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13 March 2020**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Friday 13 March 2020

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163), and negatived.

Education (Guidance about Costs of School Uniforms) Bill

Second Reading

9.34 am

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

On 9 January, I was lucky enough to be drawn No. 1 in the ballot—the first private Member's Bill of this parliamentary Session. I will admit that at first I was not aware of the significance of that, until the avalanche of emails started to arrive, as did the meeting requests, the demands from the press and, of course, a mighty big lobby for very worthy causes. It gives me a real opportunity as a Labour MP to change the law—something of a rarity in recent years. Although the date of the Second Reading of the Bill is Friday the 13th, which may be unlucky for some, I am hoping that for thousands of hard-pressed families up and down our country, this day will be a milestone on the way to helping those in our schools and our constituencies.

My Education (Guidance about Costs of School Uniforms) Bill gives MPs from across the Chamber the chance to step up and do the right thing for our constituents. It is a genuine opportunity to put words into action, to change the law and to make school uniforms more affordable for families struggling with often very high and prohibitive costs. Today is an opportunity to help children such as Emily who, rather than facing the indignity of her classmates knowing that her family did not have the money to replace a lost PE uniform, asked her mum to write a sick note saying that she was injured. Today, Members across the House have the opportunity to help children such as Callum, who was put in detention because his parents did not have the cash to replace his blazer, which no longer fitted him because of a growth spurt.

As is often the case with yah-boo politics and spin in the media, the intentions of legislation can get lost in the narrative. I assure Members that the Bill is not anti-school uniform. The Bill is not a gateway to some slippery slope that paves the way to the abolition of school uniforms—far from it. As a teenager who went to a school in the '80s that did not have a uniform, I can vouch from experience that that was not a good thing. It highlighted the haves and the have-nots and the fashions of the day.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this important measure forward. Does he agree that a well-structured uniform policy can work out significantly cheaper for parents than a non-uniform policy?

Mike Amesbury: I do; I concur completely with the hon. Gentleman. When I was at school and people did not have a uniform—as I said, it highlighted the haves and the have-nots—the fashions of the day were really bad, particularly if someone had a highlighted mullet or, in some cases, Day-Glo leg warmers.

I believe, as does the Minister, that school uniforms are a good thing if they are affordable and inclusive. They are one of the ways that schools can poverty-proof the school day. They make children equal and take away the pressures to have to wear the latest fashionable and often very expensive branded clothes and shoes. Yet, too many schools needlessly apply high prices to a multitude of branded items of uniform, including jumpers, blazers, ties, hats, PE bags, coats and even drama socks.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the issue is also the quality of the uniform? I speak from experience as the mother of two teenagers. One attends a girls' comprehensive just down the road. I bought her blazer when she was going into year 7. She is now in year 11 and about to leave the statutory part of school and she is still in that blazer. It has been excellent quality.

My son, who is in year 9, is now on his fourth blazer because the quality has not been the same. He is in a different school. I absolutely support this Bill, but it must be about quality and ensuring that parents do not have to keep buying uniform. Obviously, children have growth spurts, but the quality of the uniform should be as good as we would expect.

Mike Amesbury: I do not disagree about quality, but we should also think about choice and affordability, and that is the key thing that this Bill addresses.

One parent wrote to me about a particular school that demands a different uniform for each house group. The march towards "if a child wears it, brand it with an embroidered logo" must end, to drive down costs and make uniforms genuinely inclusive.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I am delighted to sponsor the Bill. The hon. Gentleman mentions branding. Will he confirm that it is not his intention to stop all branding on school uniforms? It is quite appropriate for schools to require a badge on the blazer to promote the identity of the school and pride in the school, and he is not trying to restrict the ability of a school properly to brand its uniform.

Mike Amesbury: I thank the hon. Gentleman for sponsoring the Bill. I can confirm that it is not anti-branding. As we go through proceedings on the Bill, things will become clear. I thank the hon. Gentleman for the intervention.

The Bill also paves the way to extending choice and stimulating competition in the local retail market to bring down costs for many hard-pressed families—a point well made by the Competition and Markets Authority back in 2015, when it reminded school heads and governors

[Mike Amesbury]

to avoid making their uniforms available only from a single specialist retailer, which undermines competition and the equalising properties of school uniforms. Many parents are left unable to afford the right uniforms and have got into debt. There is also an effect on children. Wearing the wrong school uniform can lead to a child being bullied, left out or even excluded from school, which of course impacts on their education. The Children's Society estimates that 500,000 children were sent home for wearing the wrong clothes—something I have had confirmed by many of my constituents.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Sometimes people are sent home for really petty things like the wrong colour of socks. I know of a case in which a badge was cut out and put on a black jumper, but that still did not conform with the requirement for what was supposed to be the appropriate jumper.

Mike Amesbury: I agree with my hon. Friend; this is just simply sad and unacceptable. Children should never lose out on education because of the family's financial situation. Research released and updated today by the Children's Society, which has been working very closely with me on the Bill, found that parents spend around £337 per year on school uniforms for each secondary school child and as much as £315 a year for a primary school child.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): It would be remiss of me not to mention research that I have seen from the Schoolwear Association, which says that the average per year is £101.19, rather than the figure the hon. Gentleman cites. Is he aware of that research?

Mike Amesbury: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I have met the Schoolwear Association, which shared that research with me. The research I am referring to is from 1,000 parents who talked about the real costs of uniforms. The hon. Gentleman is right to cite some very good retailers and manufacturers out there that are providing good-quality manufactured goods. This Bill is not about penalising them—far from it.

Kevin Hollinrake: Further to the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) about the cost of uniform, the £340 in the research is not just for the uniform. It is also for shoes, bags and other things. The cost of the branded items, according to the research, was only £100 and they normally last for two years, so the actual cost of the branded items is more like £50 a year. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that point?

Mike Amesbury: The cost, of course, varies and the uniform is the uniform. If a school says a cap, a coat, a bag, a tie—all branded—are needed, some children will definitely feel left out if their parents do not buy those things, and families will struggle. It is a story I have heard numerous times from my constituents, and I know it is a national issue. Members across the Chamber will know of stories of hard-pressed families in their local communities. One of the most concerning things that the researchers found—I am sure we have heard these stories across this Chamber—was that too many

parents choose a school based on the cost of the uniform. The Children's Society has estimated that this has affected 500,000 children, and I hope we can all agree that parents should never be put in that position.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for introducing this important Bill. Dozens of constituents have told me how the high price of uniforms leads parents to cut back on food, how kids get detention for not having the right items and how that leads to feelings of shame and embarrassment. Does my hon. Friend agree that in the sixth richest country in the world, parents should not have to cut back on basics to meet the needs of uniforms for their kids?

Mike Amesbury: I wholeheartedly agree. My hon. Friend makes a strong point.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): Can we just be clear that this Bill will not affect the ability of schools to enforce school uniform policy?

Mike Amesbury: That is not the intention of the Bill.

I am not the first MP to campaign on this issue, and I must give credit to the sponsors of the Bill from across the Chamber. I also give a nod to the former MP for Birkenhead, Frank Field and, indeed my hon. Friend the current Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley), who is campaigning alongside me. I also want to give a nod to the former MP for Peterborough, Lisa Forbes. In her brief time in Parliament, she was a champion of this issue, while highlighting the unfair demise of the school uniform grant—a fact recognised by our shadow Secretary of State for Education, my good friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), who continues to press the Government every step of the way.

This Bill is not about the school uniform grant or extending the provision for projects such as breakfast clubs. It is part of our legislative landscape and should not be viewed in isolation to those campaigns. Alongside others in this House, I will continue to press the Government on these matters.

My Bill will require the Secretary of State for Education to produce new guidance that would make it a legal requirement for schools and their governing bodies to make affordability the top priority when setting uniform policies. In 2013, the Department for Education produced good non-statutory guidance, but there lies the problem. While some schools progressively responded to it, others have unfortunately chosen to ignore it. This Bill gives teeth to those good intentions.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his choice of this issue and the progress he has made with it. Does he agree that it would be very helpful if the guidance that he is arguing for included a cap on the cost of the uniform specified within the guidance?

Mike Amesbury: That is not the intention of this Bill. I am sure that some of this will be explored in Committee stage, if the Bill gets there.

The Bill also intends to break down monopolies with single suppliers, which, at times, is based on a historical nudge and wink. Fair and transparent tendering and

increased competition will help to drive down prices for hard-pressed families, while rewarding good retailers and manufacturers.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): I just want to take a step back for a minute. What does the hon. Gentleman think about the inclusion of PE kits, DT kits and things such as that? Much of the time, what a school specifies to parents is not just about the blazer, the shirt and the shoes, but about the other things as well. How does he think that that could be dealt with in this Bill, or does he think that we need to go wider still? May I also commend him for bringing this absolutely fantastic initiative before the House today?

Mike Amesbury: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention and indeed for his support. This Bill does cover the broad scope, as did the 2013 guidelines, so yes to his question.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Does he accept that one aspect of the cost of school uniforms is the value added tax, which is imposed on secondary school uniforms in particular? Does he agree that, now we are leaving the European Union, it is time for the Government to put their avowed intent into practice by removing VAT on school uniforms?

Mike Amesbury: I thank the hon. Member for that question. I cannot quite believe this, but I am actually going to agree with him. As a remainer, yes, I really think that people should take control of this issue; and, yes, this is an opportunity which, of course, the manufacturers and retailers have lobbied for over a number of years. However, although I agree wholeheartedly that that should be an opportunity, it is beyond the scope of this Bill.

The requirement by some schools for a branded logo on everything needs to be curtailed, to allow parents the choice of where to buy more items of their uniforms from a wide range of competitive retailers, including from supermarkets and low-cost retailers. I am not against schools having their own identity, far from it, but why not limit the number of branded items to a maximum of two, or have a badge that can be sewn on to a generic shirt or blazer? This Bill is about being fair while being smart, and making a real difference to families who are struggling.

The past three Governments have publicly stated that they intend to legislate on this matter—most recently in 2019, prior to the general election, when the Secretary of State responded positively to the *Sunday People* campaign—but legislation has been noticeable by its absence in the most recent Queen's Speech, and in every other one since 2015. After a number of meetings over the past few weeks, I have gained an encouraging amount of cross-party support, including from the Minister and his team, and I sincerely thank them for that.

In conclusion, this Bill is constructed in such a way that it will allow for a swift, effective passage through Parliament, and it has Government support. I look forward to reassurance from the Minister on how parents and schools will be engaged on the content of the guidance as part of this process. Most importantly, today, parliamentarians can help many families in their

own constituencies and beyond by getting this done. They should do the right thing by making sure that school uniforms are affordable for all.

9.53 am

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) on introducing this Bill. Like many hon. Members, I have received a considerable number of emails from constituents concerned about the unacceptably high cost of uniforms. It is perhaps unfortunate that many of these were part of a concerted mass email campaign that was somewhat sensationalist and inaccurate in nature, and did not in fact consider the specific situation in my constituency, let alone at individual schools in the Aylesbury area. That said, let me be very clear that I entirely support the proposal in the Bill that the Secretary of State should issue statutory guidance on the costs aspects of school uniforms.

It is vital that children should be able to attend school to focus on improving their life chances and not to experience any form of bullying, harassment or stress because of the clothes that they wear. In fact, the principle of a school uniform can be a great leveller. It enables children to form a joint identity, a common bond, in much the way that fans of a football team enjoy wearing replica kits to matches. Many children enjoy wearing their uniform, too. Only yesterday, I spent time with pupils from two primary schools in my constituency—William Harding School and St Edward's Junior School—visiting the Houses of Parliament. They told me that wearing uniform stops children being judged, and that it is easier to afford than many other clothes. They liked the way that a uniform helped to form a common bond and, ever wise as young children are, they pointed out to me that it would help to identify them if they got lost during their tour of the House, which did make me wonder whether we new MPs might have benefited from a uniform in our first few weeks here.

The advantages and benefits of school uniforms do not, however, mean that head teachers or governing bodies should be able to use them as a covert means to restrict admission. To insist on one particular supplier with unnecessarily high costs is simply not acceptable. Schools must be able to justify their uniform policies. The fact that this Bill puts guidance of cost of uniforms on a statutory basis is for the good. It is entirely in line with the Government's commitments, and I commend the hon. Member for introducing it.

The main point that I want to make today is that many suppliers of school uniforms are responsible businesses. Indeed, a competitively priced school uniform can be considerably cheaper than buying ordinary clothes, especially those from famous fashion or sports brands. I speak from personal experience, which is similar to that of the hon. Member. My own school in the '80s did not have a formal uniform, and the result was often close to a catwalk competition—a competition that I never won.

In my own constituency, the company Print Lab supplies 22 schools. Its secondary school branded uniform consists of blazer, jumper, tie, PE top, outdoor PE top, shorts and socks, for which the total cost is £107.50, and typically lasts for between one and two years. The primary branded uniform of four sweatshirts or cardigans,

[Rob Butler]

four polo shirts, the PE equipment and the bags costs £105.50. That works out at about 55p per day, so it is possible to do it at a competitive price.

That company is an example of the entrepreneurial spirit that we need to foster in our country. It was founded by Ian Goodchild in his mum's garage on Bedgrove in Aylesbury in 2012 and has grown over the past seven years so that it now employs up to 11 people at peak times. That company helps out the schools that it supplies to, sometimes by providing kit for sports teams and sometimes by providing free uniform for the least well-off. What is more, it is a firm that welcomes competition. Indeed, it outsells both Marks & Spencer and John Lewis at the schools where they are also approved suppliers.

In short, it is a British small business that is providing a competitively priced product, employing local people and helping the community.

There are many other such firms around the country, so let us use this Bill to recognise their contribution to the economy and to our schools. Let these firms set the example of how uniforms can bring real benefits to schools, but let this Bill also serve to stop schools insisting on a particular supplier and uniforms at inflated prices that provide a barrier to any pupil, and to demonstrate to the unscrupulous, the greedy and the irresponsible that there is no place for them in our education system.

9.58 am

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak in today's debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) on bringing forward this Bill.

I grew up in a family shop that also sold school uniforms for local schools in Hounslow. Interestingly, I remember how as a child the relationship that my parents had with other parents was important as was the relationship that they had with the local schools.

This Bill requires the Government to make new statutory guidance for all schools on the costs aspect of school uniforms, and it is right to ensure that schools give priority to the consideration of cost and affordability when setting and implementing school uniform policy. The Bill is rightly pro-uniform, because uniform acts as an equaliser between pupils, and many charities also support the campaign.

In preparing for the debate, I conducted a short survey of my schools, local suppliers and parents. I am also grateful to Prashant at School Bells, a local company providing uniforms for many local schools, for his input.

The Bill seeks to make school uniforms more affordable for parents, and I thank the Children's Society for its work, although its research on costs is worrying. It is also important to note that costs show great variation across the country. The schools I consulted suggested that the cost of their uniforms was considerably lower than the average, but an average is an average, and it shows high rates being charged across the country. We have to have a much more level playing field.

Schools sometimes foot the bill for school uniforms. A few years ago, I undertook some research covered by *The Guardian*. Schools were hiding the fact that parents could not afford the school uniform and—from the experience of shops in my constituency—telling the supplier

to cover the cost for them, allowing the parents to have the uniforms with the school paying later. In recent years, that has got worse, as family incomes have been squeezed. That is another example of the hidden costs and price of austerity.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware of the Children's Society research that has just been published? It shows that one in five families on lower incomes are struggling to pay for school uniforms. Given that the average cost is about £300 a year, that means they are cutting back on other things—[*Interruption.*] According to the research.

