



Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

School Uniforms (Guidelines and
Allowances) Bill: Retail NI

7 May 2025

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Nick Mathison (Chairperson)
Mr Pat Sheehan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Danny Baker
Mr David Brooks
Mrs Michelle Guy
Ms Cara Hunter
Mrs Cathy Mason

Witnesses:

Mr Alastair McCall	McCalls of Lisburn
Mr Glyn Roberts	Retail NI
Ms Francesca Cahill	Truly Fare
Ms Jan Buchanan	Warnocks

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): You are all welcome. Thank you for giving up your time to brief the Committee on Retail NI's response to the Bill. I will do the introductions first. If anything needs corrected or updated, feel free to say so. We have Glyn Roberts, the chief executive of Retail NI; Jan Buchanan, who is representing Warnocks; Francesca Cahill, who is representing Truly Fare; and Alastair McCall, who is representing McCalls of Lisburn. Hopefully I got all of that correct.

As I said, you are very welcome. I will open it up for an initial presentation or opening remarks. We ask for that to be up to 10 minutes, and we will then move into questions and answers. As far as possible, we will keep today's evidence session focused on the Bill, what it does or does not do and how Retail NI responds to that, but we will move into questions and answers once we have had the initial presentation. We generally tend to keep the questions to about five minutes per member. That gives members and witnesses a sense of the timescale that we are on. Thank you again for your time. I will hand over to you for an opening presentation.

Mr Glyn Roberts (Retail NI): Chair, thank you very much. It is a pleasure to present today. Obviously, my three colleagues are who you really want to hear from, so I will just make a brief opening statement and then hand over to my colleagues, who will each take different aspects of the Bill.

Retail NI represents 2,500 independent retailers, wholesalers and suppliers. You will find our members in every village, town and city in Northern Ireland. We were pleased to respond to the Minister's consultation. Independent retailers recognise issues of concern, such as the need for and cost of bespoke garments, especially at this time of financial hardship for many families. We welcome the opportunity to present to the Committee today, and I thank my three colleagues, whose businesses have served generations of parents and maintained the high quality demanded by our

schools. It is important that they are family-owned, independent retailers that are major footfall drivers for our high streets.

After consulting our membership, we responded, as the Committee is aware, and highlighted several areas that we want the Department to focus on. We have submitted a more detailed statement in written form, which the Clerk will have. I think that you have it in front of you as well. If we are to proceed with the Bill, we believe that the Northern Ireland Executive and the Department of Education must commit seriously to the following issues: a three-year transition period should be introduced to manage the new policy effectively; there should be a phased implementation, with sportswear being the primary focus; and the Northern Ireland Executive and, indeed, our MPs should formally support the removal of VAT on school wear items and recognise that that is not a devolved matter. And, of course, there should be an increase in the uniform grant.

As the Committee is aware, retailers carry a lot of stock, which entails a significant financial investment. Therefore, we need certainty about the direction of travel that is being considered by the Department. We contend that, in many areas where the large supermarkets have entered the market, prices have been lower but often at the expense of quality, and we question whether real savings have been made. As I said, uniform retailers are locally owned, independent retailers, and, obviously, the money that they make is redirected into the rest of our economy and local high streets. We want to work with the Department of Education to develop a policy that recognises the value of local retailers and gives them an opportunity to continue to trade in the sector.

I conclude my remarks by emphasising our commitment to the sector and stressing the broader point, which you will be familiar with, that independent retailers have the benefit of offering a high-quality, personal service that the larger competitors either cannot or will not offer. I will hand over to my colleagues.

Mr Alastair McCall (McCalls of Lisburn): Good afternoon. I am Alastair McCall from McCalls of Lisburn. We are a family-owned and family-run menswear and school wear retailer with nearly 70 years' experience in the retail market in Northern Ireland. Thank you all so much for listening to us today and taking on board our concerns about issues that will affect the current school wear supply chain.

As a third-generation retailer who stocks for over 80 schools, from nurseries to primaries, grammars, high schools and some special needs schools, I have a great understanding of the market. As part of Retail NI's response to the consultation, there is a four-point plan, which Glyn outlined: lead times, phased implementation, VAT removal and increase in school wear grants. I will talk a bit about the lead time aspect of that, and Jan and Fran will talk a little about some of the other points.

Our school and education system in Northern Ireland is absolutely fantastic. Our children achieve exam results that are the envy of other parts of these islands. There are many factors in that success, but I believe that a big part of it is the uniforms, which set our young people up for success. I am sure that the parents among us are so proud when we see our sons and daughters going off to primary school and even moving into high school in their new uniform. It really is a special moment in people's lives.

The local businesses that currently supply the school wear market are, in many cases, long-established, family-owned businesses. All those businesses have invested heavily to supply the market, from retail premises, warehousing, online web shops, staff and stock. A change to the market could have devastating consequences for some of our long-established businesses. Many lines in our product mix are made only once a year. To manage any transition effectively, we need a three-year window. The main ordering time for stock is September for the following year's back-to-school business. I will try to explain that a little. A good school wear retailer aims to have stock whenever a child needs it, 12 months of the year, not just in a six-week window like many multiples. The current stock position as of today is that we are working from our stock holding, which was ordered two years ago, in September 2023. Now, in May and June, we are starting to get the bulk deliveries that we ordered in September 2024. Bulk orders, obviously, keep our prices at their lowest. The stock will be sold throughout the academic year starting September 2025 and on to June 2026 and beyond. In June 2026, we will not have a zero stock position, because of the first aim, which is not to run out, so that we can get items at whatever time of the year it is. In September of this year, if we want to have uniforms for school year 2026-27, our suppliers will need to have our orders.

