



Briefing Paper for Education Committee

School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill

Retail NI welcomes this opportunity to address the committee on this important topic. We were pleased to respond to the Minister's consultation, and independent retailers fully recognise the issues of concern, such as cost and the need for bespoke garments, especially in this time of financial hardship for many families.

I will make an opening statement, and my colleagues who business owners, will answer any questions you may have and provide additional comment as required.

We welcome the opportunity to present to the committee this morning, and I should put on record at the outset my thanks to retail colleagues, who have served generations of parents, and maintained the high quality demanded by our schools.

After consulting our membership, we responded positively and highlighted several areas which required attention if the department is to achieve its objectives, which I'm happy to set out now for members:

- Schools should be legally required to comply with departmental uniform guidance. It is essential that we maintain common practice and standards across all schools in Northern Ireland.
- School uniforms should be affordable, comfortable, and sustainable. However, we would also contend that these are common considerations involving products such as clothing.
- Governors, when developing policies, should engage with all stakeholders, such as in this case, parents and retailers. Like all areas of governance, it is good practice to review periodically, but whether this is published is irrelevant.

- It is very easy to focus solely on affordability but there needs to be a balance between price and quality.
- Retailers already display the cost of their items in their shops and on their websites. That is what matters most to parents, and there will inevitably be changes for various reasons.
- Based on their long experience, retailers point out that often items are passed on to family members at different stages of the schooling system, a good example of sustainability in practice!
- Many of the colours in a school uniform are based on long tradition and help identify individual schools.
- We accept that where it is possible, a crest should be reusable, however, we also know from experience that for many, their school crest is an important memento from their early years and many parents wish to retain their crest for their child.
- There are several excellent unbranded uniform options on the market right now and there is no longer a need to reach for brands names when looking for quality. We would strongly disagree that 'brands' in terms of sportswear companies are necessary and instead suggest that the sole 'brand' should be the school logo.
- We believe there may be a case for looking at the working of school shops. Some school now want to sell sportswear directly. This can mean that such exclusive arrangements do not provide parents with any choice and instead offer an uncompetitive monopoly. This should be challenged.
- Sportswear should be provided by the school or sponsors of the team or individuals, rather than a sports company who will then demand that the entire school wears their garments when there are only a very small minority playing in teams.
- Retailers themselves are not averse to fair competition. It should be a decision taken by the school governors to decide how they advertise uniform availability. However, it is a

positive sign of support for their local community when schools encourage collaboration with local independent retailers, and this should be permitted to continue.

- Schools should be transparent about any financial or in-kind benefits from sports companies and retailers. Allowing schools to benefit in this way and sign long contracts with sports companies has been the ruination of the school wear industry and is a huge part of the reason we are in the situation we are in.
- We wonder how a price cap would work in practice. There has been an increase in costs in recent times as there has been with every other consumer product. Retailers are inevitably forced to pass on costs if they are to remain in business, and whilst there may be cheaper alternatives available there is also often an accompanying reduction in quality and durability.
- There are many challenges in the education system at present which deserve departmental attention as a matter of urgency. Whilst this issue has made media headlines in recent months, we do not believe that families will see a great deal of change by what is proposed.
- We may see a much more aggressive push by the large supermarkets into this area, but we do not believe this would be a positive step and indeed while it may be initially welcomed by some, it would not be of long-term benefit to either pupils or individual schools.
- Schools do not need an ever-increasing administration burden placed upon them for little practical reason. We were bemused in the consultation with reference to a 'condition of safety.' It is highly unlikely that any retailer would sell anything which was unsafe!
- There should be ways of engaging with pupils on the practicalities etc of their uniform but not to have a say over the policy making process. Pupils are there to learn and develop. We are moving further and further away from this basic premise. This is potentially an administrative and supply nightmare.

- There is a risk of over consulting to the detriment of both the pupil and school. Experience retailers also highlight that in many decades of trading, having a say in uniform policy is not a consideration for many parents.

If we are to proceed with the Bill, we believe the Northern Ireland Executive, and the Department for Education must commit to seriously on the following issues:

- Introduce a three-year transition period to manage the new policy effectively.
- There must be a phased implementation with sportswear being the primary focus.
- The Northern Ireland Executive should formally support the removal of VAT on all school wear items.
- There should be an increase in the Uniform Grant

Retailers carry a lot of stock year on year which entails a significant financial investment. Therefore, they need certainty with regards the direction of travel that is being considered by the department. We would contend that in other areas where large supermarkets have entered the market, prices have sometimes been lower, but often at the expense of quality. We would question the real savings which have been made.

Uniform retailers are locally owned independent retailers, meaning that the income is retained within the Northern Ireland economy. We are concerned that in effect, this will have a severe negative impact on many local businesses at a time when they are already under severe pressure.

We urge the Department of Education to work with Retail NI to develop a policy which recognises the value of local retailers and gives them the opportunity to continue to trade in this sector. A failure to do this will be detrimental to the Northern Ireland consumer.

We conclude by again emphasising our continuing commitment to this sector, and stressing this broader point, which you will be familiar with - independent retailers have the benefit of being able to offer the high quality, personal service that larger competitors either can't or won't offer. It is these businesses which have underpinned our high streets for decades and if we continue to enable ways that undermines their viability, how are we going to regenerate our town and city centres? Task forces and strategies have their place but it's people and businesses that make things happen.