Seema Malhotra: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I, too, wanted to look at the detail of the costs, so when I did the research in my local schools, I asked about the individual items included. The costs were considerably lower than the full average coming through the Children's Society, but I am sure that as the debate goes on, the details of how that was calculated will be looked at closely. The point my hon. Friend makes, however, about one in five families struggling, is important. There is also variation across the country. We cannot allow that to be hidden.

Local authorities are another part of the picture. Sometimes they help in cases of hardship, but in Hounslow the grant has been cut from £120 to £60, which is not enough to cover the whole cost of a school uniform, even where it is cheaper. That is another example of the impact of austerity and its effect on children in our society collectively. The Bill will place a duty on the Secretary of State, as we have discussed.

In Feltham and Heston, almost 5,000 households depend on universal credit and have child dependants, with about 66% of them being lone parents. It is not surprising, therefore, when we look at the economics being dealt with by families, that thousands of parents are struggling to make ends meet. Anything we can do to reduce the costs of purchasing school uniforms for their children will be a positive step. For any parent to have to cut back on food or other basic essentials in order to afford school uniform—it happens at particular times of the year—is completely unacceptable.

I welcome the Bill. I look forward to the consultation on how to implement the guidance to get the long-term answer to this, with the input of schools, parents and providers.

Over the past few weeks, I have been contacted by many constituents. At first glance, the Bill seems uncontroversial, asking the important question of how we move forward. I want to make a few points for consideration on that. The first is about the quality and durability of school uniforms. That has to be considered because of the way uniforms might be supplied. None of us wants to see a situation in which school uniforms are produced cheaply, imported and sold in local supermarkets. We want to see a different way, in which durability and quality are also considered, with guidance on that as well.

Secondly, the single supplier arrangements have been much discussed. The Bill does not rule those out, but understanding in more detail whether schools should be allowed to have single suppliers is important. The analysis is mixed on the use of single supplier contracts and whether they drive up prices for parents. Some analysis

and examples show that the contracts can add value, as long as robust tendering processes are in place. A number of the schools that came back to me have single supplier relationships which, when they run well, can provide better for families because they ensure better year-round availability of products for all. Single suppliers also tend to overstock, allowing for tailored affordability and other relationships with the school in the interests of parents.

Bim Afolami: Stevensons, a retailer based in Harpenden, the Hertfordshire area and elsewhere, does precisely what the hon. Lady is talking about, often through single supplier contracts. Last year, it also gave £30,000-worth of uniform to disadvantaged parents. Is that not the sort of thing that the Government should also be championing?

Seema Malhotra: What is important is that schools' and parents' voices are heard. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, however, and I will come on to that in my remarks. We do not want unintended consequences: over the course of time, we might end up with less quality and less of a relationship—making school uniforms fit well and such things are all part of the relationship between the school, parents and providers, which can be important.

Thirdly, local suppliers invest heavily in stock, as has been said, and as part of their contract tend to overstock through the year, whereas supermarkets might only have a small amount of stock, prioritising it in the holidays. However, when kids change schools during the school year, for example, the risk is a delay with the school uniform. I have asked schools and suppliers whether they experience delays with uniforms and how quickly a parent can get a new uniform if one is damaged or a child moves school. That flexibility is important, so that parents do not have to wait and children are not told they cannot attend school because they are struggling to get the school uniform they need to be alongside their fellow pupils.

What the supplier relationship can provide is interesting, because we do not want a situation in which children are left unable to replace a damaged or torn uniform. I do not want to see a move towards purchasing uniforms from anonymous supermarkets. A worry—which, interestingly, has come up in other circumstances, such as the coronavirus crisis—is that different providers might have different colours and slight variations in the school uniforms, which signifies where a child has bought the uniform from, and that can let inequality in through the back door.

My fourth point is about community. Buying a school uniform for a child is personal. It might be a big milestone in that child's life. The relationships between local—often family—businesses and the schools can be important to help and support parents and their children through the big milestones of starting primary and secondary school. Important to those relationships, and where they work well, are the annual review meetings with schools, to ensure that any concerns or issues are raised, that schools and governing bodies have power in those relationships, and that standards are maintained as per the school's requirements. Standards need to be acceptable and proportionate, which is one of the important things that the Bill will introduce into the debate.

Overall, the Bill is welcome, and guidance on school uniform costs being placed on a statutory footing will be an important contribution to how we deal with the issue in the long term. As the Bill progresses and the guidance is developed, I am sure that the Government will consult as widely as possibly with school uniform suppliers, schools and parents. Research needs to be kept up to date, and school uniforms must be of the quality we want for our children in our local schools, but at a price that they can afford. Affordability and the impact on families is a prime policy consideration.

10.9 am

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): It is interesting, and in some ways welcome, to have a proposal before the House that attracts cross-party support, but also obliges us to consider it and debate it carefully. The hon. Members for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) and for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) have talked in the House about schoolwear costs—the latter quite extensively—as have numerous Conservative Members, and Ministers. Some of my comments, however, will be on other aspects of schoolwear, and approaches other than those that hon. Members suggested in other debates. I want to be unambiguously clear, though, that value is important, and that there are parents and carers for whom the cost of schoolwear is a very serious issue, even when we allow for the costs of a school not having a uniform, and cost pressures of every other kind. I take that issue as seriously for my constituents as I am sure Members in every part of the House do for theirs.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) for her comments. She made very sensible points about the special nature of the sector, and about stock, unintended consequences and quality, which I shall expand on a little. I suppose that one of the benefits of these sorts of debates is the measure of agreement; it allows us to achieve consensus, but also to draw out points that need to be made.

I have brief comments on the nature of the proposal, but will focus more on the pragmatic and practical. Views on school uniform—how traditional or otherwise it should be, and its role in promoting standards in education—vary. On the issue of cost, the schoolwear sector—retail and wholesale—deserves a fair hearing. Marge Simpson once said that she could not afford to shop at a store that had a philosophy. I wonder whether, for some, that feeling extends to schoolwear suppliers. In so far as the sector has a philosophy, I have found it very positive. Much of it relates to value. The Schoolwear Shop in my constituency of Northampton South certainly tries hard to keep costs down, but there are examples that illustrate why guidance must allow for differentiation between absolute cost and value for money. The team at David Luke Ltd of Manchester, for instance, led by Kathryn Shuttleworth and Mark Woolgar, have developed schoolwear that is not only low cost but made from recycled materials. That is a move away from fast fashion and waste, but also enhances the hard-wearing nature of the clothes they sell.

The approach of seeking decent-quality, and thus longer-lasting, clothing, as well as interesting and innovative ways of supporting parents on lower incomes, is also taken by Jan Richardson and her team at Total Clothing in Peterborough. I have seen that approach taken by Georgina Bradley at Sussex Uniforms as well. Someone

[*Andrew Lewer*]

who has to buy three pairs of trousers for £10 each, instead of one pair for £25 that lasts three times as long, is not saving any money.

My encounters with business people in this sector, and messages and information from others, show me that the sector cares about the schools and the parents whom they serve, and understands the price pressures on many of them. The fact that it seeks to resolve those issues through durability and ethical sourcing shows that there is more to value than the sticker price, and that is something to which schools, parents and the Department for Education should have regard. Tendering for sole supply arrangements can keep prices on the cost and value matrix down, and I welcome the place for that idea in the guidance, and believe that it addresses many of hon. Members' concerns. I very much hope that when the guidance goes back out to consultation, the schoolwear sector, and especially its best exemplars, get a full opportunity to contribute and explain the special business model that the sector requires, which we have heard a little about. I hope we also hear from charities and campaign groups of various kinds.

The need for a balanced assessment is underlined by the hugely detailed, and—I would assert, reverting back to my time in academia—peer reviewable work that the Schoolwear Association has done on the true cost of uniform, which acts as a corrective to work done by others. We have heard that the average basket price for branded garments—uniform and sportswear—for a child starting secondary school is £101.19, and that the cost is £35 to £40 a year thereafter.

We have all been children, and many of us have school-age children; I do. Opinions in the House and the real world will diverge based on personal, family and constituents' experiences. There are families where someone did not go to a good school that they would have thrived in, because it was thought that they could not afford the uniform. Alternatively, there are families who found having a school with a proper uniform a great social leveller; it gave them freedom from the peer pressure of, "Your jacket's from the supermarket, but mine's Gucci." That relates to the PE point. If requirements are too generic, all those expensive brand labels that the Bill's promoter, the hon. Member for Weaver Vale, spoke about will return to schools. That makes the case for having lower-cost items that are branded by the school, rather than by Nike, Adidas or someone else at unbelievable cost, which would put pressure on those on low incomes to keep up with the Joneses.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): That brings to mind a childhood memory of my mum telling me that we could not have the Dunlop Green Flash; we would have to get the £3 bargain plimsolls. I dreaded going to school the next morning, and the embarrassment of doing PE in those crummy plimsolls. I want to ensure—this is the hon. Gentleman's thinking, too—that the principle of more affordable PE kit and sportswear is enshrined not just in the Bill, but in the guidance, so that the young people of Ilford South who aspire to be sporting heroes do not have to worry about whether they can afford to be the next Ravi Bopara or Nasser Hussain.

Andrew Lewer: The hon. Gentleman provides a good illustration of how personal experience informs rather than inflames the debate. His point also illustrates the importance of local areas and schools having a measure of control and responsibility. That is not always delivered by an attitude of, "The man in Whitehall knows best." There is space for guidance—that is the purpose of our discussion today—but guidance and over-prescription in a country the size of ours, with the number of schools we have, would be unwelcome.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the vast majority of schools take a very responsible approach when designating their school uniform? We might be looking at a relatively small number of exceptions when we talk about more expensive uniforms.

Andrew Lewer: What my hon. Friend says is true in the overwhelming majority of cases. It is interesting; I have found from my meetings with larger schoolwear suppliers, and the intermediate businesses that provide wholesale stock of those garments to a local area, that some of them have prevailed on schools to take a more measured and responsible approach. It is a tribute to people in the sector that although they could say, "Yes, you should absolutely have a cerise lining and charge £250," they have said that they do not think that is a very responsible approach. People may respond, "Oh, the sector would say that, wouldn't it? It's just in it to gouge everybody." That is not, I hope, something that we would necessarily say about other sectors, such as the defence sector or the theatre. This sector, being so close to the people it serves and so embedded in the communities it serves, overall does take its responsibilities particularly seriously.

Nobody suggests that a uniform makes or breaks a school, but if a school is seeking to change and drive up standards—possibly in response to not very satisfactory Ofsted results, or in response to parent pressure to step up their game—a uniform makes the statement that it is on a mission to do that. Also, schools with a much longer tradition of success that they want to keep up encourage pride in their uniform—pride in their brand, and in what they have achieved for the young people that they serve. Uniform has an important role to play there.

I went to a state school with a comprehensive intake, Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School in Ashbourne in Derbyshire. I owe it so much that I mentioned it in my maiden speech. It has a traditional uniform, including right through the sixth form. That is not why it is a good school, but it plays its part.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. I also went to Queen Elizabeth's School, but in Barnet. We had a traditional uniform, and we had houses. There were different uniforms for those in different houses. Does he agree that these sorts of things raise the ethos of a school, and therefore raise aspiration, and deliver better outcomes in the long run?

Andrew Lewer: That is absolutely true. I do not want to play school status bingo, but that does sound very grand because all we had for a house was a little plastic or metal badge—that was it.

Kevin Hollinrake: We had a similar thing: little yellow or green badges that we could stick on our uniform. The guidance illustrates this. A school in Cumbria allowed students to put their house logos on their jumpers, but they were stitched on, so they could be taken off, with the jumper given to a brother or sister, a relative or whatever. Uniform can therefore be branded with a school motto or house logo without it costing parents too much.

Andrew Lewer: It can. I put a big question mark next to this section of my speech in case it instigated a wide range of people's recollections of various kinds. However, I have been pleased to hear those from Members. I do want to mention Duston School in my constituency, led by the no-nonsense head, Sam Strickland.

An aversion to philosophy and a preference for pragmatism has overall served this country well, in contrast to some others, right back to the glorious revolution of 1688. That aversion is echoed in Lord Palmerston's statement in Parliament in 1864:

"We cannot go on adding to the statute book ad infinitum."

Lord Palmerston was not necessarily prescient there, considering the amount of statute that has been passed since. But it in no way detracts from the concerns of Members across the House on a whole range of issues, including this one, not to wonder sometimes whether regulation is always the answer and whether we benefit from being what groups as diverse as *The Economist*, the Institute of Economic Affairs, the Centre for Cities and the Institute for Public Policy Research regard as the most centralised state in the western world. That is a question for Government—especially a Conservative Government with a healthy majority—to ponder henceforth.

However, with this legislation, we are where we are. To seek comfort, I ask the Minister to address three matters. First, will the schoolwear sector be fully consulted and have its role respected as guidance goes out for consultation? Secondly, will sole-supplier arrangements be allowed when there has been tendering? Thirdly, will the key consideration be value for money? In tendering, quality of product can be a consideration as a better way often of saving parents money than the pure sticker price for a fast-fashion, not ethically sourced poor product that may wear out quickly.

10.22 am

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) for using his good fortune in the private Member's Bill ballot to bring forward this critical Bill, which I am sure is welcomed by parents and carers across the country. Many hon. Friends have mentioned this. I still remember that sense of pride many years ago when I first put on my primary school uniform and that sense of belonging to a team. I was in the red team, which made sure that I would join the Labour party later in life.

I am a parent of two young children. When my eldest daughter started reception in September, I remember the sense of pride when we put on her school uniform, yet in the back of my head I could hear my husband going, "How much did that cost?" School uniforms are expensive for a number of families in Vauxhall and across the country. As parents and carers from

disadvantaged and lower-income households struggle, these costs are really high; they are struggling from pay cheque to pay cheque. That is the reality.

We need action on lower costs for school uniforms and to provide flexibility for many families who are struggling to get by. That is why I am pleased to support the Bill, which would give the Government the power to set guidance once and for all about the cost of school uniform for parents and prevent the spiralling costs they are seeing up and down the country. The impact of those costs can be severe, with one in six families having to cut back on basic food essentials and one in eight getting into debt just to pay for school uniforms. That should not be happening. When parents and carers cannot afford these costs, their children also face the brunt of it, as we have heard, with some schools imposing draconian school discipline and some kids actually being sent home. The Children's Society did a survey and reported the experience of a child who was sent home just for wearing the wrong school uniform. I am therefore glad that the Government are accepting the Bill today, but its failure or success will come from the strength of the guidance issued by the Government. I am therefore happy to see the Minister is here listening to all our contributions.

I urge the Government to use guidance to limit the amount of branded items that are strictly necessary. If a school feels that use of its logo is necessary—I think it does provide a sense of emphasis—and is right, it must be sure that parents and carers can use cost-saving measures such as self-attachment without fear of their child being excluded or reprimanded.

Mike Wood: I think all parents of school-age children have been slightly frustrated by the rate at which their children tend to grow out of school uniforms, long before those uniforms wear out—invariably, children have a growth spurt just after they have been bought a new uniform. Many schools have introduced second-hand uniform shops. Does the hon. Lady think that that should be encouraged and made best practice in all schools?