If legislative change does not take those factors into account, bankruptcies and mass redundancies across the sector are a real possibility. In addition, a large percentage of our suppliers, such as AF

White in Comber, Douglas and Grahame in Carrickfergus and the Signature Works in Bangor, are also local businesses. Those suppliers normally work at least one season ahead of us, so, in September, if we are planning for 2026-27, they are planning for 2027-28. All of that represents a substantial contribution to the Northern Ireland economy: local money is spent here, stays here and is reinvested here.

Also, when change happens, we need to have meetings with all of the schools whose uniforms we stock, look at the legislation, come up with solutions and then go to sampling. Those proposals then have to go to a school consultation with senior management, school councils, pupils and even, perhaps, parents. That all takes time, as, I am sure, you can imagine, which is why we are looking for an adequate lead time and stepped implementation.

The main area of concern for cost to parents comes from the sportswear side of school wear. Dealing with that first would bring about the most effective change. I will pass you over to Jan, who will discuss that.

Ms Jan Buchanan (Warnocks): Thanks so much for inviting us here today. I am grateful for the opportunity to put forward my views on the subject. I am Jan Buchanan from Warnocks on the Lisburn Road. The business was established in 1880, so it is one of the oldest retailers in the city. We are predominantly a secondary-school uniform supplier with a smaller number of prep schools and primary schools. I will cover a few points in the context of secondary-school uniforms in particular.

The cost of school uniforms has not necessarily spiralled. School uniforms have not changed: what has changed is the introduction of compulsory branded sports kits. As you know, they are provided exclusively by sports companies that have negotiated a monopoly on the supply of those items. That has raised the price of uniforms as a whole and ruined the reputation of and negatively impacted on the small family businesses before you, which have been providing uniforms successfully for generations.

When I first entered the business around 10 years ago, several of our schools were still wearing polo shirts with a school crest and a wee pair of shorts, which cost maybe £15. Many parents now pay more for their child's PE kit than they do for their uniform, which is worn every day for eight hours a day. As an example, for one of the schools that we supply, the compulsory items for the boys' uniform comes to a total of £86.90. The compulsory PE kit for that same boy is £198.70. For another one, it costs £106.50 for the PE kit and £46.90 for the compulsory items of uniform that we sell in our shop. During our sale, a polyester blazer is £32. That is cheaper than most branded PE T-shirts that you can buy for your child these days. Even a wool blazer, at £64, is still cheaper than a tracksuit top and bottoms for a lot of the schools.

We sit before you as three fierce competitors. We put a great deal of time into constantly sampling new items, comparing pricing between different manufacturers, undercutting one another and trying to find the best quality and value for money on the market to keep our customers satisfied. Healthy competition drives prices down. Most of our schools have between three and five uniform suppliers. However, out of around 50 schools, we are allowed to sell PE kits for only about 10 of them. I do not sell the same St Dominic's pinafore as Fran, and I do not sell the same Royal Belfast Academical Institution blazer as Alastair. Our parents have options when it comes to where they want to shop and how much they want to pay, as well as options on the quality and price, so should that not be the case across all the uniforms, including the PE kit?

I have seen in practice that it is possible to bring the cost of uniforms down considerably by taking a more sensible approach to PE kits. We worked closely with a large Belfast grammar school last year — Alastair was also involved — and we took all the items of the uniform, including the PE kit, and reduced the price as much as we could. The hoodie is now £18.95, and the PE T-shirt is £12.95, so it can be done. It is very achievable but not while the big brands control the PE kits in most of our schools.

I will now pass you over to Fran.

Ms Francesca Cahill (Truly Fare): I am from Truly Fare in Belfast. We are a family-run business as well, and we have been proudly serving our local community for 40 years. Today, we supply uniforms for over 120 schools across Belfast, operating through three retail stores, an online platform and a dedicated warehouse facility. As with many of my colleagues here and school wear suppliers across Northern Ireland, the issues that we are discussing today have a significant impact on our businesses now and in the years ahead. I appreciate your time and willingness to hear some of our key concerns.

With decades of experience in school wear supply and manufacturing, we bring valuable insights into the expectations and demands of parents, pupils and schools. We hope to contribute meaningfully to the school wear policy conversation. Alastair has already highlighted the critical importance of lead times and product turnaround. I wholeheartedly support that view, especially when it comes to stockholding, which is why our warehouse is so vital.

I have been looking closely at the school clothing scheme and the uniform grant system. While quality and availability are important to families, affordability remains one of the most pressing concerns. That is a major reason why we are here today. The school uniform grant is intended to support families and ease the financial burden of education. However, in the context of rising living costs, we must ask whether the current level of support is still fit for purpose and how it compares with what is on offer in other parts of the UK.

In Northern Ireland, the grant stands at £42.90 for primary-school pupils and £61.20 for secondary-school pupils under the age of 15, for their everyday wear, plus £26.40 for PE. That is a total of £87.60. For secondary-school pupils over the age of 15, it is £67.20 for everyday wear, plus £26.40 for PE, a total of £93.60. There is a small difference of £6 between the grant for younger and older secondary-school pupils that only partly accounts for VAT on larger clothing. However, that increase does not reflect the 20% VAT rate. In contrast, support in Wales and Scotland is considerably higher. The Welsh Government website states that it is £125 per learner, with £200 for learners entering year 8, plus additional funding for schools. The Scottish Parliament website states that it is a minimum of £120 for primary-school pupils and £150 for secondary-school pupils. By comparison, Northern Ireland falls short.

