. It is not like a normal retail environment where, if stock becomes obsolete, you discount it and people buy it at some point. School uniform is binary: if a school says that something is not part of the uniform, nobody will buy it. If a retailer has a lot of stock sitting there, it is worthless. It goes to landfill, which is a huge potential issue.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): You clearly recommend some form of transitional arrangement to allow that process to happen.

Mr Easter: Yes, 100%. In England, the guidance went to schools in November, and we said that we really needed more than one back-to-school period to clear the stock and allow schools to go through the process of reviewing and updating their policy. Schools have lots of important things to do as well as school uniform; it is only one aspect of school life.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Our Minister may be operating to a different timescale, but we note those points. He is keen to deliver extremely quickly, but we note those comments and will bear them in mind in our considerations.

Mr Easter: You need to help him to understand the position. Retailers' stock is in now or is coming in for this summer. That will be a significant problem for the business community in Northern Ireland, particularly for school uniform businesses and associated businesses, if a sensible time frame is not put in to the guidance.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you. It is important to note that. We heard from retailers early on, but it is helpful to hear that message again as we reach the business end of our considerations and produce a report. That is appreciated, Matthew.

Mr Easter: Not at all.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That brings our evidence session to an end, unless you want to make any final remarks.

Mr Easter: No. Thank you again for your time and for allowing me to come and talk to you. As I said at the start, what seems like a simple thought process on uniform is a much more complex and nuanced situation. I would be more than happy to attend another session or answer any specific questions that the Committee may want to ask at any point. Hopefully, you can see from my approach that a pragmatic approach is needed to manage all the stakeholders and achieve the best outcome, ultimately, for parents and pupils. That is what really matters, but it needs to be thought about in a cohesive way, otherwise, unfortunately, it will come back to bite. Thank you for your time. I am more than happy to help.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you, Matthew. Given our issues with having a quorum, it may be that, once a formal note of the session is circulated, members will want to raise other questions. We may take you up on that offer, so thank you again for your time.

Mr Easter: I will be very happy to help you get to the right conclusion.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you.