Florence Eshalomi: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point. As the eldest of three girls, I can guarantee that my mum used to recycle all our school uniforms. To the horror of my immediate sister, when she started secondary school, she had to wear my blazer. That blazer was passed down again when my cousin started at the same school. Those initiatives are excellent to help families who are struggling.

Seema Malhotra: My hon. Friend has reminded me that I was the fourth of four girls, all at the same school. I did not have a single piece of new school uniform; I had three hand-me-downs.

Florence Eshalomi: Thankfully, I have a son and a daughter, so there will not be any passing down. If I could, I would.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): As the sister of an older brother, I assure my hon. Friend that hand-me-downs happened and I can wear a navy blue jumper as well as any boy.

Florence Eshalomi: That highlights the problem for a number of parents and carers right across the country. If we pass the Bill, its measures will bring costs down significantly for a number of parents and carers across the country. However, even if it passes, the hard reality is that school uniforms will still be an expense that some of our poorest in society fail to afford. While there is support for poor families, it is at the behest of local authorities—which have also seen their budgets cut in the last 10 years—and how much support they can offer.

The proponents of school uniforms argue that they create a level playing field for children from all backgrounds and drive down inequality, but how can that be the case when parents and carers are having to fork out hundreds of pounds to pay for uniforms and when support for poorer families is based on a postcode lottery? The Bill is not to question the rights and wrongs of school uniform—I think we all agree with that—but it gives the Government the potential to create a genuine level playing field for pupils up and down the country and ensure that our children continue to learn.

10.27 am

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate about guidance on and costs of school uniforms. We have all been through school and had the experience of looking forward to buying school uniform, or our parents buying it. Hon. Members have rightly highlighted how, when we go to the shop to get the blazers and sports kit, it really sets that sense of transition from primary school to secondary school, which is a really important stage in life, for the vast majority who go to schools with these uniforms.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi). I have three brothers so I was in a similar position on hand-me-downs. The hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), in his speech, made an excellent contribution. The reassurance that the Bill is not about getting rid of school uniforms is so important, because they hold an important place in our society. It is not just the uniform—the tie and the badge—that is important; on sports day and in sporting competition between different schools, they allow people readily to see their team and who they are supporting. Uniform lends itself to that ethos and identity within a school.

It is far cheaper to have a school uniform, because it avoids that competitive catwalk approach. My hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) highlighted what can happen if a school's sports kit is not also part of the school uniform; by attempting to reduce the overall cost of the uniform, schools can actually allow other areas of school life to become dominated by cool kit, style and fast fashion. School uniform is important in many different ways.

Perhaps this is a minor point, but children will only appreciate a mufti day at school if they have to wear a school uniform the rest of the time. However, there is a concern that non-uniform days come a little too frequently now and happen for too many different reasons. Perhaps there should be a reduction in such days, because it is now on these occasions that competition over clothing comes out, undermining the value behind having a school uniform.

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that schools deciding to have dress-up days can cause additional pressures for families, who have to keep finding different outfits for their children?

Chris Green: That is a very good point. Fortunately, I was at school before it became the fashion to have these themed days—for World Book Day or other occasions—for which parents have to go out and spend money on outfits. I am glad that I missed all that, and having to dress up as Harry Potter or anyone else is not something I would ever have looked forward to when I was at school.

It is quite right that we emphasise the value in good-quality school uniform. This ought not just to be about the cheapest price. A lot of small shops provide good-quality school uniforms. We ought to be aware of the concern that in many towns around the country there might not even be a question of which school uniform the children are wearing, because it will be the cheapest option—from whichever supermarket is in that town. Supermarkets provide a valuable space for affordable clothing, but we need to be careful that they do not push out the small businesses on our high streets by doing so.

It is important for schoolchildren to wear a uniform because they may end up wearing one when they leave school, as people in so many walks of life wear uniforms. Madam Deputy Speaker, Mr Speaker himself, and so many others around this Chamber and around Parliament wear a uniform. The police and nurses wear uniforms. Arguably, as is evident on the Benches around me, many male Members of Parliament dress in quite a standard way. Schoolchildren are likely to wear a uniform of one sort or another throughout their working lives, so they may as well get used to it early on.

School visits are one of the most interesting parts of any Member of Parliament's life, whether that visit is from a secondary or a primary school. We often do the fearsome or dreaded Q&A, where there can be a range of questions—from “What is your favourite colour?”, which I deal with quite well, to “What are the relative merits or demerits of the party leaders?”, which is a far more involved question. It is sometimes good to ask the kids questions as well, and to get them to participate in democracy, especially given the importance of referendums.

In these sessions the children do ask, “Why do we have to wear a school uniform?” and the arguments can be set out as to why it is so important that they do. But I asked the children of St Bartholomew's Church of England Primary School in Westhoughton to vote on whether their teachers and headteacher should wear a school uniform as well, and that question was agreed to not 52% to 48%, but with unanimity within the classroom. So many schools have school councils now, and I think that teachers should respect the children and democracy; perhaps we should be expanding this Bill. I do not know whether the hon. Member for Weaver Vale wants to seek to expand the remit of his legislation, but maybe we should be asking whether teachers should wear school uniforms as well.

10.35 am

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in favour of this Bill, promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike

Amesbury), who has truly identified a real issue faced by millions of families across the country. The Bill takes the necessary steps required to alleviate the problem.

The cost of a uniform can vary dramatically across a community and across the country, with the only uniformity being that the relatively cheapest uniform is still extremely expensive. The school uniform serves a wide range of important functions. It provides a uniformity for what young people wear to school, regardless of their family's financial situation. A young person cannot be made fun of because their family cannot afford the most up-to-date clothes, for example. This uniformity, which was in part designed to help some of the poorest in our society, is in fact now placing an undue cost on families.

In my constituency alone, the cost of a branded blazer is between £31 and £37, a tie is £6.50 and a PE top is £15. The average cost of a secondary school uniform is £340. In its 2020 update, the Children's Society has announced that this cost is now even higher, with costs rising to £361. Some 43% of parents said that the cost of school uniform alone had affected their families in some way, and one in 10 families reported getting into debt trying to pay for uniform costs. We also need to bear in mind that this is a yearly, and sometimes twice yearly, cost. Some Members in this Chamber may hear "£37 for a blazer" and think, "That's not too bad", but as young people grow their uniform often needs replacing yearly and sometimes twice a year, so these figures become an annual cost. This leads to poorer families being unable to replace worn out or outgrown school uniforms, which leads to stigmatisation and bullying, meaning that uniforms are failing to meet their purpose of providing a baseline for all.

I know that we cannot do away with the cost of uniforms altogether, and I welcome the work that Governments have done on this matter previously. The Government's advisory guidance, for example, does emphasise the importance of cost considerations. However, as we have heard from the contributions of my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale, the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Rob Butler), and my hon. Friends the Members for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) and for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), who have made good contributions, this guidance is not enough and is seven years out of date. It also lacks the teeth required to make schools lower the cost of uniforms, although I am aware that many schools have schemes to help.

This Bill is so important because it will empower the Government to take the statutory steps necessary to alleviate the financial burden being placed on families across the country. The Government have already pledged to make their guidance statutory, as stated in the 2015 better markets plan. My hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale has helpfully drawn up the Bill up for the Government, and I can see no reason why they would wish to oppose it, given that it is in line with their own stated aims and is admirably written. By passing this Bill into law, the Government can take the necessary steps to limit the amount of items that must be branded. It is often this branding that increases the cost of uniforms, as families are forced to purchase from a single provider.

Chris Green: Does the hon. Lady share my concern that reducing the range of branded school uniform items would enable—and perhaps, to some extent, encourage

—a pathway for people to have more branded items that are not branded by the school, which would slightly undermine the concerns about bullying and a lack of cohesive identity?

Ms Rimmer: I have heard the hon. Gentleman, but the Bill means that the Government would have to take the necessary steps to limit the amount of school uniform that must be branded.

The Government could also use the powers contained in the Bill to ensure that schools must have a fair and open tendering process at the end of each financial year, which would increase competitiveness and help drive down costs, and the savings could then be passed on to families.

One such family is Paula Hay's. Paula has four children. Her youngest is 14 and still at school. Over the years the family have struggled to pay for uniforms, especially when the three older boys were all at secondary school at the same time. Paula said:

"Having to buy three sets of everything was expensive and I would have to rely on my parents to help out. If they had not covered the costs of things like shoes and trainers, I am not sure how we would have managed it."

Paula's daughter is currently in year 9. At the start of the current school year her school changed its uniform, which meant Paula had to buy everything new again. She said:

"I bought two skirts and a blazer for £89, and then we had to add a tie and a few bits for the PE kits. It was well over £100 on those items. Then there were additional shirts, jumpers and tights—it all adds up. Many of the schools use that same shop, which means you don't have a choice and have to buy the more expensive items. It's not fair to those from low-income families."

This Bill can and will, if utilised effectively by the Government, make a real difference for families like the Hays. That is why I commend the Bill to the House and call on Back Benchers and Front Benchers to support it through all the stages required to make it law.

10.40 am

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): May I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) for introducing this private Member's Bill? As a former teacher, I understand the impact that the high cost of school uniforms can have on parents.

I would like to start by stressing the importance of school uniform, of which I am an ardent supporter. I recently visited two of the top-performing schools in my constituency: the first is a brand-new through school, Armfield Academy; and just last week I welcomed my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education to St George's School. The headteachers of both schools explained that the introduction of a zero-tolerance policy on school uniform had had a profound impact on school standards and results. When I spoke to some of the brilliant pupils at those schools, they told me how proud they were to wear their uniform. They said it gives them a sense of belonging and community, and that it helps them get into the correct mindset for learning. It also puts all pupils on a level playing field, where their personality, achievements and attitude make them stand out, not the cost of their clothes.

I also understand the stress that having no school uniform can bring to parents and children. A single non-uniform day a year can be a cause of concern for some. Parents will worry about sending their children to

[Scott Benton]

school if they have not bought the latest fashionable brands—a point articulated by the hon. Member for Ilford South (Sam Tarry) a few moments ago. Bullying can seriously impact children's development, and many fear what their peers will say on a non-uniform day. A standard uniform can alleviate these worries and allow children to focus on what is important: their education.

Chris Green: No doubt many parents in my hon. Friend's constituency take a sensible and pragmatic approach to school uniforms, as indeed did my own parents. I had a total of two blazers during my time at secondary school—I remember that on my first day the sleeves went past the tips of my fingers. It is really important that people make sensible, pragmatic choices about school uniform, and that schools support families in need to ensure that they can have the appropriate wear.

Scott Benton: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. I am sure that all Members will have heard the phrase, "You'll grow into it." I suppose many parents hope that their child will not grow out of it.

As a primary school teacher, it never ceased to amaze me how hard-wearing school uniforms can be, when I would see children knee-slide across the hall at the school disco, or rolling around in the playground. I believe that there should be simplicity and longevity in school uniforms, to make the cost to parents lower than that of personal clothes.

However, the rise of branded school uniforms and the requirement to have a vast number of items, including branded PE kits, separate GCSE clothes and bespoke skirts, is making school uniforms unaffordable for many. I do not believe that parents should have to decide where to send their children to school based on which has the least number of bespoke garments, many of which may never be worn. Branded items can cost multiple times the non-branded equivalent, and using sole suppliers only exacerbates the problem.

Uniform costs can enter hundreds of pounds as children outgrow clothes and shoes. My constituency of Blackpool South unfortunately has some of the most deprived wards in the country. It is known that material deprivation can have a serious impact on school attainment. Despite being a big supporter of the previously mentioned zero-tolerance policy, it is often the children of low-income families who fall foul of the rules, and they can miss out on crucial learning as a result. I hope that this change in legislation will help those parents trying to do the right thing to send their children to school with the necessary tools to succeed.

I welcome the Government's support for the Bill, and their commitment to levelling up per-pupil funding across the entire country. They have a clear commitment to ensure that all children receive a first-class education, whatever their background and wherever they live. Schools have a responsibility to ensure that the costs to parents are reasonable, and it is right that the Bill will make that statutory.

10.46 am

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): I have been inundated with requests from constituents asking me to support this important Bill, so I am delighted to

be in the Chamber today, and indeed to be a sponsor of the Bill, which has been introduced by my good friend the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury). I hope that Members on both sides of the House will come together to make a real difference on a matter that affects so many parents and students.

Despite my infancy in this place, I already feel that, with all the rhetorical back-and-forth, the bluster, the hyperbole and so forth, we can sometimes lose track of the real issues that affect the day-to-day lives of our constituents. In our communities across the land, whether they voted blue or red, too many working and non-working parents, and even grandparents, are worried about the cost of school uniforms. I acknowledge that we have heard different views today on the costs of school uniforms, but the Children's Society, as my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale pointed out, has put the cost at more than £300 a year, meaning that an estimated 1 million parents have to cut back on food and other essentials to cover the cost.

Although I very much hope that the Bill will proceed today, we must remind ourselves that we are not in the business of gesture politics and warm words, so any new guidance offered to schools must tangibly and materially improve the situation for parents and pupils. I am sure that hon. Members will make similar points—indeed, others already have—but it is important that we get this right while we have the opportunity to do so. Any new guidance must look seriously at monopolisation within the sector. Monopolisation by suppliers is increasing costs, to the extent that it is harming the pockets of parents, and in its very nature it is exclusionary. Schools should comply with the guidance, and the guidance should address the exclusivity arrangements in the sector. I am certain that the best way to ensure that this takes place is to put in place mechanisms to see that the guidance is enforced. Schools should have to demonstrate clearly that a tendering process has been undertaken if using a single supplier, for example, which I am sure can be achieved in ways that need not be very bureaucratic.

When consulting with stakeholders and before introducing new guidance, the Government and the Department for Education must put parents at the heart of the consultation process. Schools must be required to reach out to parents who may not naturally be forthcoming about their concerns at the cost of their child's school uniform. Assumptions and assertions by school leaders will only take us so far. As with tendering, we should be asking schools to demonstrate clearly that they have attempted to engage with parents, so that we, as political representatives, can continue to get a clear picture of the reality of forking out for uniforms. If done right, that will contribute significantly to guidance that is comprehensive and will universally improve the lot of our children.

To sum up, I believe—as pretty much all in the House do—in the principle of school uniforms. The benefits are many and have been reiterated in this place today. We have a great equaliser in the school uniform. However, we should not be creating inequalities elsewhere. As I said at the start of my speech, let us get on with it, but let us do it right and make a real difference.

10.50 am

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) on promoting the Bill. I am pleased that the Government

are supporting it, and I am happy to do so as well. I was a governor of schools for 10 years before coming into politics, and uniform issues weaved in and out of my time as a governor. Let me start by saying that I am a strong supporter of uniform and the role it can play in building identity and discipline, as well as the role it should play as a leveller for children of all different backgrounds. The Bill is necessary because uniform is not acting as the leveller it should be at the moment, and I want to touch on three aspects.

The first is the financial burden. As we have heard, the £340 figure is widely disputed, and that is the limitation of a survey of a small proportion of parents. On the other hand, some of the very low figures that have been sent my way do not seem to take account of the fact that children often need multiples of the same item. They also do not take account of the growth spurts or the obstructive activities that children can get up to at breaktime and lunchtime, which may mean that further items are needed during the course of the year.