Additionally, while VAT is a devolved issue, it would be a disservice not to mention its impact. Currently, school wear items above a certain size or for children over the age of 14 are subject to VAT. That creates confusion and unfairly penalises older children and their families. Although the grant increases slightly for older pupils, it does not align with the VAT costs. For example, the grant should increase by around £17.50 to reflect the 20% VAT, but instead it rises by just £6, which is only 7%. Furthermore, families with younger children who require larger garments also face VAT charges yet receive no additional support. Increasing the grant and aligning it more closely with VAT realities would provide immediate relief to low-income households. The full removal of VAT from school wear would make uniforms more affordable for everyone.

In today's difficult trading environment, we are working hard to sustain our business, protect jobs and support our local community. As we are a small independent retailer, our customers are at the heart of everything that we do. We must ensure that school uniforms are made affordable without compromising on quality or service.

Thank you for your time. We are happy to take questions now.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you all for your opening presentation.

There are a number of threads to pick up. I want to pick up on the issue of PE first of all, as you have been clear in your views that the principal driver of increased uniform costs is PE kits rather than school uniforms in the traditional sense of the school uniform that is worn for the school day. On the PE aspect of it, do you think that the Bill is explicit enough in addressing the specific cost of PE kits? I will add my view. The Bill does not mention PE anywhere, and there is a question mark as to whether we are to assume that any reference to school uniform also covers PE. Could more be done to be explicit about addressing the cost of PE kits specifically?

Ms Cahill: It proves to be one of the more expensive items of school wear. Therefore, if we are looking at affordability, that has to be looked at. I supply around 18 secondary schools, but I supply only one PE uniform, because I cannot get my foot in the door with any of the other suppliers. It is one of the more expensive items, so, yes, that should be addressed if we are addressing affordability.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): From your engagement with the market — obviously you will be in touch with a wide range of schools across your three retailers — do you have a sense of the proportion of retailers that have a standard, non-branded PE kit, as opposed to those who are asking for particular sportswear brands and multiple items? Can you give me a sense of what that looks like in the market at the moment?

Ms Buchanan: There are very few schools that have an unbranded kit. To me, the brand should be the school, whereas, at this moment in time, the brand is a sports company. There are very few schools that follow the example that I just gave you of the grammar school that we work with that has an unbranded hoodie and unbranded T-shirt. They are of just as good quality, they work just the same and they have been popular. I struggle to think of any other schools that have gone down that route. It is a route that, certainly in this climate, schools are starting to think more about. It is about getting the information out there that it is an option and that there are alternatives to the big brands.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Would you support the Bill going as far as to prevent the use of branded sportswear items?

Mr McCall: That is maybe a difficult question to answer. For example, the majority of the local high schools that we supply are using non-branded sports kit. It works well and is cost-effective. One high school in our town specialises in football and is gold-accredited. If boys or girls are into football, they all want to go to that school. There is an absolutely fabulous football guy at that school, and it uses a brand of sportswear. He believes that, because his sportswear is of a particular brand, it is a driver for them to encourage young people to play sport. It is a difficult question to answer. From a cost point of view, yes we would, but, from the perspective of encouraging pupils to play sport, there are two ways that you could look at that question.

Ms Cahill: I do not think that that would be fair. To make it fair, more options should be available for the sports. As Jan mentioned, lots of schools have several suppliers of everyday uniform items, yet most of the schools have one branded supplier for PE kit, and that is it. There is no option for us or anybody else to compete in that market. We always say that, especially with school uniforms, when you walk in to a school, you do not know what manufacturing brand a child is wearing when they wear their school blazer, jumper or sweatshirt, but you know fine rightly whether they are wearing branded sports kit, because it is displayed. I do not necessarily think that we should do away with the branded sports kit, but it is about allowing more competition in that market and more than one supplier and giving the parents greater options.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I have a question to ask on that. You were clear in your opening presentation that you work hard to drive costs down for school uniforms. When you deal with branded sportswear, is there the scope to deliver those cost savings? You are dealing with a different beast when it comes to big, multinational brands that produce high-performance sportswear. From your perspective, is there scope to bring those costs down and deliver those savings?

Ms Buchanan: I wrote down an example. I have to buy pairs of shorts from a company for one of my schools for £15.30 each. That same company sells them on its website for £20. If I want to sell those for £20 in my shop, during the summer, when we give 20% off, I will make 70p on a pair of shorts. The answer, then, is no, because I cannot compete fairly with those companies, because I can only buy that product from them for the price that they set. It is tricky.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That is fine. I think that David wanted to come in on sportswear.

Mr Brooks: I will leave my other questions until later, but I have some on this issue. I have talked before about items that are branded versus those that are unbranded, which you are basically touching on. I have talked about it before at Committee when we discussed there being a spectrum of brands. There are premium brands. We are probably not talking about Nike and Adidas for schools, but we are probably talking about Canterbury or Kukri and the likes of those. Certainly, when I was growing up, you had your Prostar and team-wear brands. Is it always the case that they are more expensive than unbranded items? Is there a quality difference? What I am saying is this: we do not want the unintended consequence whereby banning brands across the board stops parents getting some value and quality.

Mr McCall: I understand what you are saying. We had a big change in the clothing market 10 or 15 years ago. Basically, a blazer from 50 years ago is roughly the blazer of today, and a pair of trousers is roughly the same when it comes to composition, fabrication and those things. If you think of what guys wore to play professional sports 20 years ago versus what they play in today, you will realise that there has been a lot of innovation in the sportswear market during that time, with flat seams, wicking fabrics and all those things.

