

# Northern Ireland sportswear factory scrubs up in virus fight

March 27 2020, by Paul Faith

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A sportswear factory in Northern Ireland is now producing scrubs for local operations of Britain's health service

As other factories fall silent due to the coronavirus, the din of production continues at O'Neills sportswear factory in Northern Ireland, where staff have pivoted to making scrubs and facemasks for besieged

healthcare workers.

"You always feel proud of your product," business development manager Orla Ward told AFP.

"But this is just on another level because you really are getting it to the people that need it most at this really critical time."

Around 750 [staff](#) at the factory in Strabane, which makes kits and leisurewear primarily for Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) sports, were temporarily laid off as the COVID-19 crisis unfolded.

Teams and groups playing GAA sports—such as hurling and Gaelic football—began to postpone events and matches as the British and Irish governments restricted gatherings in a bid to stem infections.

"Our business was just basically drying up," Ward explained.

"Over the period of basically two weeks our order book went from extremely busy to practically nothing whatsoever."

But with the factory switching to produce scrubs for local operations of Britain's National Health Service (NHS), 150 staff have been able to return to work.

The news has been a small mercy for the town of Strabane, where the factory is the biggest employer.





Ranks of the skilled machinist staff are separated from each other under 'social distancing' guidelines

### **'Tsunami' of patients**

It has also had an effect on a national scale, boosting Britain's efforts as it prepares for a "tsunami" of new [coronavirus](#) patients.

Healthcare workers across Britain have complained of a lack of protective equipment for staff, who are at higher risk of contracting COVID-19.

"The managing director had been speaking to people here in the local hospital and realised that they were in desperate need of scrubs," said



Ward.

Ranks of the skilled machinist staff were back at their stations on Thursday, separated from each other under "social distancing" guidelines designed to slow the spread of the virus.

Surrounded by spools of vibrant thread and wearing masks made in the factory, they sewed the maroon fabrics which will soon be worn by frontline NHS staff.

Production began at the O'Neills Strabane location on Wednesday after the fabrics were dyed, given antibacterial treatment and shipped from Dublin—where the firm is headquartered.





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The Strabane factory is currently working to meet an order of 5,000 scrubs

The Strabane factory is currently working to meet an order of 5,000 scrubs—consisting of a set of trousers, a top and a mask.

"I think there's absolutely a great sense of pride that we can do this," said Ward.

"When you're faced with a challenge, look how quickly and how well you can step up to the plate and really help."

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