Most studies, including the ones from the Department for Education, seem to indicate that there are parents for whom uniforms are a real financial burden, and who sometimes get into debt and have to give up essentials. Before I came to the Chamber, I received some information from the Competition and Markets Authority—I am sure other Members did as well—which said that this is one of the areas it receives most complaints about, which is an interesting point to note.

It is true that schools and local authorities offer support to families with the cost of uniform, and when I was a governor, we did the same, but as with any support offered to people experiencing poverty, the stigma of applying for it can mean that they do not do so, even when they are eligible. I remember, as a governor, that all the schools I was working with bent over backwards to get children who were eligible for free school meals to claim them, but whatever they did, families were uncomfortable doing so. We therefore need this statutory guidance, to ensure that everybody is getting the support they need.

The second aspect is attendance, which is fundamental to attainment. When I was a charity chief executive, I became familiar with other charities such as School-Home Support, which works on the relationship between schools and families, particularly trying to combat issues of truancy. At the heart of truancy were often issues of uniform—items of uniform that had been lost or that children had grown out of, and sometimes items of uniform that children were embarrassed to wear because they were dirty. Sometimes School-Home Support meant putting that uniform in a washing machine, which the family lacked, and fixing that issue fixed the attendance problem.

At the charity I ran before coming here, we placed young people—mostly those who were eligible for free school meals—with employers, and we often had to buy them the items they needed to feel comfortable in the workplace. Many of those young people now have successful careers in those companies, but if we had not bought them the original item they needed to feel comfortable going on their work placement, they would never have taken up that opportunity.

The third aspect is the way the schoolwear market operates. I believe in competition. I think that higher prices are not usually the result of too much competition,

but rather too little competition. I have heard from schoolwear suppliers in my constituency about the issues they face in supplying schools with uniform. They feel that they can sometimes cut the cost to parents by 25%, while maintaining the same quality. Quality is important—it should not be like my occasional eBay purchases where I think I have got a bargain, and two weeks later I have to buy the same item from a more reputable source. Those suppliers feel that they can match the quality, and yet they are kept out because of exclusivity arrangements that schools have reached without going through a proper tendering process.

I have been pleasingly surprised by how many within the schoolwear industry welcome the Bill. They would like to see it enable a level playing field for them to compete on quality and price, so that their business can succeed in the way that I think we would all like them to succeed. I hope that, with these guidelines, we can enable businesses to operate on a level playing field, while protecting families who, for too long, have had to pay too much for uniform.

10.56 am

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): I congratulate my good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), on his Bill. As we all know on the Opposition Benches, 10 years of austerity have had a major impact on the most vulnerable and plunged many into precarious financial positions. Liverpool, Riverside has some of the most deprived wards in the country, and many parents do not have the money to feed their kids, particularly during the summer holidays, never mind being able to find hundreds of pounds for branded uniforms. If this Government are serious about levelling up, they need to get this Bill done.

10.57 am

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I am delighted to speak in the debate and to co-sponsor the Bill. When my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) asked me to support it, I quickly agreed for a number of reasons. The first is that he is a very decent fellow, and I enjoyed the time we spent as members of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. Secondly, I thought it was a very sensible Bill. Thirdly, he told me that the Whips were supporting it, which is always a bit of a help.

The Bill has a simple purpose. It is not about restricting the ability of schools and school governors to set a sensible branding policy for their school. It is about increasing the amount of competition, which it is right that we do. It is great to hear so many Labour Members speaking about the need to create more competition—they are absolutely right that that is what we need to do. We should guard at all costs, at any time, against monopolies, be it private sector monopolies or, even worse, public sector monopolies. When we think about the way we run many different things in this country, we have to try to prevent monopolies. Public sector monopolies are worse because there is nobody to hold them to account. If the Government own a monopoly, who can possibly hold that public sector monopoly to account?

It is right that we support the creation of more competition. Competition is the best way to drive up service and reduce costs, as I know from my own life. I

[Kevin Hollinrake]

draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I have been in business for most of my life, and I still am. As we look to become more effective and do better in our marketplace, the thing that has made our business more competitive has been when new competition has entered the market and started to put pressure on our business. At that point, we look at our business model, try to reduce costs in order to gain market share, and try to drive up our service. It is fundamentally right that we try to engender more competition in every single marketplace. Competition is not just a dog-eat-dog situation that is about driving other businesses out of business; it is about giving the consumer more choice. That is the fundamental principle about such needs and our ambition to make the consumer market more competitive. That is absolutely right, and I believe the Bill does that.

We also have to guard—unfortunately, this tends to happen in some instances—against vested interests. For some reason, some schools will use a uniform policy for the wrong rationale. It is sometimes about generating more profit or more revenue for the school's suppliers. It is absolutely right that this Bill is not about restricting the ability of a school to put in place a sensible uniform policy that allows for branding. It is simply a Bill that means we do a minimum of branding, but can increase competition for the other elements of the uniform.

In the Government guidance, there is a simple example of how certain schools have been able to increase competition and reduce costs for their uniform. One particular school is Caldew School in Cumbria, and it has done that by keeping as many items of uniform as possible generic. Whether it is a simple pair of black trousers or a white shirt, this is about reducing the number of items in the uniform policy that are branded.

The hon. Member for Weaver Vale talked about restricting the number of branded items to two. I think that would probably be an unreasonable restriction. We can see why a school may want more latitude in having various items of clothing with different badges, but there are ways to do that without excess cost to the consumer, particularly by allowing people to buy a badge, rather than a whole blazer.

Florence Eshalomi: On branded items, I remember when my oldest child started school in the September, I thought we were ready, but then I realised I had not sewn the name tags on all the items. I had to spend the next three hours sewing them on each branded item, with the pain of pricking my fingers quite a number of times. Hence limiting the number of branded items may be welcomed by many parents.

Kevin Hollinrake: I can see why we may want to reduce the number of branded items, but I guess that has to be done for name tags—for my son, Charlie Hollinrake, I remember my wife sewing them into jumpers, T-shirts and stuff—even in non-branded items, as well as in branded items.

I, too, was a school governor—for six years at our local school. In fact, it was the school I attended myself as a young child, which is a great place to be a governor. There is no doubt that most people can see that having a sensible uniform policy instils pride and identity in

young people at their school. It can enhance productivity and create a greater focus, and it is less of a distraction if everybody is dressed in a similar way, they are dressed well, a uniform policy is properly implemented and properly imposed, and standards are high. However, schools can clearly do that without saying that children have to have a particular pair of black trousers. If they let people choose the more generic items—those that do not need to be branded—the greater choice for the consumer will drive down the cost of the uniform.

Interestingly, the Government's own figures show that the average cost to parents of a uniform, adjusted for inflation, is lower than it was in 2007. It is right that we look at this policy, and that we take forward the guidance and make it statutory, but we should not think that lots of profiteering is going on in this sector. Generally, the costs are fair. On the costs mentioned earlier, the research from the Children's Society says it is £340 a year, but that includes lots of other things. The research from the Schoolwear Association shows that, for branded elements, it is about £100 for a typical suite of items, which would typically last two years, so the annual cost of branded items is more like £50, which would be a fairer cost. That is not of course to say that some people will not still struggle: for a lot of people, £50 a year is a significant cost, so it is right that we should seek to minimise it. It is right that there should be measures in place to help people on low incomes afford the uniform.

Just outside my constituency, there is a business called NextGen Clothing, which is a member of the Schoolwear Association. I have spoken to those there, and they absolutely support this legislation. They talked about how they provide branded uniform items for schools, and they also provide a lot of the generic items. They compete on those generic items with Tesco and Marks & Spencer. For example, a pair of black trousers costs £15.40 from that provider, whereas from Marks & Spencer it is about £13. They know they are in a competitive market, and it is absolutely right that they are in a competitive market. It is not just about cost; as several Members have said, it is also about quality.

An interesting point was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) about VAT. VAT does apply to children's clothes for children above the age of 14. After we have left the European Union, we may perhaps look at that. It has been the historical position for some time, but clearly people leave school at a later age than when that VAT policy was implemented, and perhaps we should look at it again. He is quite right that it would reduce by 20% the cost of uniforms for parents and young people.

I am very pleased to be able to support the Bill, and pleased that the Government are supporting it. I encourage all Members to do so, so that this Bill makes a smooth passage through the House.

11.6 am

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me for calling me to speak in this debate on a subject that affects families across my constituency of Putney and across the country. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) on taking up this Bill. Like many others in this debate, I am speaking in favour of

uniforms, but against the excessive cost of uniforms, which in my experience is increasing. I am in favour of the statutory guidance to enforce the Department for Education's existing guidelines, which make cost and affordability the priority in choosing and setting a uniform list.

I have four children, and it is an extremely proud moment when I dress them up in their uniform—they are very proud to be wearing it—and take them off to their new school. However, there was a heartbreaking moment for me when I attended an open day with my son, when we were going around local comprehensive schools, and I sat down to hear the headmaster's speech. In front of me, another mum sat down and picked up the information about the school. I saw her picking up the uniform list, looking down it and turning to her son and saying, "We can't go here", and they left. That school was never available to them. With that school's current uniform policy, if someone buys one item of clothing of each of the items, it is £468.50. That is a huge bill to face in September, if their child is going to school for the first time. The uniform policy is a hidden cost for parents at this school, but that parent will never have a chance to have a say on that school's uniform policy because she will never be going there. That is why this legislation is so important.

Sarah Chapman, who works at the Wandsworth food bank, told me:

"The impact of school uniform costs for families on low incomes can't be underestimated"

in her experience of talking to families.

"It's a constant theme in conversations with families at the food bank, especially before the new school year starts, and especially if children are moving to secondary school."

She says that branded uniforms—it is not just blazers and PE kits; at some schools, it is also skirts and trousers—can push low-income families into struggling to pay the rent and to buy essentials such as food. She says:

"Many parents tell us that it was so much better when the uniform needed was generic grey/black skirts/trousers...which they could buy at much lower cost",

but still at good quality, from supermarkets.

The food bank has recently been supporting the mum of one daughter of secondary school age, who fled domestic violence and was unable to work or claim benefits while the Home Office processed her asylum application. When Sarah met her, the pressure of previous trauma and present inability to provide basic essentials for her daughter meant she had recently attempted to take her own life. She said that one of the big things for her was that her daughter, at secondary school, was having to wear hand-me-downs she had long grown out of, and as a result was being laughed at by other students. Local church members clubbed together to get her money for her uniform, and she now feels more comfortable being at school in clothes that fit, unsurprisingly. That has lifted a lot of pressure off, but has not fixed the root problem that prescriptive, branded uniforms place unnecessary financial pressures on low-income families. That family will face the same problem again as the daughter grows.

A Children's Society survey has found that 13% of parents are getting into debt to cover school uniform costs, so that story is not alone. Nearly one in six

families said that school uniform costs were to blame for them having to cut back on food and essential items. Uniform to start secondary school can be several hundred pounds, but the costs do not need to be so excessive, and the Bill will result in policy reviews that put affordability first. As many hon. Members have said in this debate, the problem is not with having a uniform, but that schools are increasingly using compulsory branded clothes from exclusive suppliers as part of the uniform. It does not need to be that way.

The Children's Society research also shows that having an exclusive supplier increases the average cost of a uniform by £71 for secondary schools and £77 for primary schools. My children have been to several different schools during their careers, and there is no school they have been to that does not have an exclusive supplier. The Bill will stop comprehensive schools using uniform as a form of selection by the back door. Legislating for guidance by the Secretary of State to all schools will require them to follow current best practice, which says that when considering how school uniform should be sourced, governing bodies should give highest priority to the consideration of cost and value for money for parents. That will put parents and governors back in the driving seat when it comes to reviewing those policies. Items should be available from good-quality and affordable stores, and exclusive single supplier contracts should be avoided. Too often, schools do not follow that, and governors and parents do not have a basis to challenge those decisions: I think that is the difference that this legislation will make.

I am very pleased to support the Bill. Too many families are paying over the odds for uniform, are going into debt, or are being forced to choose between breaking the rules and breaking the bank. Let us make sure that no child is unable to apply for any school just because of unnecessarily excessive uniform costs.

11.12 am

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): I welcome the Bill. The hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) and I met two or three weeks ago in a television studio where we were on a programme together. Much like my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), the hon. Gentleman is such a nice man that I think he could persuade me of most things, but he was certainly an articulate advocate for this very important issue when we discussed it in the green room at the television studio, and he has been so again today. I am very proud to come here today, as I said I would, and support him and the Bill.

I will not repeat all the reasons why uniform is a good thing. We have heard lots of reasons so far. I am stood here today because a constituent came to me and said, "James, we have an issue. My daughter, who is unemployed through no fault of her own, has two children at high school in your seat. She is facing a cost of over £300 in respect of the clothing and sporting equipment for her children to go to school." It was not a case of affordability or an issue for debate: my constituent's daughter simply did not have the money to provide the uniform that the school in my constituency required her children to have to go to school in the first place. I made inquiries with the school. It is a good school, but it did not have any procedures in place to assist with the costs. I went to my local authority, which also did not have any procedures

[James Daly]

in place to assist with the cost. It seemed to me that that was a completely unacceptable situation. It is not a question of one person or 5,000. The interests of the one are just as important as the interests of the 5,000 who are affected by something.

The Bill is welcome. I think at its heart is a very simple message. It would give a clear signal to school governing bodies that uniforms must be affordable: how on earth can anyone argue with that? Local authorities are not private businesses, they are state organisations, and they need to provide the best means by which our children can thrive and succeed. Discrimination should not happen as a result of what they have to wear, their background or their parents' income.

I am a chair of governors at a nursery school, so we do not have some of the problems we have heard about today, but it is in extremely deprived area of my seat. We have a wide catchment area, but many parents at my school could not afford the prices that are being charged for uniforms, and I do not want them to be penalised for that.

This is a simple but excellent Bill that will help and assist in a positive way. But there are other things we should take away from this debate. We should not simply stop here, and as MPs we should work with our local authorities and encourage our schools. Some schools in my area are fantastic and help their pupils through various payment plans and other ways of affording uniform, but we should try to work with our local authorities to ensure that all of them have some financial support in place for constituents, like mine, who are not in a position to send their children to school because they cannot afford the uniform.

11.16 am

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bury North (James Daly). They say every day is a school day: well, thanks to the speech by the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green), I now know what a mufti day is.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) on introducing this important Bill, and I am proud to be a sponsor of it. Last week, I was contacted by a woman whose grandson was given a detention because he did not have the right school shoes. Families are waiting for payday to get their children the right uniforms, and in the meantime pupils are suffering. Many of my constituents have spoken to me about the affordability of school uniforms, including one family who had to pay £200 for one child for school uniform and PE kit. That is completely unacceptable. Buying a school uniform for your child is not a one-time occurrence, because kids grow. Parents and carers spend sleepless nights worrying about how they will pay for new shirts, shoes or trousers. Children from poorer families who are unable to replace worn-out or outgrown items of school uniform struggle, and that has to stop.