Normally, innovation comes from bigger, branded companies. Those are the guys who are trying to push the thing forward, no matter what area of the world we look at. After that innovation has been made, companies can supply that technology in clothing without the brand name being on it. In the past number of years, as Jan said, some schools that used that branded product to get those innovations are now saying, "Here is the equivalent, non-branded version at a cheaper price point. We can get the quality of item from the non-branded options and get all the benefits". There has been a shift in the technology. You see that. We have done that in quite a few schools. Some schools now work a two-tier system, in which they use non-branded products for the majority of PE, but there is a branded kit for the elite sportspeople, such as those who are on the first XV or play at the top schoolboy or schoolgirl level.

Mr Brooks: Just to bring you back to the specific point, is there a need for allowance in the market for team-wear-type brands, as opposed to the likes of Canterbury and premium sportswear brands? Is there a need for that in the school market?

Mr McCall: Ask me that again, sorry.

Mr Brooks: I am talking about different levels of brand. Obviously, Canterbury and so on are involved in some of our schools, but that is a premium, world-level brand, with technology and all of that piece. However, you will have football teams, GAA teams and others, and no doubt schools in the past have used lesser-known team-wear brands that specialise in supply to the mass market. You will not have people going into shops and buying a hoodie from them, although they supply that. That, technically, is still a brand. It is not a premium brand but still a brand. It is likely to be badged on the sportswear —

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Just a brief response, please. I brought David in on the point we were on —

Mr Brooks: Sorry, yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): — so just answer briefly so that I can bring in other members. Do you not feel qualified to answer that question for your market?

Mr McCall: I do not quite understand the question.

Ms Cahill: Yes, I am not really sure what he is saying.

Mr Brooks: Maybe it is for a conversation after the meeting. That is fair enough. Maybe it is a bit too nuanced. I am concerned. I have no skin in the game, but I am just concerned that a flat ban of all branded sportswear could lead to an exclusion of some lower-cost brands that might be beneficial to families in value and price.

Mr McCall: That is a fair point.

Ms Cahill: That is the thing. It is all relative. That is what makes it competitive. You have so many brands and non-brands. You have branded products that have higher-priced items but offer a value range too. It is all very relative. There is so much out there within different brands and in non-branded items as well. You run the risk that non-branded items could be expensive as well. It all depends on the product that you want. Because there are product alternatives, it does not have to be like for like, T-shirt for T-shirt. It could be a T-shirt or some other kind of sports top. It is very fast.

Mr McCall: What might be a non-brand today might be a brand tomorrow.

Mr Brooks: Yes. I agree with that.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): We just have time. I made the mistake of bringing David in for a quick supplementary question.

Mr Brooks: I thought it would take less time than that. Apologies. Sorry.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): No, no. You are OK.

There are a number of things. You mentioned the transition period and the lead-in. I hope that other members will pick that up. I wanted to ask you specifically about the cost cap. The media have given a lot of attention to that in particular. It is the area that they have homed in on. Your briefing is clear: you are not keen on the idea of a cost cap. I put the scenario to you: you know, as a retailer, that for a particular school, you can bring in a uniform for x price and that is affordable and absolutely fit for purpose, but a school down the road is charging three or four times the amount for that. Your briefing references that a lot of schools are delivering affordable uniforms and then there are some outliers that charge a lot more. If you are aware of those disparities in the market — it may be that the outliers are in the minority, but the gap is huge — would a cap not help to bring market alignment so that parents had a degree of confidence that they would be able to bring the cost of the uniform in at a level that is affordable regardless of what school they choose?

Ms Cahill: Does it not all depend on what you deem to be affordable and what amount you set? I took the top four secondary schools that I supply and gave them all a blazer, a shirt, trouser or skirt, tie and jumper — I think that was it — and took an average of the cost. The whole uniform — one of everything — came in at an average for those four schools of £116.71. For nearly three months of the year, we give a discount. Although it was the average for only four of my schools, it is basically the average for all my secondary schools.

You talk about a price cap. What is it in relation to how much we charge at the moment? For primary schools, we sell a primary-school sweatshirt for £13.99. For a lot of schools, that is the only item that they have. You asked about the price cap. In relation to the price that we sell our uniforms at, it is hard to comment on that when we have no idea what —.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): The issue is that there is no benchmark. You do not know what that threshold will be.

Ms Cahill: Absolutely.

Mr McCall: Moreover, you may be concerned about a fluctuation in costs when the national minimum wage increases or rates go up or there is a problem in the Suez canal, with the result that, all of a sudden, your shipping costs are 20% more than they were before. If the cap is x amount and the stuff is already on its way, you cannot retail it for below the cap, so you are beaten before you start. There are those sorts of practical thoughts, and then there are the inflationary figures.

Ms Buchanan: It would have to constantly change and evolve. It would nearly have to be looked at every six months. Would there be a cap for uniform and a separate cap for PE kit? As we said, the price of materials fluctuates, as does the price of shipping. VAT would also have to be accounted for. If a wee guy who is only in first year is wearing a size 38, he will need a different price cap from a person who is wearing a smaller size, and the price varies greatly.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): So, the logistics of how it would be worked out are a concern.

Ms Buchanan: The price of what we buy from our manufacturers changes every year, be it up or down. It depends.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That is fine. I wanted to hear you expand on your view.

Ms Cahill: The uniform grant has not changed in three years. It is not even being adjusted. We constantly talk about the increasing cost of living. That has gone up from what it was three years ago, but the uniform grant has not gone up. If you do the same with the price cap as you have done with the uniform grant, it will not move, so it is not really going to work.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That is fine.

You touched briefly on VAT and the uniform grant. As you mentioned, VAT is not devolved; it is out of our hands. Certainly, the advice that we have had from the Department is that the uniform grant does not fall under the scope of the Bill. There is a lot of support on the Committee for increasing the uniform grant. We have discussed that.