Last summer, I launched my school uniform exchange in partnership with Barnsley Council. We placed donation boxes in libraries across Barnsley so that families could benefit from donated items of school uniform that were no longer needed.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): In Warrington, we have a number of community-led school uniform swap schemes to ease the burden on parents, particularly where they have children in different schools or children who seem to outgrow their uniform as quickly as they get it. Indeed, Warrington food bank also provides school uniforms to families who need them. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill would support such initiatives by making school uniform more affordable, not only for individual families but for the community schemes that support them, by ensuring branded items are kept to a minimum and generic items can be bulk-bought?

Stephanie Peacock: I completely agree, and my hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. Her community, like mine, has shown kindness and generosity. Parents and carers across my community came together, and we collected hundreds of items. Families should not be forced to fork out for increasingly expensive items of school uniform. Compulsory branded items and limited numbers of uniform suppliers have caused school uniform prices to skyrocket, severely impacting the household budgets of many families.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent and very powerful speech, no doubt based in part on her experience as a teacher. Does she agree that this huge issue that we have been discussing this morning also needs to be seen in the context of static or falling family incomes and rising fuel, transport and food prices?

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This issue does have to be seen in the context of the past 10 years. My area in Barnsley has had the worst cuts in the country, and no doubt that has had an impact. There is no reason why clothes from everyday shops should not be used at a fraction of the cost. Right now, there is no legislation in England that regulates school uniforms. The Bill will make a difference to families in Barnsley and across the country who are desperate to give children the best start in life, even if that means spending money they cannot afford on school uniforms that are unnecessarily expensive. New statutory guidance on school uniform costs that must be followed by schools when setting out their uniform policies will help to put an end to spiralling costs. Barnsley families who are already struggling, due to a near decade of Government cuts to local services, are being pushed into financial difficulty by compulsory uniform purchases.

School uniform is an asset to children's education, from instilling a sense of school community to supporting good behaviour, but if school uniform prices and policies remain unchecked, they will increasingly become a way of entrenching inequality as schools become a place of punishment and stigma for poor children. The Bill has the potential to change those children's lives, and I am pleased we are supporting it today.

11.20 am

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak on the Bill. It is one of those occasions when we in this House get to speak on an issue that affects all of us in our everyday lives and the everyday lives of our

constituents. I do not yet have school-age children, although it will not be long—my eldest will go to primary school later this year—but my mother was a teaching assistant for many years and my wife—this is in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, Madam Deputy Speaker—is a governor at the local primary school. This is an issue that I see and hear about all the time. It matters to us hugely.

We ought to consider at the outset whether, in today's age, there is a need for school uniforms. We live in a world where we want access to the highest form of education for everybody. We live in an egalitarian age, so it is worth considering at the outset whether there is a need for school uniforms. I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) for making it clear at the outset that this is not an anti-school uniform Bill. In fact, in many ways, we could say quite the reverse. The Bill seeks to ensure that the benefits, as I see them, of school uniform are available to everybody.

There are benefits to school uniforms, provided that they are managed in a judicious and sensible way that ensures there is access to education for everybody. First, it gets children used, at a young age, to dressing formally and professionally. Those habits are harder to bring on later in life, once people have got used to acting and behaving in a certain way. Whether we go on to work in business, law, medicine, Parliament or whatever it happens to be, the need to dress professionally is something that everybody has to learn. It may be a suit and tie, or it may be less formal than that, but it gets people used to that at an early age, which I feel is a benefit.

The second benefit is one that we have heard mention of today: esprit de corps. It is pride. I think it was the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) who made mention of the pride that she had in dressing up her children and sending them off to school on their first day. It provides a pride in an institution. I think we are more likely to see a school that is successful and well regarded in the local community, that children want to go to and is seen to be successful, if people have pride in it. Parents look around and see their children there and are glad that they go to that school.

There is a further benefit, which perhaps has not been mentioned today, which is that it makes things a bit easier for the pupils who are at the school. We live in an age that is increasingly pressured for young people. We have seen that very powerfully in the context of the mental health debate. More is required of young people at a younger age through the Instagram effect: everyone is expected to look good to show that they are on top of fashion and to show that their lives are the glossy image that all their friends are portraying.

Laura Trott: Does my hon. Friend agree that a house system and an ability to identify who is part of your clan within a school is very important to guard against some of the mental health issues he so rightly identifies?

Robert Courts: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. She is absolutely right. I do feel that a house system and that pride in being part of a group, as well as the competition between houses, is very helpful in providing a support network. That does help to guard against mental health difficulties, too.

I wonder whether any other hon. Members agree on this point. I do not suppose that any of us, when we were young, particularly enjoyed putting on a school

uniform. We would have much rather dressed more informally, following our friends in whatever the latest and greatest trends and fashions were at the time. So no one will thank us for school uniforms, but they do have the advantage that children can just wake up and put it on. They are not required to consider how they look. They are not required to consider whether they are in keeping with fashion, whether they have done better than they did yesterday, or whether they are looking better than their friends and peers in school. To that extent, it helps with focus. It helps students to focus on what they are meant to be doing, which is going to school and focusing on learning, without that added pressure. There are already so many pressures on young people, which we discuss so often, arising from peer groups, social media, the internet and magazines, so it may be that there is that additional benefit.

Even if we all accept that point—I suspect we are all more or less on the same lines in seeing that there is a benefit—there is no getting away from the fact that in some circumstances a school uniform can provide a pressure on parents. I hear in my own postbag, as much as other hon. Members do, from those constituents who struggle with the cost. In some circumstances, it is a cost that they are unable to bear.

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend is making an excellent point. Obviously, nobody is suggesting that there should be no school uniform, but if we did not have it the cost of clothing children throughout the school year, with the extra pressure on shoes and so on, could be even more than if there was school uniform.

Robert Courts: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for that excellent point. He is absolutely right. I spoke a moment ago about the pressure on young people of having to look their best and having to comply with fashion in the absence of school uniform. Of course, that pressure does not just impact on them; it also impacts on the parents who would have to bear the cost. If there is pressure—which one of us does not want to do the best for our children; everybody has that feeling—there will be a cost on parents in providing the latest pair of shoes or any other item in the absence of school uniform. He is absolutely right to make the point that in the absence of school uniform the costs on parents could, in fact, be worse.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): Does my hon. Friend accept that it is not just that the cost in total is higher? There is also more social stigma on poorer pupils in a non-uniform environment. When we had a non-uniform day at school, I distinctly remember that, instead of us all being the same, there was suddenly great competition—and very expensive competition at that.

Robert Courts: Absolutely. That is another excellent point. Younger people have an absence of social tact when it comes to pointing out such differences. Schools can be quite brutal places in the sense that the filter that is there in later adult life is absent. Pupils can feel very much that they are the odd ones out if they come from a family who cannot afford the latest fashion.

Damien Moore: Does my hon. Friend agree that there should be more co-operation between primary schools and secondary schools on generic items such as trousers,

[Damien Moore]

skirts, shirts and blouses? A parent might buy an item right at the end of a child's time at primary school that might well fit them in secondary school, but they cannot use it because the uniform is completely different. Does he agree that if local schools got together and worked on generic items, there could be a completely different outcome on cost, because of all the other items parents have to buy when their children go to secondary school?

Robert Courts: I do. That is another excellent point. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for raising it. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) made the point about a student going to school with a jacket that is too long, where it looks like you are wearing your father's clothes because your parents are trying to get the longest possible wear time out of them. That is understandable and I suppose that that will happen in any event. There is nothing much we can do about that. I suspect that the Government cannot legislate to stop that sort of thing. It is beyond the abilities of this House. *[Laughter.]* He is absolutely right that when children get to the end of the school year at primary school and they are due to go off to secondary school and have to have new clothes, the old clothes essentially have to be dispensed with when they go to secondary school. We will in due course deal with what will be in the guidance and I will make a few comments about that in a moment, but I think there will be some consultation and that is a point that could be raised.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): On the point that was made about generic uniforms, does my hon. Friend agree that schools could provide those not only for primary and secondary, but to work in areas with gang problems and where people are being attacked because of their school uniform? If there were more generic, simplified uniforms in areas of gang violence and in areas where a uniform is creating mental health issues for someone walking through a certain neighbourhood, they could help. Could we make it as easy as possible for people to have certain base pieces of uniform? Could we look at that—how we could help to level this inequality? It is probably something for the schools to look at, but it is also something we could examine.

Robert Courts: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and I am glad that she has. I will come in a moment to the question of how we institute and work the legislation. It is right that decisions be made locally. I will make a comment or two about that in just a second, but that could also be part of the consultation.

Chris Green: The point about transferability from primary to secondary school is incredibly important, and I appreciate the point about not looking too distinctive in particular neighbourhoods, but we have a very mobile workforce. People go from one place to another, and therefore families go from one place to another, so does my hon. Friend agree it is important across the United Kingdom that, as far as possible, people can transfer uniforms from one place to another?

Robert Courts: Both my hon. Friends have drawn attention to the importance of having, essentially, a base layer—perhaps the shirt and trousers could be fairly

standard across regions and the country—and then an interchangeable element giving the individuality and the esprit de corps that could be taken off if required.

Andrew Lewer: Could I provide my hon. Friend with some constructive challenge, following some of the comments from colleagues around me? Aneurin Bevan once said that nothing is too good for the working class. Nothing should be too good for any school in any area, and therefore every school should be able to have a distinct and clear, rather than excessively generic, identity, out of pride in their school. I would rather that than everyone being in clothes that look like everybody else's.

Robert Courts: That is also an excellent point. My hon. Friend touches on the philosophical point that I will come to in just a moment, if I may. I will make a little progress first though.

We all want to avoid the feeling where someone wants to go to an excellent school in their area but cannot because of cost; or perhaps that is the only school, but it comes with a cost burden they do not want. I think the hon. Member for Putney alluded to that point. That is clearly something we would all want to avoid. How we do that is the philosophical point. I generally take the view that the man in Whitehall does not know better than local areas, that over-centralisation generally comes up with the wrong result and that the individual knows better what is right for them and their family than a centralised machine. Therefore, it is quite uncomfortable, on first principles, that the Government should propose to involve themselves in this level of regulation.

Neil O'Brien: My concern is not so much the gentleman in Whitehall as the gentleman in the courts, because what we are discussing is the creation of statutory guidance, with the prospect of disputes over school uniform policies being referred to the courts. Does my hon. Friend agree that, while we want to reduce costs, we must draw up this guidance in such a way that minimises the use of this new statutory guidance as a political weapon to cause trouble for academy schools, for example?

Robert Courts: I could not agree more—my hon. Friend is absolutely right—but that point does not so much go to the principle of the Bill as to what goes into the guidance when it is drafted. That is a matter for the consultation, which we should all want to look at in great detail. A lot of the concerns raised about the Bill allude to what is to be in that guidance and the consultation process, which I understand will happen in due course.

Philosophically, I would prefer national government not to involve itself in this level of detail. That is fairly standard Conservative thought; I suspect that most of my hon. Friends would agree. So what are we trying to do with this Bill? Ultimately, Conservatism is about pragmatism and seeking the result we would all wish to achieve, rather than being obsessed with or trammelled by dogma. In some circumstances, therefore, I think it appropriate that the Government step in and Parliament legislate, and that is what the Government are ultimately trying to do here.

The Department has already produced the guidance; the only question here is what someone can do if that guidance is not followed. As I understand it, the Bill

seeks to provide that, in extremis—where a school is not listening—there is an appeal to the Secretary of State, who could then intervene to work with the school to address those concerns. The Government are not proposing to impose a certain school uniform type, or to abolish it, or to be the recourse in the first instance for any complaint. As I understand it, in all circumstances, that would remain with the school and the school governors.

This brings me to the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer)—I apologise to him for not having addressed his point earlier. I am interested in freedom, personal choice and localisation and localised decision making, and it seems to me that the Bill does not contravene those fundamental principles. If schools locally decide they do not want a generic uniform, they could make that decision. Equally, if they decide that across a particular town or region it would be in the interests of their pupils to do that, they could adopt that principle and make that choice. I am happy with that in these circumstances.

Neil O'Brien: Does my hon. Friend agree that, as we move from non-statutory guidance to statutory guidance, actually, there is a strong argument for somewhat looser guidance and more carve-outs? For example, achieving non-single supplier status is much more difficult in remote rural areas than in the middle of London. In some sense, the guidance, if it is to be statutory guidance, needs to be looser, if we are to avoid lots of appeals to the Secretary of State and excessive clampdowns on our hard-won school freedoms.

Robert Courts: Yes. That is another superb point. I hope this is a useful debate for the Minister in thrashing out in advance some of the points we will need to consider in the consultation. One of the great successes of this Government and their predecessor Governments over the last 10 years has been the creation of freedom and choice for schools, which has led to the outstanding educational results we have had, and I would not want any of that to be reversed. I am very aware of that.

I would like more competition in the provision of school uniforms. Generally—again, this is fairly uncontroversial Conservative thought—I believe that more competition will generally lead to a better product and lower prices, and I would like that to be the case here. That said, I am aware of my hon. Friend's point that that might be hard to achieve in rural areas, and I certainly would not wish a school to be penalised for transgressing a rule that it has no choice but to contravene.

As a general principle, I would like the Government to stay out of people's professional affairs and lives wherever possible. I would like outstanding teachers to do the job of teaching and to concentrate on their passionate desire to make people's lives better, without worrying about being taken to court or excessive regulation coming from Whitehall. I am, therefore, very aware that there is an important balance to be struck here, but that is a question for the consultation and the statutory guidance that will come after it.

My final point is about quality as opposed to sheer cost. Some excellent points have been made about quality items that could be handed down through the generations. We have heard great examples of that on both sides of the House. Sheer unit cost ought not to be the overriding point, if quality is being lost in the process.

Overall, however, while at first glance some aspects of the Bill seem counterintuitive for this Government, it is a judicious use of small-scale intervention to do our best for something that matters to us all—the welfare of families in our constituencies and the children and students who go to our schools—and therefore I support it.

11.39 am

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I start by wishing my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) a happy birthday—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hooray!"] I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) on introducing this important Bill and thank all hon. Members from across the House who have spoken in today's debate. He is not just an hon. Friend, but an actual friend, and not just mine, because it seems that the hon. Member for Bury North (James Daly) and other Members have taken to him as well. I do not think that that is down to his good fashion sense—[*Laughter.*] As he pointed out, school uniforms can hide some of the disastrous fashion mistakes that many of us have made. My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Sam Tarry) mentioned his school uniform fashion, his trainers in particular, and many Members will know that I have an obsession with shoes, and I have put my own little twist on things with the ones I am wearing today.

I join my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale in paying tribute to the former Member for Peterborough, Lisa Forbes, who introduced a similar Bill in the previous Parliament and did so much to bring the issue to the nation's attention. My hon. Friend's Bill is important because there are no binding rules on school uniforms in England. I hope the Minister's response will answer my hon. Friend's points about limiting branded items and breaking down the monopolies of single suppliers, and many Members quite rightly mentioned the quality of school uniforms.

I reiterate that this Bill is not anti-school uniform, as my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) outlined in her valuable contribution. We also heard from the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) and the new hon. Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton), who continues the legacy of the previous Member for his constituency with his passion for education and his personal experience, from which I am sure the House will benefit. I also acknowledge the expertise of the hon. Member for Wantage (David Johnston) shown in his contribution. The hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) made a pithy speech—[*Laughter.*] There was so much of value in it that there is not enough time for me to go through it all, but he clearly has a talent that will be used many times in the House in the coming months and years.

I am pleased that there is a consensus across the House today on this Bill. It was in November 2015 that then Tory Chancellor promised to legislate on such issues, but we are now four years and four Education Secretaries on. I have responded to three Conservative Queen's Speeches and still nothing has happened. It has fallen on Labour Members to step in, introducing two Bills in six months. My hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale, with the help of Back Benchers from across the House, including the hon. Member for Thirsk

[Angela Rayner]

and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), has had to do the Government's job for them, and I hope they will now offer him their full support.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale mentioned in his opening speech, school uniform costs blight working families in England, and many Members have spoken about examples from their constituencies. Although I am in a privileged position now, I remember all too well just how expensive it was to put my first son through school. It is a problem that still affects my constituents today, as well as the friends I grew up with. My hon. Friends the Members for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer), for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker), for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson), for Putney (Fleur Anderson) and for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) all expressed that point eloquently in their passionate contributions today. Their complaints echo the concerns of the mums who gave evidence to the Select Committees on Education and on Work and Pensions last summer and spoke of the strain of school uniform costs and the huge pressures put on their budgets in the school holidays. The Minister will know that the previous Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee warned the Government that school uniform costs reinforced the financial difficulties that many parents face during the summer holidays. I pay tribute to the organisations and MPs who assist with the swap of school uniforms to help those parents.

Many Members mentioned the figures from the Children's Society that were released today, showing that parents are spending over £300 on uniforms and that hundreds of thousands of children across England are going to school wearing incorrect or ill-fitting uniforms. I know that some Members question that research, but many families watching this debate know the reality, and I welcome the work of the Children's Society that has contributed to today's debate. Parents have reported that they have had to cut back on essentials like food to cover the cost of school uniforms, and children have been sent home and denied their education, but this Bill will change that. The hon. Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) and others made important points about pragmatic considerations, and it is right that we consider them, but it is also right that I share that I also have a love for "The Simpsons" and that I am about to hit a milestone which means that I am old enough to remember the Bartman. [Laughter.]

The Bill will ensure that hard-pressed parents will not suffer the indignity of their children being sent home because they are wearing the wrong uniform. It will free up money for parents to spend on activities for their kids during the summer holidays. Above all, it will ensure that no child is priced out of school, because our fundamental belief is that education should be free, and under my national education service it would be free and lifelong at the point of need as well. This Bill takes us one step towards that ideal. I am proud to endorse it today, and I urge all Members to support it.

11.46 am

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): I congratulate the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) on his success in the private Member's Bill ballot and thank him for choosing the cost of school

uniform as the subject of his Bill. School uniform has so many positive benefits for pupils and schools alike, and I, along with many of the House today, greatly value its contribution to school life. I am pleased that the Government are able to support his Bill and, indeed, to be working with him, so that families are financially reassured, not burdened, at back-to-school time.

As the hon. Gentleman stated, this Bill is not anti-school uniform—"far from it," he said—because he remembers his time at a school without a school uniform in that fashion golden age of the late 1970s and early 1980s. He pointed out that a lack of school uniform highlights the difference between

"the haves and the have-nots".

My hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Rob Butler) cited pupils from William Harding School and St Edward's Catholic Junior School in his constituency, who said that school uniforms stop children being judged on what they wear. He also went to a school that did not have a school uniform at the time and where the result was close to a "catwalk competition" that he claimed he never won, which frankly surprises me—[Laughter.] My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) raised the cost implications of dress-up day, which was an issue of particular concern at his old school: Hogwarts—[Laughter.]

We debated this issue just a few months ago in a Westminster Hall debate secured by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy). Then, as now, our position is that school uniforms should be affordable and good value for families. I am particularly grateful to the hon. Member for Weaver Vale for choosing this topic, as it is a subject that crosses party lines and the Bill will positively improve the lives of families across this country. I support the way that the hon. Member constructed the Bill as a straightforward mechanism to put the non-statutory guidance on school uniform costs on to a statutory footing. I hope that that approach means it will progress quickly through the House.

Neil O'Brien: As we move from non-statutory to statutory guidance, is the Minister conscious that some of the issues touched upon in the current non-statutory guidance, such as religious freedom, cultural differences, parent voice and the governor's responsibility to take into account reasonable requests for change, could become very politically contentious? They could drive a large number of cases on to his and his fellow Ministers' desks. Is he sympathetic to my thought that we should be clear in new statutory guidance about the kinds of things that will still be the subject of local school freedom and local choice and not the decision of the man in Whitehall?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Those issues are important and are all covered in the non-statutory guidance. The Bill does not seek to put those items on to a statutory basis; they will remain in the non-statutory guidance. The Bill seeks to put the cost elements—just the items relating to the costs of school uniform—into statutory guidance.

A school uniform is important. It helps to create a school's identity. It fosters belonging and, with that, a sense of community. It can make background and family income less transparent, working instead to highlight

commonality among pupils. It is a “social leveller”, in the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer). For many pupils, wearing their uniform gives a sense of pride. As the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) emphasised, that is a key objective of a school uniform. When pupils represent their school at events or competitions, their uniform plays an important part in creating a team spirit.

The Government encourage schools to have a school uniform because of how it can contribute to the ethos of a school and help it to set an appropriate tone, supporting good behaviour and discipline. My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton) cited a school in his constituency that saw a marked improvement in academic standards following the introduction of a zero-tolerance policy on school uniform. That is why affordable uniforms are so important. School uniforms are also important in teaching children how to dress professionally, as pointed out in the tour de force of my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts). For many schools, a school uniform can be a reflection of the school’s history or the history of the local area, and it is right that schools are able to continue to honour tradition in that way and preserve their long-standing identity.

The Government also believe that it is right for the responsibility for setting school uniform policy to rest with the governing body of a school, or the academy trust in the case of academies. It is for schools to decide whether there should be a school uniform and, if so, what it should be and how it should be sourced. The Bill upholds and protects schools’ decision making in those areas. It upholds all the freedoms that are so important to the Government and to my hon. Friends the Members for Witney and for Harborough (Neil O’Brien).

In an increasingly autonomous school system, it is right for schools to make those decisions, but in doing so, it is essential that they consider value for money for parents. Issuing statutory guidance will enable schools to take decisions within a sensible framework that prioritises the issue of costs for families.

Rob Butler: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Bill will also help those parents who have children in different schools and therefore do not benefit from the possibility of handing down a uniform from one sibling to another? The affordability that would result from the Bill would help those particular parents.

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend raises an important point. No matter how much we try to have uniform swap exchanges, as I will come to, or, indeed, hand-me-downs, when there are different schools with different uniforms, inevitably parents will need to buy a new uniform, and in those circumstances we want to make sure that the costs are affordable for those families.

Seema Malhotra: I thank the Minister for his sympathy with the values of the Bill. Will he make a few remarks about how he will engage across the country as the Bill and the statutory guidance move forward? Will he reassure the House that teams in Whitehall will be gender-balanced? We have had three references to men in Whitehall today, but I think we all acknowledge that there are women involved in the work of Whitehall as well, and it is particularly important to give that message in the month of International Women’s Day.

Nick Gibb: If the hon. Lady turns her eyes to the civil service Box, she will see that six out of seven members are women, reflecting the gender balance that is prevalent in the Department for Education. She raises an important point about the statutory guidance, and we will be talking to schools, suppliers of uniforms and all the stakeholders about making statutory the guidance that has already been drafted.

We can all appreciate the positive impact that a school uniform can have on the sense of cohesion and community, but equally, we understand the financial burden that it can present, particularly for lower-income families. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) said, a school uniform can often be less expensive than not wearing school uniform. In 2015, the Department commissioned the cost of school uniform survey, which showed that the average cost of a school uniform was £213 and that the average cost of most uniform items decreased between 2007 and 2015, once adjusted for inflation—a point referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). More recently, the Schoolwear Association undertook a survey that found that the average cost of branded items for a child starting secondary school was £101 for both uniform and sportswear, and that the average annual spend per parent on branded items was between £35 and £45.

The Children’s Society has today released a report which found that parents said they spent on average around £315 on primary and £337 on secondary school uniforms per child. These reports may not all present the same picture of the cost of school uniforms for parents and will depend, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston) pointed out, on what is included in the survey. How many pairs of trousers, for example, are included in what parents buy for their children? However, I think we can all agree that the cost can have an impact, particularly on lower-income families, and that it is therefore crucial that school uniform costs are affordable. That is why this Bill is so important and why statutory guidance is needed.

Many schools have, in fact, already made efforts to support vulnerable families with the cost of school uniforms, whether through pupil premium grants or through second-hand uniform schemes such as the school uniform exchange in Barnsley, as pointed out by the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock). I would like to see every school finding a way to make second-hand uniforms available. My younger brother, whom you know, Mr Speaker, had the advantage of wearing my hand-me-downs on occasion, and it did not do him any harm.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly) is right that schools should be able to help the poorest families with the costs of school uniform. This Bill sends a clear signal to schools that the costs of the school uniform must not be a barrier to parents choosing a particular school for their child or for a child attending a particular school. School uniforms must not be unreasonably priced, and schools must not disregard the importance of achieving value for money for parents. We will be producing statutory guidance on the cost aspects of school uniforms that makes it clear to both parents and schools that uniforms must be affordable and value for money. We will be engaging, as I have said, with key stakeholders to understand their views as statutory guidance on uniform costs is drafted.

Sam Tarry: One school in Ilford South has written to me of its concerns about items that are not strictly part of the school uniform—for example, hairbands that have to be black or the overcoats that the girls wear to school. I wonder whether the guidance that is being prepared could include some flexibility, so that schools cannot specify things that are not school uniform and therefore increase the financial burden on parents.

Nick Gibb: The non-statutory guidance says that branded items should be kept to a minimum, and we support that view. On issues such as hairbands, I would ask the hon. Gentleman to visit the Thomas Jones school in Saint Mark's road in west London, which has very strict guidance for pupils on issues such as hairbands and other things—small things, such as not having dangly keyrings hanging from their school bags. The consequence is that pupils there are very smart, despite the fact that many of them come from disadvantaged backgrounds. It does create a sense of community, a sense of work ethic and a sense of equality among children from different financial backgrounds. Issues such as hairbands can, sometimes, be more important than the hon. Gentleman might think.

James Cartlidge: I endorse the point my hon. Friend is making. When I was at secondary school, we were not allowed to wear white socks. Obviously, I am not talking about games. I am talking about the socks that children wear with their school uniform and school shoes. Aside from the fact that they look terrible, does he agree that there is no financial implication of requiring children to wear socks of a certain colour? It just looks smarter and more in keeping with the style of the school.

Nick Gibb: I bow to my hon. Friend's experience of fashion as to whether they look good or not. He is right that just requiring a certain colour of sock, or indeed a hairband, does not necessarily add to the costs for the parents, but it does send a clear message that the school has very high standards of dress and appearance, and that can have an impact on academic standards and the work ethic of a school.

A number of hon. Members have raised issues that relate to the contents of the statutory guidance, and the starting point for that guidance will, as I have said, be the existing non-statutory guidance on school uniforms, but there are two particular issues that I wish to address. The first is branded items. Of course, it is understandable that schools will often want to have branded items of uniform that are specific to their schools, such as a branded blazer or a particular tie, and, at present, the Department's guidance advises schools to keep such branded items of uniform to a minimum, because multiple branded items can significantly increase costs. Although the Government believe that that is the right approach, we do not want to ban branded items altogether. Branded items such as a blazer of a particular colour or style may well be part and parcel of a school's history or ethos and may not be available, for example, from a supermarket.

The second issue is single suppliers. The Department's guidance already recommends that schools avoid exclusive single-supply contracts unless a regular competitive tendering process is run to secure best value for parents. Again, the Government believe that this approach provides

the right balance to secure open and transparent arrangements and good value for money. Competition is key to keeping costs down, as pointed out in the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton.

Neil O'Brien: I am grateful to the Minister for giving so much of his time. Does he agree that statute often casts a long shadow as people overreact to things? For example, I struggled greatly to sign up to my village newsletter because of people totally overinterpreting the general data protection regulation. Is the Minister sympathetic to my plea for a non-exhaustive list of things that definitely are allowed? Many schools will think, "Oh, gosh, what does this guidance mean? We had better not do this and not do that, because the guidance might say this." People can be very panicky. Will he please lengthen the non-exhaustive list of things that are definitely allowed?

Nick Gibb: I take on board my hon. Friend's important point.

For the supply of certain bespoke items, which form part of a school's uniform, single-supplier contracts can have value. It ensures year-round supply; it allows the supplier to provide a full range of sizes, not just the popular sizes; and it secures economies of scale, so I do not believe that we should ban those arrangements. None the less, we want them to be transparent and competitive.

My hon. Friends the Members for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) and for Northampton South, as well as the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), raised the issue of the quality and availability of school uniform, which is something that a single supplier from a specialist school uniform retailer will be able to deliver.

We trust headteachers to take the right decisions on these issues, and once the statutory guidance is issued, to abide by it. Where that does not happen and parents have a legitimate grievance, however, there must be an enforcement mechanism. As now, if parents have concerns that their school's uniform is too expensive, they should raise that with the school and, where issues cannot be resolved locally at the school level, parents may raise it with the Department for Education. Were a school to be considered to be acting unreasonably on the cost of its school uniform, the Bill would enable the Department to act. In extreme cases, the Secretary of State could issue a direction to a maintained school under sections 496 and 497 of the Education Act 1996 to comply with the guidance.

In the case of academies, a provision in the funding agreement states that an

"Academy Trust must comply with...any legislation or legal requirement that applies to academies".

That means that the duty to have regard to statutory guidance can be enforced using the Department's enforcement powers under the funding agreement.

School uniforms play a vital role in school communities and are deeply valued by parents and pupils alike. We want uniforms to continue to be held in positive esteem by families, so that the benefits outweigh the costs for families. The Bill ensures that families will not have to worry about an excessively priced school blazer or forgo

sending their child to a school for fear of an expensive PE kit. Fundamentally, we want to secure the best value for families and to do so by introducing statutory guidance. The Government support the Bill, and I urge Members of the House to support its Second Reading.

12.6 pm

Mike Amesbury: With the leave of the House, I thank everyone who has attended and spoken today, some at more considerable length than others.

I thank the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Rob Butler), my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), the hon. Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer), my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green), my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer), the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton), my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker), the hon. Member for Wantage (David Johnston)—an excellent speech by the way—my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson), the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), my new-found friend the hon. Member for Bury North (James Daly), my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) and the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts). A number of Members have also made powerful interventions.

I thank my good friend and former boss, the shadow Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), who again made a powerful speech and, very importantly, has been a long-standing champion of this issue. I also thank the Secretary of State, the Minister and the formidable team behind the Ministers, who are predominantly women—we should note that—as well as the 20 or so organisations that have been champions of the Bill for some time. Other significant people include the sponsors of the Bill. I will not go through individual names—they know who they are. I thank them for their fantastic and powerful contributions.

Finally, and very importantly, I thank the children involved with the Children's Society who shaped and contributed to some of the original guidance in 2013. They paved the way for the Bill. As well as consulting with manufacturers and retailers—there are some great ones out there—the Bill, with fair, transparent and competitive tendering, will open up opportunities for them. The shadow Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), wrote to me only yesterday about a manufacturer that is a little concerned about aspects of the Bill. That manufacturer is an absolute bargain basement and it offers quality, so the provisions of the Bill should offer it opportunities.