Mr McCall: I will give you one little fact about VAT. Of the school trousers that we sell to high schools, 83% have VAT, and, of the white shirts that we sell, 65% have VAT.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Sorry to cut across you, Alastair. That is not something that, legislatively, we can address in the Bill, regrettably.

Mr McCall: It is just for information.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Absolutely.

Ms Cahill: Surely it is something that needs to be considered when we talk about the affordability of uniforms.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Absolutely. It is, unfortunately, not within the legislative scope of the Assembly, because it is dealt with at Westminster, so the Committee cannot in any way influence the legislation for that. I am sure that members can bring that back to their Members of Parliament separately, as it is a Westminster matter. We cannot legislate for it here.

Ms Cahill: When talking about the affordability of uniforms, can it be considered? It may not be a devolved topic, but can it be considered?

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Considered in terms of —?

Ms Cahill: In terms of talking about what is affordable: there is a 20% difference between the cost of a VATable uniform and a non-VATable uniform.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): We can go back to the Department with that question. When it is looking at how it will define "affordability", we can ask whether VAT will be factored into that. We can certainly consider that, but it cannot be part of this legislation, because it is not within our scope.

Ms Buchanan: If you are discussing a cap, you have to presume that every child is wearing a VATable size. That is probably what you are —.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I am conscious of time. There is a lot more that I could ask, but I will open it up to other members.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks to you all for coming in.

There may be a misconception that the legislation is directed at suppliers, and that is not the case. I know that there are some good suppliers of school uniforms to a wide range of schools. I know Truly Fare, which is based in west Belfast, where I am from, and I know that it has a very good reputation. I know of Warnocks and McCalls, but I have no personal experience of either. This is focused on everybody who is involved in school uniforms: the suppliers, the schools and the Department in terms of uniform grants and so on. Of course, we have no control over the issue that you just mentioned, VAT.

Do you agree that some pupils are excluded from certain schools on the basis of the prohibitive cost of the uniform? I am not even referring to PE gear.

Ms Cahill: It says somewhere in the guidelines that no child should be excluded because of the cost of a uniform. Therefore, if that were the case — I would need to find it in my notes — extra help would be provided by — is it the Education Authority (EA)? It might provide money for that. It is in the guidelines on school uniforms that, if anybody is struggling, there is somewhere that they can go.

Mr Sheehan: One of the difficulties here, Francesca, is that the guidelines are not being adhered to by schools. There are guidelines, but they are not in statute and are not really enforceable. We know of cases because parents have come to us, telling us that they would have liked their son or daughter to go to a particular school, but the cost of the uniform was so prohibitive that they could not afford to do that. We are talking about the fancy blazers with the braid on the cuffs and all that sort of stuff. It is just beyond the reach of some parents. Do you agree that that happens?

Ms Buchanan: Of course that happens. I absolutely agree with you. As I said earlier, we do our best. We work with our schools. This year, I have a delivery coming in for two of my biggest schools. They have reduced the price of their skirts by £15, for example. It is little things. We are always trying to chip

away at what they use and asking them, "Do you need this wee trim or belt?". Yes: I agree with you. Of course that is a real problem.

Ms Cahill: The uniforms — sorry.

Ms Buchanan: We definitely do our best. We offer different versions. There is the more expensive version of a jumper and a cheaper version. You can choose the material and quality that you want. As I was saying, across the three suppliers, you can choose different prices and quality as well.

Mr Sheehan: That is one part of it: the uniform is too expensive for some families. However, the other point is that there are sweetheart deals between schools and suppliers.

Ms Cahill: No.

Ms Buchanan: No.

Mr Sheehan: I am not accusing any of you of that, but it is a fact that, if a school, the board of governors or whoever it is decides to use only one supplier, the school will get some sort of benefit from that.

Ms Cahill: I know that I am not the only supplier for any of the secondary schools that I supply. I do not have a contract with any school either.

Mr Sheehan: Do you accept, Francesca, that it happens with other suppliers?

Ms Cahill: I could not comment on other suppliers; I can speak only for myself. I do not have a contract with any schools, which is a good thing and a bad thing. Last year, I had a school that changed its PE uniform: I had to give away seven thousand pounds' worth of PE kit because I could not sell it. I could not even give it away. I do not have a contract with anybody. I am not the sole supplier of any of the secondary schools that I supply. Therefore, from my point of view, that is not the case.

Mr McCall: I cannot comment for every school across the Province, but, for some of the schools that we supply, the difference between the cost of the uniforms for the local high school and the local grammar school might be £60. Yes, £60 is a lot of money for people for whom money is tight.

Mr Sheehan: Especially if they have to buy two or three uniforms.

Mr McCall: Sure, but what we hear from people is that it is not just about the uniform but about the fact that, if they send their kids to the local high school, they will have next to zero fees to pay — there might be a nominal fee of £50 or £80 — but, if their child goes to the grammar school, there will be a higher fee. It is not just the uniform; it seems to be the cumulative effect of all of it added together. The £60 difference between those two uniforms amounts to just over £1 a week. I know that £1 a week for some people — I understand all that. I suppose that that is why we are telling you that, if the grant were more in line with what is offered in Wales or somewhere like that, with the figures that we are shouting out, it would give them the leg up to go to whatever school they want. That still does not take care of the —.

Mr Sheehan: I understand that there are a number of factors.

Mr McCall: I cannot comment for 100% of the schools — just those of which I have experience.

Mr Sheehan: I understand that there might be a number of factors that will have to be taken into account when it comes to the affordability of going to certain schools. Our view is that no child should be excluded from any school on the basis of their parents not being able to afford to send them there. That is maybe a broader and deeper conversation.

You talked about the three-year lead-in period. I have some sympathy for that, but, at the end of the day, parents have been hammered over the past number of years with the cost of living. They cannot wait for three years. Do you agree?