I again thank the Children's Society, which has been a key supporter of the Bill. I look forward to contributing to its passage through the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).

British Library Board (Power to Borrow) Bill

Second Reading

12.10 pm

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill would amend the British Library Act 1972 to give the British Library the freedom to borrow. I stop at the word “borrow”, because earlier today, I was having a word with the Minister for School Standards, and he asked, “What’s your Bill about?” I said, “It gives the British Library the ability to borrow.” He thought about it, and said, “Can’t it do that already?” I said, “Borrow money, Minister, money.” He thought I meant borrowing books. The Bill would allow the British Library to apply for Government loans through its sponsor Department, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, represented on the Treasury Bench today by the able and fantastic Minister for Digital and Culture. I believe—I hope—that the Bill is supported by the Government. I am delighted to take it forward.

Access to books really matters. I am very lucky; I grew up in a house with a father and grandparents who love books, and went to a school that was well equipped. I grew up in a village in Berkshire that had a brilliant library, staffed largely by volunteers. It was a wonderful environment in which to grow up. All the things that I am now interested in—history, economics, politics occasionally, Latin, Greek, the ancients—[*Interruption.*] Yes, and more; given what is going on, I wish I was a bit more interested in science at the time, then I would know a bit more now. My interest in all those things came about through my access to books, and so my access to learning.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): I could not agree more on the importance of reading books, and encouraging young people to do so. Will my hon. Friend congratulate the Chancellor on the announcement this week about VAT on books? Hopefully that will see far more young people spend money on books.

Bim Afolami: That is an excellent point. I knew that there was something about the Budget that I had to add to my speech, but I had forgotten what it was. My hon. Friend has put that on the record, and I join him in congratulating the Chancellor on what he has done on VAT—and on the British Library; the Red Book increases funding for the British Library, and that will enable it to do lots of things that I will talk about.

Books can open anybody’s eyes to a new world. They enable people to discover their passions and interests, and to think about how they might improve their life and their opportunities. It is not just books but libraries that matter, because not everybody gets to grow up in a home where there are books, or where there is enough space for them to work. They may have to share a bedroom with two or three others, or with an elderly family member. It is important that they have a library reasonably near their house that they can go to—a free space where they can think, work and, through the exploration of books, start to plan their life and imagine a future for themselves. Libraries matter, and the British Library is our foremost library.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): My hon. Friend talks about people having books to hand near where they live. The British Library is of course in London. That is not very close for people who live in the north. Does he welcome the plans to open a northern outpost of the British Library in Leeds, and will his Bill facilitate the development of that library?

Bim Afolami: Gosh, my hon. Friend is up to date with what is going on with the British Library. For the record, it is worth pointing out that the British Library is indeed in London but there is also part of it in Boston Spa, which is, I think, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin).

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): It is close by.

Bim Afolami: It is close by. There are plans to open a site in Leeds, but more important than all of that is the work that the British Library does in different communities across the country. One reason why the Budget was so good for the British Library is that it will help to increase its number of outposts with public libraries to 20 across the country, with 18 of those operating a hub-and-spoke model: that is where the British Library works with a public library in a large town, with that large town working with smaller villages and smaller towns around it, thereby extending the British Library in effect all the way through to every community in our country.

That is the primary reason for giving the British Library the ability to borrow, because borrowing enables it to take advantage of certain opportunities that may not be possible through a grant. That ability, combined with commercial activities and the rest, can help the British Library do that more and, moreover, perform more than just the functions that we imagine typical of a library—the lending of books, the provision of somewhere to work and so on. Business and intellectual property centres are growing hugely in popularity in the British Library in London and all over the country, and the British Library can help to sponsor the exporting of that model in the country to give many more people the opportunity to set up a business and have the right advice when doing so.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) is a successful businessman, which is one reason why he is in this place. However, he will know many other people who could have run a successful business if they had had the right advice at the beginning. It is very important that we ensure that. That is one of the functions of a modern 21st-century library.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): Does my hon. Friend welcome the support in the Budget to extend the network of the intellectual property office to 20 centres around the country? That will provide a wonderful advantage to small businesses in my constituency.

Bim Afolami: It provides a very good advantage to small businesses. If anyone from the Treasury is listening, they will have heard how popular the Budget appears to be on the Government Benches as well as on the Opposition Benches. In this House, whether on Budget day or on big issues of foreign affairs and the like, we often focus on the macro big-ticket items, but often comparatively

smaller things in money terms have the biggest impact in local communities. Libraries, and indeed the British Library, are an example of that.

The British Library is enjoyed by more than one and a half million people a year, with another 27 million visits to its website. Its origins in the British Museum Library go back 250 years or so. It is home to Magna Carta, handwritten lyrics by the Beatles and, I am told, even a gravestone. I am not quite sure where they have put it—perhaps in the same place as the “Ed stone” from the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband). Sorry, that was rather mean of me, but I could not resist it.

When I visited the British Library last week to talk about the Bill, the staff were very kind. They showed me some of their manuscripts and exhibits, including manuscripts from the Anglo-Saxon era. As somebody who did his thesis on the development of the burghal system of Edward the Elder, that was a real interest to me, though not to too many others in the world.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): He's a moderniser.

Bim Afolami: I am on the moderniser wing.

I also saw letters from the Anglo-Saxon period to the 20th century, including those from the Conservative Prime Minister Arthur Balfour—his statue is in the Members' Lobby—to a young, ambitious, thrusting Conservative Back Bencher called Winston Churchill, basically telling him to calm down. They showed me everything in between. The collection is almost unparalleled not just in this country but across the world.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the challenges for national treasures such as the British Library is that their buildings can often start to be unfit for the purpose of storing the great items that he is talking about? For example, parts of the building might be falling down or be energy inefficient. Perhaps they could show more of their collections to the public if they could simply borrow, as this Bill allows the British Library to do, in order to upgrade their facilities or build new parts of their buildings.

Bim Afolami: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is probably worth saying at this juncture that giving the British Library the power to borrow does not mean that I now do not wish everything the British Library does to be done better; of course there are things it could do better. Indeed, my hon. Friend makes the point about the British Library showing off much more of what it has. I agree that these items should not just be for showing to Members of Parliament before they present a Bill. They should be presented much more to the public. Having the ability to borrow will give the British Library the freedom to innovate much more than it does today, and that will enable it to show more of its collections to the public. If it does not do so, I am sure that the Minister will say, “Well, hold on—you have now the ability to borrow. Why not push the boat out a bit more with different types of exhibition and exhibits?”

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that we get the British Library out on the road, so that communities up and down our country are able to take advantage of not only the library van, but the British Library van at that?

Bim Afolami: There's an idea. That is the kind of project for which the British Library can ask the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport for a loan. That is what giving it financial freedom can help it to do.

Kevin Hollinrake: Will there be any restrictions on what the British Library can borrow the money for? Local authorities have borrowed lots of money from the Public Works Loan Board and bought some things that, I think it is fair to say, they do not necessarily understand, such as very expensive shopping centres that may not be part of the commercial retail space in the future. What borrowing restrictions will be put on the British Library?

Bim Afolami: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. It is worth now explaining exactly how the process works. In effect, the British Library currently has a grant in aid from the Government through the Department. Under this Bill, in the event that the British Library wishes to borrow any money, it will submit an application for a Government loan. That application will include all terms, including the period of time and any terms on the debt, and the man or woman in Whitehall will have to approve that. But there is no monopoly on wisdom anywhere, so let us just say that the investment does not work—that it goes wrong. In that event, the grant in aid to the British Library would be reduced. This Bill will therefore not result in a loss for the taxpayer. If the British Library takes on debt that it does not pay back—either in part or in full—the consequences will be on the British Library. The big failsafe is the fact that the debt has to be approved by the Government. The British Library will not be going out to commercial banks; it has to go through the Government. Hopefully, that will avoid the problem mentioned by my hon. Friend.

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Is not the key point that this legislation is not revolutionary? I believe that the Natural History Museum and the Science Museum have both enjoyed this borrowing power since 2013, and that it is a quirk of legislation that the British Library has not. Is it not therefore the case that, rather like many of the books that I have borrowed, this legislation is overdue?

Bim Afolami: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is worth saying that in 2013 many DCMS-sponsored museums—such as Kew Gardens, the British Film Institute, Historic England and the Ministry of Defence museums—were given 12 operational freedoms to help them become more financially independent and access finance for new projects, through commercial revenues, philanthropic donations and the like. Of the 12 freedoms, the British Library has 11. It is just that the 12th was prohibited by the 1972 Act, which this Bill seeks to change. My hon. Friend is indeed right that this Bill will bring the British Library up to date with other similar museums.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): I wonder whether my hon. Friend could explain how the British Library will repay the money it borrows, because we are the party of responsible borrowing, as he knows, and indeed as the Chancellor outlined in his Budget only this week.

Bim Afolami: My hon. Friend asks a very good question. The British Library will first have to submit a business case that satisfies the Government. For example, it might want to make its members' centre bigger and more attractive, in order to attract new members—I think the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Batley and Spen, is a member. Its members pay a yearly subscription, so that investment could recoup the library money over time.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): My hon. Friend has helpfully outlined that a business case would have to be made for the loans. How will we monitor the impact of the loans and how effectively the money has been spent?

Bim Afolami: That is a very good question. My understanding is that the monitoring will be, first, whether the library pays back the money on time, because by paying back on time we show that we are satisfying the terms of our debt and upholding our end of the bargain. More broadly, the Minister on the Treasury Bench is responsible for overseeing the British Library, and indeed all the other sponsored museums and libraries. It is therefore the Department's responsibility to ensure that the library is operating in a sensible way.

Across both its sites, at Boston Spa in west Yorkshire and at St Pancras in London, the British Library holds over 150 million items. It is interesting to think about the scale of the physical collection, which expands by something like 8 km every year—the distance between Westminster and Greenwich. Then there is the digital archive, which in 2019 alone expanded by the equivalent of 2 billion web pages. The library's expertise in digitisation means that rare and fragile objects are available for anyone to see online while protecting them from damage—a point my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston) made earlier. That expertise, because it is online, can be shared around the world.

Why is it important that that expertise should be shared around the world? After all, it is the British library, this is the British Parliament and it is for this country. It is important because we are not an isolationist or inward-looking country. The British Library, like the BBC and all sorts of institutions, is critical to our soft power. Those institutions are critical for displaying to our partners and friends around the globe that Britain is not just a leader in the things they know about, such as our armed forces or the English language; we are also a cultural leader. Showing that culture is so important to this country, and the British Library is a key part of that.

Many Members might be thinking, "Why does the British Library really matter? Yes, the library is important, but it is not really core to my politics or the concerns of my constituents." I will say two words for why it matters: levelling up. *[Interruption.]* I can see Opposition Front Benchers saying that they have another four years of this. Indeed, they might have another 10 years of it. It means levelling up regionally. As I have said, the British Library reaches out across the country beyond its two sites. With the ability to borrow, it can do even more and have more ambitious plans for spreading its model and its knowledge and expertise throughout the country.

The British Library matters because it is at the forefront of what a public library means in the 21st century. It is not just about lending books and providing people with space to work. In its own words, "helping businesses to innovate and grow"

[Bim Afolami]

is one of the British Library's core public purposes. Through its network of business and intellectual property centres in public libraries across the country, the British Library offers support and advice to entrepreneurs and small businesses, helping them to thrive, with most of those people being outside the main site in St Pancras; it is important that the House appreciates that.

I visited the business and intellectual property centre in St Pancras last summer with Baroness Neville-Rolfe, to look at ideas for promoting businesses in underperforming regions and helping entrepreneurship. That was when I first came across the people who run the British Library, long before the Bill was conceived, and I was really impressed with the work they were doing. As I was walking around, I talked to not only members of staff but the businessmen and entrepreneurs themselves, and I saw the value that they were getting out of that service. Indeed, I met a constituent who said, "Gosh, Bim, I had to come to the British Library because our local library didn't have that capacity"—they travelled into London to get that advice from entrepreneurs. My constituency is only 35 miles from London, so imagine how difficult that is for somebody who is 150, 200 or 300 miles away from London. That is what we need to change, and that is one reason why we need the British Library to be able to borrow money.

It means levelling up not just regionally but with those who are under-represented. The impact that the British Library is already having on groups of people who are otherwise under-represented in business is unmistakable. From January 2016 to December 2018, of the business and intellectual property centre users who started a new business, 55% were women, compared with 22% for new business start-ups across the UK, and 31% were from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, compared with only 5% nationally. Furthermore—I found this stat really surprising—17% of all the people who come through the British Library's business and intellectual property centre have a disability of some kind; nationally, the figure is below 2%. The British Library has already shown that it is doing good work, and we need to help it to do more.

It means levelling up to ensure that the British Library can innovate, just like the entrepreneurs that it helps. The DCMS voted loans scheme, which is the process whereby the British Library will get access to the debt, has already been used by other cultural institutions for things such as new buildings to house collections and conservation studios or to move staff into; newly constructed, purpose-built storage spaces; building new galleries; increasing visitor footfall; and putting more objects on display. Those are the sorts of thing that the British Library could do if it had the ability to borrow.

Our cultural institutions in this country need to be much more commercially minded to generate extra sources of income to help them continue their valuable work. If we go back, say, 40 years, the grants in aid to certain public institutions might have been bigger, but they did not have a digital presence in those days. Now, all those institutions need to have a significant, prominent, effective digital presence, because if they do not, people will not value the physical presence. That is a huge expense that did not exist 40 years ago, and our cultural institutions need to be able to have that.

It is worth my talking about the St Pancras Transformed project, to give a flavour of what could happen across the country if the Bill passes. It is a public-private partnership to extend the London site, to create more exhibition spaces, improved public areas, a better offer for business users and a permanent home for the Alan Turing Institute. It will also provide flexible accommodation for third-party companies and institutions.

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend is getting to the nub of the matter and he is making a fantastic speech. On the other services that the British Library could provide and the commercial aspects, can he tell us whether some of them will be charged for? Obviously, the overwhelming service provided by the British Library is free to use, but some of us would argue that, if it provides a competitive charge for services to cross-subsidise that, that could be justifiable.

Bim Afolami: The answer is that some would be charged for and some would not. I repeat the example I gave a few minutes ago about membership. If there were a members' area in the British Library—it has one at the St Pancras site but if it wanted to extend that model to one of the public libraries across the country—members would pay a subscription that enabled them to go to a certain part of the library. There would also probably be a café in that part of the library, which would obviously charge for food and drink: coffee, tea and the like. Again, the café would be making commercial revenue and the members would pay, but that would not prevent people from going to the library, using the computers, borrowing books, getting advice for their business and so on entirely for free. It is a mixture and it would really depend on the part of the country people are in.

One of the things we have thankfully moved away from in this country over the last 10 or 15 years is the idea that one centralised model works everywhere. I know that libraries operate in my constituency differently from how they operate in the constituency of the hon. Member for Batley and Spen. It is just different: the demographics are different, the ages of people wanting to do things are different; the atmosphere is different; the landscape is different; the sorts of companies people want to set up are different; and the types of books people borrow are different. This is about giving our institutions enough freedom that they can move forward and innovate in an entrepreneurial way, but do that locally in a way that is locally based and locally sourced.