Ms Cahill: Again, it is hard to say, because we have not been given any guidelines. People replied to the questionnaire — the consultation — at the time. Nowhere in that consultation did it say, "Rank how much you believe a uniform should be". We are blind with all of this. My uniform is affordable, especially when it comes to quality and the service, for instance, that we offer. Am I way off? I do not know, because the consultation did not guide us in any way.

Ms Buchanan: I had a wee look at a supermarket black blazer. It was £26 for a plain, black blazer with nothing on it. I know that this has been discussed. People can sew on their own crests, but you have to buy the crest. If the crest costs £5, and if, like me, you cannot even sew on a button, you will need to pay the seamstress down the road a fiver to sew it on, that brings the cost to £36. Whereas, in our sale, you can buy a blazer with the crest on it for £32. Therefore, it is not the case that we are sticking the arm in or that our uniform is expensive and pushes all of our customers into the supermarkets or that that is the answer and will make it cheaper. We can all work together, as you said, the schools, the suppliers —

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I do not want to cut across, but is it fair to say that you will sell whatever is reflected in the schools' uniform policies? Ultimately, it is the schools' decision as to what, they think, is affordable. If the guidance is set, the schools need to have a serious look at what is affordable. No doubt, you, as a local business, will want to provide the best value to your customers —

Ms Buchanan: We do.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): — but, if the schools do not comply with the guidance, that is the issue that we have.

Mr McCall: I have two examples. A high school in Dunmurry closed down at short notice. We had ten thousand pounds' worth of blazers that went to charity because we could do nothing else with them. We had ten thousand pounds' worth of bespoke hoodies for another school. That was two schools and £20,000 for two lines. With 80 schools and widespread changes, the loss could be devastating for the market. I understand that parents need affordable options — I get that — but give us a chance to finish one set and start another.

September 2025 is coming. These guys will knock on our doors saying, "Lads, you need to order this, or none of those schools are going to have stuff to wear next year". At the moment, we are nervous; we do not know what to do. What are you telling us to do? We are damned if we order and damned if we do not. That is why the lead-in time is there. If you said now what will happen, we could at least plan and know what we need to do in September. I cannot go to see 80 schools in two weeks with all proposals. That is what I was trying to say in my opening statement.

Mr Sheehan: We all agree that there should be some sort of lead-in time. It would not be fair just to say, "You need to change this for September coming".

I will go back to my point about sweetheart deals. Should schools be required to publish any financial or in-kind benefits that they get for exclusive contracts that they have with suppliers?

Ms Buchanan: Yes, I do. Hand on heart, we have never given anything to, taken anything from or signed a contract with a school. My father-in-law before me and the people before him felt, as we now feel, that that is unethical. It is not how we have done business. I have no problem with transparency in that regard.

Mr Brooks: I want to ask about the criticisms in your document of how school shops work. Would you mind expanding on that? What is your understanding of how they work? I understand that, if schools are selling, that means competition for you, but is there a wider issue? Is there some kind of unethical practice by school shops?

Ms Cahill: If a school sells a uniform, it should be held to the same rules, regulations and guidelines that a retail store is. When a school sells a uniform, you can look at it only as a retailer. If we are going to talk about competition, is it right that, because a school is selling a uniform, it is the only one that supplies it? I do not know of a lot of schools that do that.

Mr Brooks: I saw it in the briefing. That is why I asked the question.

Mr McCall: My only experience of school shops is that the supply of products is not there 12 months of the year. People have to buy certain things for a particular school. They come to us because they cannot get Sally's PE shirt, as the school shop does not have it in stock. We are set up to supply products 12 months of the year, and those people ask us, "Could you not retail that?". We hear that a lot on the shop floor.

Mr Brooks: I remember from my schooldays that you might order a tracksuit through the school, but you could do that only at one time in the year. If you did not get it then, you did not get it. I understand that.

Ms Cahill: Most of the time, schools realise that it is way more hassle for them.

Mr Brooks: It is not a concept that I was familiar with. I saw it in the briefing, and that is why I asked the question. It is fine if there are no further issues with that.

I want to go back to the sweetheart deals that Pat talked about. This is less about retailers, and I know that you sometimes become the focus. You mention premium sports brands in the briefing as well. Is it your understanding that some of those premium brands supply sportswear for school teams, with there being a contract that states that the school must buy all its sportswear from that company? Is that a widespread practice in schools?

Ms Cahill: You would need to ask the sports companies what they do. Again, it is about transparency.

Mr McCall: We do not know the facts about that.

Mr Brooks: No problem. Thank you very much.

Mr Baker: You said that you cannot get your foot in the door to supply PE gear. Can you say a bit more about that?

Ms Cahill: There may be branded PE wear. As you all know, most of the uniform is dictated to us by schools. A school can have a conversation with a sports brand and decide what its PE uniform will be. We pride ourselves on trying to be a one-stop shop. When customers come to us, we want them to be able to get whatever they need from us so that we keep them. I have approached companies that schools have decided to use, but they have not allowed me to supply the items through my retail store. Those items can be supplied only through those companies' retail stores or, in a lot of cases, only online. They have windows in which people can order. I have approached sports companies to ask them whether I can supply a uniform, and they have said no.

Mr Baker: You broke down the averages. Do you have an idea of the average prices of those schools' PE gear?

Ms Cahill: I do, yes. I do not have it with me, but I do. For the uniforms, there is a jumper, a pair of trousers, a blazer and this and that. For the PE items, there is way more. One secondary school that I can think of has a half zip, a top, a base layer, leggings, track bottoms, shorts and socks. All of those items are available, and they are much more expensive than one of my everyday uniforms.

Mr Baker: Yes. It then boils down to what the school requires a child to wear for the PE uniform.

Ms Cahill: Yes. The school will say, "This is the PE uniform". People then come and ask us if we sell the PE uniform. The fact that, with us, as independent retailers, customers can leave over and pay off has a massive impact. You can put down a deposit and pay off. You can pay off all year on nothing or on uniform items. We offer a discount, and we accept uniform grants. Years ago, before they went into people's bank accounts, we accepted the grants at no charge. You only had to spend two thirds of the grant, and we would give you the change. You were only allowed to buy uniform items with that grant. One of the reasons that we were looking to supply PE uniforms was that I know what we do and what services we provide and that the sports companies do not provide those services.

Mr Baker: I want to go back to the voluntary contributions to tie it all together. We are talking about school uniforms, but on top of that are PE uniforms, which, in my experience, can be just as expensive.

Ms Cahill: Most are the same price or dearer.

Mr Baker: So that doubles the price of what pupils need for school. Then, you throw in the voluntary contributions. You, as retailers, are hearing this from your customers. Does the fact that the cost is now much greater for parents need to be considered? It is not just about a blazer or jumper: PE is not mentioned in the Bill. The voluntary contribution would not be in it, but I just bring it up because you mentioned that it is also a burden on parents.

Mr McCall: Even with footwear, a decent pair of school shoes that will last all year costs a fair price.

Ms Cahill: The school uniform grant in Northern Ireland does not include footwear; it is only for school uniform items. As already mentioned, it is broken down into what they allow for the PE uniform. For example, a secondary school child under the age of 15 gets £61.20 for everyday wear and £26.40 for the PE uniform. More often than not, the cost of the PE uniform is equal to or more than that of the everyday uniform, but what is offered for PE kit in the uniform grant is dramatically less.

Mr Baker: Do you have experience of hearing from parents about the disparity whereby one school asks for a £20 voluntary contribution, where there is no real pressure to pay, but another school up the road requires £250 that must be paid?

Ms Cahill: I know of that more from my friends in the group chat. At the start of a school term, some have said, "Gosh, the school is looking x amount from me," and others say, "My school is looking x amount from me." If you have two or three children at that school, it is an issue.

Mr Baker: Are there different levels?

Ms Cahill: There are; they are not all the same. I can speak only about what my friends have said: their children attend different schools, and they pay different voluntary contributions.

Mr Baker: I went down a different route there; sorry. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That is OK. We will probably have a discussion about the PE kit issue after the briefing. We have to be mindful that PE is one subject in the curriculum; it is not professional sport. We have to ask why the costs are rising so high.

Mrs Guy: Thank you to the guys who are giving evidence. It has been really helpful. Most of the questions have been covered by now, so I just have a few additional points to ask for clarity on.

We had a discussion around the cap, which is more of a cost-cap model, and you identified some concerns about that. What about alternatives to a cap? We have talked an awful lot about branded goods in the PE kit. Do you think that something that limits the number of branded goods, as an alternative to a flat price cap, might serve as a method of increasing affordability for parents?

Ms Buchanan: Yes. You will have discussed this, but you would have to define exactly what a branded item is. Is it the school logo? Is it the school colours? Is it a stripe on a jumper? Is it a specific skirt, PE top or whatever? Would a cap be separated whereby you say, "Here is the number of branded items that you can have for your uniform, and here is the number that you can have for your PE kit"? What you suggest is not completely unfeasible. I am sorry to keep going back to PE kit, but it is the thing that is branded. There could be six items of branded PE kit. For a standard boys' school, there is a blazer and tie, which is two items. There are a lot of points to consider on both sides of that coin.

Ms Cahill: Something to look at is whether to go down the route of having compulsory items and non-compulsory items. Could you have x number of products that are compulsory and some items that are non-compulsory — completely optional? This is a silly item, but my girl customers love having a school scarf. Those are bespoke to the school and are in the school colours. If you are looking at saying that there should be only three or five products, where would the school scarf fall in that? The girls absolutely love the school scarves. Could an option be to have compulsory items but also have non-compulsory items available, which you can have but do not have to have?

Mrs Guy: I loved my school scarf, I have to say.

Ms Cahill: They love them.

Mrs Guy: So does my daughter. They are great. I know exactly what you mean.

Some of this will be anecdotal: I am just asking you from the point of view of your experience of the marketplace. Is there much of a price differential between a boy's uniform and a girl's uniform? Should there be an equalising of that?

Ms Buchanan: For us, there is not a huge differential. We sell a huge number of pairs of black trousers. We have an excellent black trouser that is great quality, and our customers come back for it every year. It is great value; it lasts them all year; and it is probably equivalent in price to our girls' skirts. I am talking about secondary school. I know that it is different for primary school, for which you can pick up a wee school skirt for £5 in Tesco or somewhere.

Can you repeat the question?

Mrs Guy: I will add to it: do you find that there is a difference between grammar schools and secondary schools in all of this?

Ms Buchanan: No. They are similar.

Mr McCall: They are very similar. The big difference is if, for example, a school is a big rugby school. The difference in cost would be in the rugby version of the kit. You cannot play rugby in a PE shirt, because it will be destroyed; it would just rip, because the fabric is too light. You need a heavier-weight garment for rugby.

There is only a couple of pounds' difference between a girl's uniform and a boy's uniform. There is little difference, unless you start to look at the little checked or striped summer blouses that some schools have — items that are not available for boys, who tend to wear little white or blue short-sleeved shirts that are quite generic. That is the only item where you would really find a difference. At the junior end, it would be the price of a pinafore versus that of a little pair of boys' trousers. That might be the only difference, but there is always the alternative of buying a skirt rather than a pinafore.

Ms Buchanan: It depends on the school. In some schools, jumpers are compulsory; in others, you do not have to wear a jumper. That goes back to the uniform list.

Mrs Guy: I have one last question. When it comes to consultation with parents and young people on this, it sounds like the biggest factor is the schools: they make the decisions and have all the power. From the discussion that we have had, it sounds like it could be helpful to have more formal and dedicated consultation with parents for them to express their views on it. An example was given of a school coach who had a preference for a certain type of PE kit, but the parents may have a different view because they are the ones who have to pay for it. How do you feel about the consultation that is proposed in the legislation?

Mr McCall: Do you mean asking parents what they want?

Mrs Guy: Yes, asking parents and young people for their input on the uniform policy.

Mr McCall: From my point of view, there is no problem in asking that, other than, given the lead-in time that I talked about, that would add more time before the changes can come in. In that example of the man in the school who wanted a particular kit, the issue came to the school council. The pupils got a vote on that kit, and they voted it through. I do not know whether the parents were ever consulted, but the pupils were. I would have no problem with parents being consulted about products, other than the time factor.

Ms Cahill: In the previous consultation, some of the questions were leading. You could tell that some of the questions led to a negative, as opposed to what I said about being all for educating parents on the prices and then having the consultation. I have had customers who, when they are walking away, have turned round and said, "Oh, I was led to believe it was going to be £500". There is scaremongering. It would be good to have a bit of education for parents before the consultation. One of the questions in the consultation should be, "On a scale of zero to £200 or £500, what would you

say is fair and affordable?". The questions in the previous consultation were not like that. When we read them, I found it hard to understand what it was all about.

Mrs Guy: Thanks so much, folks.

Mrs Mason: You mentioned the discussions that you have with lots of schools. Have there been any discussions with schools around girls being able to wear black trousers as opposed to skirts? Do you have specific black trousers that girls can wear? I am not saying that they have to be black, but you know what I mean.

Ms Buchanan: As of the past couple of years, in the vast majority, if not all, of our schools, girls can wear black trousers, so we provide the option of black trousers for girls and black trousers for boys.

Mr McCall: It is a recent thing, I have to say, but you can tell that schools are mindful of that. It is a new thing in the past three to five years.

Mrs Mason: Similar to that, have you had any conversations with schools about the feel of blazers for children with special educational needs? You mentioned the woollen blazer.

Ms Cahill: From my point of view, it happens a lot with primary-school children, and we always offer an alternative. If there are sensory needs or allergic reactions, for example, people might want a higher cotton content in a sweatshirt. If a customer requests that when they come to the counter, we provide it. The shop can be busy and noisy. If a customer comes to us for help with that, we can make alternative arrangements for them to come at a time that suits them. The beauty of being an independent retailer is that we are versatile, and we help where we can with sensory issues regarding uniform. Sizing is also a massive issue. There is no norm in sizing. Off-the-shelf clothing does not exist for some, so we have the ability to produce bespoke clothes to suit people's needs.

Mrs Mason: Thank you.

Ms Hunter: My question about the sensory aspect has been answered. The briefing has been helpful and has helped us gain a full understanding of your perspectives. Alastair made a point about how you are detrimentally impacted by school closures, which I had never thought about before. The briefing was really informative in respect of PE kits. Thank you so much for being here and for your commentary on the questions in the consultations. It is good for the Committee to note that.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): My final point is on the lead-in time.

Ms Cahill: That is massive for us.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): It is clearly important to you guys, and we want to make sure that the point is clear. My sense from how the Department has framed it so far — we may go back to seek clarity — is that it anticipates a degree of phasing because schools will not have the capacity to change uniform policies overnight and they need to have uniform policies ready to be published in prospectuses for the following academic year. Therefore, you are already a year behind in that process. Even if the legislation is ready to be dealt with in school prospectuses in November, it will be for the academic year 2026-27. Would it be helpful for the Committee to get clarity from the Department about how it expects the timing to operate? The Deputy Chair's point is valid: the cost pressures are really intense for some parents, and they would balk at a three-year lead-in time. By the same token, what does the Department anticipate is deliverable, given its engagement with schools? Would clarity on that point be helpful so that you at least understand the intent of the Bill?

Mr McCall: Yes. The more detail we have, the sooner we can steer stock levels and strategies. That would be helpful.

Ms Cahill: The legislation will also create opportunity for some schools. We see this all the time: when there is a change of principal or something, that opens the door for changes to be made. It could be like-for-like price changes. We could get caught with tens of thousands of pounds of stock. You are welcome to come and look at my warehouse of stock. I stock it because the school expects me to. The school has dictated the uniform, and it expects me to have that uniform available all year round.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I assume that, in your business models, you have processes built in to deal with the fact that schools will change uniform policies, even outwith the legislation. For example, if a school wants to reduce the cost of the uniform, do you have processes to work with the school to do that? I assume that the legislation envisages that happening.

Ms Cahill: That would have a long lead-in time, because, regardless of anything else, we have stock to get rid of that we cannot sit on. A school might come to us and say, "We want to change". We would say, "We need to be told the September before. I will go away, look at what I have in stock and tell you, 'It will take me x amount of time to get rid of that stock, while we are sampling this'". That process takes one, two or three years.

Mr McCall: Normally, we start changes with the year 8 uniform. All the year 8 pupils will have the new uniform, and that uniform will be OK for the next year and so on. The year 9s and above can continue with the existing uniform. When we get the stock of the old uniform down, it automatically swaps over to the new uniform.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): OK. Thank you very much for your time. It has been a really helpful engagement.

Mr McCall: Thank you.

Ms Cahill: Thank you.

Ms Buchanan: Thank you.