It is time that we gave the British Library the same freedom to borrow, the same flexibility and the same opportunities that so many other cultural institutions have, because this country will benefit from that. The British Library overall will benefit, both in St Pancras and in west Yorkshire. The expanding network of public library hubs will benefit. Indeed, the British people, whom we were all elected to represent, will benefit.

In speaking to colleagues about this Bill, they have been generally supportive, but I was asked one question more than any other. Indeed, I touched on it when my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) made this point earlier. What happens if the British Library borrows money and cannot pay it back? Just to reiterate, should the British Library apply for and receive a Government loan, it would have to pay it back, and if it did not pay it back either in part or in full, the grant in

aid would be reduced correspondingly, and the British Library would have to adjust to that reduction in revenue. Ultimately, it would have to make sure that the public purse—the taxpayer—did not lose out as a result of the Bill. It is very important that the House recognises that point.

Some people, although I definitely do not agree with them, have mentioned—*[Interruption.]* Yes, this sounds like a straw man, but it is actually true. Some people have said that what libraries actually need to do is to move entirely online and get rid of the physical books. *[Interruption.]* No one here—good—but some people do think that. Indeed, I know some people do because, when I was speaking to the Department about the Bill and thinking about the questions people had already been asking and what had come up, one of the main things that came up was, “Bim, you’re going to have to have an answer to this question”.

So I thought about an answer to the question. My view is that there has to be a mix. Yes, we have to have physical collections, but we also have to match them with digital collections, a good online presence and digitising things where we can so that we can share them across the world—for example, for a school kid doing a project. We all remember having to do projects at school, and we had to go to a library and do all these things. The worst one I had to do was something on the WWF. I spent lots of time working on it, until, the night before, I realised it was meant to be about the World Wildlife Fund, rather than the World Wrestling Federation, which meant I did not get a very good mark. I do not know why I have shared that with everybody, but I have been living with the shame for a long time.

Rob Butler: Does my hon. Friend agree that actually there is a distinct joy in having a physical book and turning the pages that simply cannot be replicated by moving everything online and having an entirely digital world?

Bim Afolami: I agree so strongly, as somebody who owns well over a thousand books. My wife is always complaining that I buy more books than I can read.

The philosopher/hedge fund manager Nassim Nicholas Taleb wrote a famous book called “The Black Swan”, but in his book “Antifragile” he makes the persuasive point that if we really want to judge how long a type of technology will be around, we should look at how long it has already been around, because that actually tells us more about it than anything else. In every single age, we all think that the new thing will be the thing that endures, but of course what tends to happen is the new thing is replaced by another new thing and so on. Books are not a new thing. Books have been around for a long time, and I am sure that books will be around for centuries to come.

Before I conclude my remarks, to everybody’s joy—*[Interruption.]* There was too much laughter from the Whip at that. What is the point of libraries in the modern world? We have talked about access to learning, digital, soft power and levelling up, all sorts of things, but the real point, I think, of libraries—and where the British Library is so important and why it needs this power—is that libraries help to strengthen communities. They help to provide a place for people to go, where they can come together, but yet be solitary at the same

time. Thriving libraries in our communities, in our towns, cities and villages all across the country, are one of the things that if we can support them in this Parliament—and the British Library can help play its role in doing that—we will be serving our constituents very well indeed.

The Bill is a small but critical piece of legislation to help strengthen our communities, to help level up the country, to help improve our soft power, to help bring the British Library into the modern world, and to help improve the access that entrepreneurs and people who want to start their own business have to quality advice. It is a small thing, but it could become a big thing, and it could be a big thing for all our constituents and in all our constituencies. I ask the House to support the Bill.

12.42 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): It is a huge pleasure to speak in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) not just for introducing the Bill, but for the time that he spent with me this week. Who knew so much politics could happen over egg and chips in the Tea Room? I hope to be able to work with the hon. Member to pursue the Bill further. I also share with him a love of books. I definitely would not be standing here today and be the woman I am without the mobile library that came round my estate and my local library in Birstall. I certainly agree with what the hon. Member said about libraries being a quiet place where people can gather their thoughts: I would not have been able to do my homework in quite a chaotic family house without my local library. Winning the book “Puff, the Magic Dragon” as a prize in a writing competition enabled me to think as I grew up that writing could be a career for me, and indeed I did pursue it for many decades.

While there is a list of things that I believe the Budget did not address, the British Library certainly is not one of them. I will not make any bones about the fact that I am a huge supporter of the British Library. Like the hon. Member, I have been a member for many, many years. I used the Library on a daily basis, and it became my office when I was writing scripts and books. One thing the hon. Member did not mention is that the British Library has a speed dating evening. Men are in short supply, so if anybody is single, I recommend that for where they can meet some very clever women. *[Interruption.]* Nobody’s single, so there we are.

I am sure that most Members will be familiar with the British Library’s premises, but, as the hon. Gentleman said, that is not the only site. Keen observers of the library will know that is also has a 44-acre site in glorious Boston Spa—unfortunately, not in my constituency and quite a drive away, but still in Yorkshire. Some 70% of its collection is already stored in West Yorkshire, so it makes sense that the British Library aspires to have a public library in West Yorkshire, too. I really welcome the commitment to provide £25 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund to the West Yorkshire combined authority to support the library in pursuing a new Leeds city centre presence, making the prospect of a British Library north much more realistic. We in West Yorkshire would absolutely welcome with open arms a public-facing British Library base, adding to our already fantastic cultural offer. From Channel 4 to Sky to the new film studios, it is a great place to live and work.

[Tracy Brabin]

I would just like to take this opportunity to congratulate the leaders of my local councils who have managed to get the West Yorkshire devo deal over the line. We will soon be seeing a West Yorkshire mayor, who can unlock all that funding for our region to build on the massive and brilliant cultural offer that will define West Yorkshire in the years and decades to come.

Kevin Hollinrake: I join the hon. Lady in welcoming the West Yorkshire deal. Will she also welcome the likelihood of a York city region deal, which will encompass York and the rest of North Yorkshire with its own elected mayor?

Tracy Brabin: I am not surprised that the hon. Gentleman intervened on that point. I am sure, given his abilities of persuasion, that that is just around the corner any day now. He will have to talk to his colleagues to make that happen, but I am sure he has friends in the right places, which is always helpful.

We will, hopefully, secure the money to support the British Library in Leeds and West Yorkshire. There is also the £13 million, which the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden talked about, to expand the Business and IP Centre national network to 20 centres in 2023, with 18 of those developing hub and spoke models to extend their reach into more local libraries and places across England.

My local libraries in Cleckheaton, Heckmondwike, Birstall and Batley will be delighted to support that, but I have to mention the cuts to our local councils, which have meant that all the libraries I have mentioned are hanging on by a thread. They are being kept open for our communities by dedicated volunteers who are working full time, Monday to Friday. The hon. Gentleman talked about why we keep libraries open. They are centres to combat loneliness, access digital services and keep young people off the street. I believe there is much more we can celebrate about libraries than just books. They are the heart of our communities.

Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): There has rightly been a lot of very positive talk about libraries in the Chamber this morning, but does my hon. Friend share my regret that, because of the scale of cuts to local authorities over the past 10 years, more than 600 libraries have closed down in that time? Despite talk about the end of austerity, local councils will in fact be receiving even deeper cuts over the next few years. For the libraries that remain, their futures still look tenuous and that is not acceptable.

Tracy Brabin: I could not agree more. My hon. Friend knows more than most about the impact a library can have on a community. I pay tribute to Kirklees Council, which has managed, by taking from Peter to pay Paul, to keep all our libraries open. It is really important that town libraries are not the ones to suffer when we have the conglomerations locally of Leeds, Manchester and other big cities. Town and village libraries should not have to pay the price and I will continue to campaign on that.

The British Library is a proud British institution and a mark of quality, like the V&A, the National Portrait Gallery and the British Museum, but these institutions, which, like the British Library, are DCMS-sponsored

museums, can borrow money, as the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden has discussed. It seems inequitable that the British Library is not part of that group, and it is right that this disadvantage now be removed, as was first recommended in 2017, in the Mendoza strategic review of national museums. This legislative step will at last bring the library in line with all other DCMS-sponsored museums.

The ability to borrow effectively reflects how cultural institutions now operate. Many of them need additional financial support to improve their digital systems, make their buildings and storage more energy efficient and develop their services. These are all issues that the British Library may choose to address with these new powers. Or it could follow in the footsteps of others by borrowing money to build new buildings, move staff to purpose-built spaces, construct new galleries, increase visitor footfall and make sure that wherever people live they can access the library's extraordinary offer. There is something amazing about being a member of the library. Members can request the most extraordinary rare book, which is then, by the brilliant staff, brought to where they are studying, writing and researching. It is an incredible facility, and I recommend that anyone who does any research become a member.

Perhaps more importantly, used properly, the ability to borrow will allow the British Library to use its funding more effectively. I would, however, also like to pick up on a point the hon. Member made. We must ensure that the borrowing is not viewed as a substitute for its grant in aid, which is currently worth more than £96 million a year. It cannot be "Well, you've borrowed, so we're going to reduce your grant"; it must be supplementary to expand and celebrate the brilliant work the library is doing around the country. It must be an additional funding tool, not a replacement.

These are definitely exciting times for the British Library. It had 1.64 million physical visits last year, and it is not just the books; its exhibitions are incredible, the shop is great and the café is great. Visitors have to get to the café very early to get a seat, because it is packed with very young, clever people with their laptops; visitors have to camp out to get a decent view. The library also has 27 million website visits, as the hon. Member said, and 16,000 people use its collections every single day. We are debating today how we can help an already strong institution thrive in the years and decades to come. It is about time there was some levelling up, so I welcome that, but it must always be reflected in our towns and villages, not just our big cities in the north. That said, I welcome the Bill very much, and I hope it makes progress.

12.52 pm

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): This is an excellent Bill, and I pay warm tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami), whose constituency I zoom through every morning on my way here, for bringing it to the House. He has spotted an important lacuna in the law and an opportunity, at no cost to the taxpayer, to get more value out of one of our most important public institutions. I congratulate him on bringing the Bill forward and I hope it makes progress.

Like my hon. Friend, I want to pay tribute to the important role of books and public libraries in our community life, and in my own life. Like him, I probably

would not be here if it were not for libraries and books, whether it was Kirklees library, which we have already heard about, which used to drive its little van around Dalton when I was a child, or Huddersfield public library—the children’s bit in the basement where I enjoyed much of my childhood. At university, I was lucky to be able to use the Bodleian, an incredible library, and to stand outside the Radcliffe Camera—for bibliophiles, it is this wonderful vent where the smell of old books is wafted at you on an industrial scale. I am not sure I ever really benefited from the intellectual resources of the library, but at least I enjoyed the smell.

In my own constituency, there is the wonderful work done by places such as Kibworth community library and Fleckney library, which is not just a great library; it also has a wonderful café and is a hub for the community where all kinds of other things happen.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman has been to St Deiniol’s library in Hawarden in my constituency, which is the home of Gladstone. What is interesting about that library is that Gladstone had a habit of crossing out the things he disagreed with and writing in what he thought was appropriate, and it is fascinating to see those books.

Neil O’Brien: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for drawing that to my attention. It seems a typically Gladstonian move. I would love to visit that library at some point; perhaps we should have a library exchange.

It should be a great source of pride for this country that the British Library is literally, by catalogue size, the largest library anywhere in the world. It currently holds between 170 million and 200 million items and, frankly, I love the uncertainty of that. I have often wondered, “How do you know if you have too many books?” I think if one is unable to number them except within a range of plus or minus 15 million, it is possible that one has too many books. That is slightly unfair on the British Library, because it knows how many books it has; the uncertainty comes from the fact that there are so many other things in there, and my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden has already mentioned the gravestone and the possibility that the “Edstone” may reside there.

As well as 30,950,000 books, there are 824,101 serial titles, 351,116 manuscripts, 8,266,000 philatelic items or stamps, 4,347,000 cartographic items or maps, and 1.6 million music scores. As has been mentioned, the British Library grows its collection by 3 million items every year and currently requires 625 km of shelf space, which is growing by 12 km a year. To put that into context, it is enough for roughly three speeches by my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts)—[*Laughter.*] In the virtual space, the library harvested over 70 terabytes of web content for the UK web archive in 2016. We are not sure at present how many of the 70 terabytes consist mainly of cat gifs, but we do know that the library is cataloguing everything with a .uk domain, so we are in a slightly meta position here in that, as we speak, our words are being catalogued by the very institution that we are discussing.

The British library also contains a huge amount of recorded music and sound, much of which is available on British Library Sounds. I will return to this point about digital content, but someone can go on to the site,

as I did in preparation for this speech, and listen to Dinka songs from South Sudan, endangered Micronesian recordings, which are sort of like mid-1980s rave music, or someone from the Edwardian era singing “Seventeen come Sunday” on to a wax cylinder. It is difficult to think of a more consequential library in history than the British Library.

David Johnston: I want to make a point about the UK publishing industry, which is another area in which we punch above our weight. It is worth £6 billion to the UK economy, and we have 10% of all academic downloads and 14% of the most cited articles. Does my hon. Friend agree that the British Library will be a key component of how we punch above our weight in this area?

Neil O’Brien: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. It is a hugely important national resource, and I will be coming back to some of his points. Indeed, one of the reasons why the British Library has been somewhat dependent historically on grant in aid is that it has these statutory responsibilities.

Just think about the history of this truly wonderful national institution. The old reading room, when it was still part of the British Museum, was host for long periods of time to an incredible and diverse group of people, some of whom did not necessarily see eye to eye. It played host not just to Lenin, but Orwell, not just to Gandhi, but Muhammad Ali Jinnah, not just to Karl Marx, famously, but also Hayek. There was Oscar Wilde on one hand, and Rudyard Kipling on the other. The list goes on and on: George Bernard Shaw, Mark Twain, Virginia Woolf, H. G. Wells, Arthur Conan Doyle. Imagine all those historical figures together. It would be the ultimate dinner party at the end of time, although perhaps a slightly combustible one.

In recent years, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden mentioned, it has been policy to give greater freedom and operational autonomy to our national museums, and our sponsored museums have already benefited from a huge reduction in bureaucracy and the associated costs.

In particular, the freedom to carry over reserves has been hugely beneficial and a big source of stability in the financing of these institutions. It has also been important to them that they have been able to determine the pay for their staff, so that they can retain the best and brightest.

As has already been mentioned, other national museums that are sponsored by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport have had the freedom to borrow following the reforms announced in 2013 and made permanent in 2015, but the British Library Act 1972 prevented the British Library from doing that. The Government’s strategic review of DCMS-sponsored museums in November 2017 concluded:

“Subject to Parliamentary time, DCMS and the British Library will explore scope for legislation that enables the British Library to borrow money.”

I am proud that we are acting on that recommendation. Removing the restriction brings the British Library into line with other national museums that already have the powers and gives it the potential to access more financial opportunities to support its growing work.

[Neil O'Brien]

The British Library is still reliant on grant in aid for around 80% of its income, which is rather higher than some of the other institutions in the same category. I hope that the advent of the new borrowing powers will mean we can bring that percentage down over time to a level closer to some of the other institutions that are funded through the same channel. It is brilliant that the library is expanding its campus in north London, opening up new opportunities in what is sometimes described as the knowledge quarter around Euston and St Pancras.

I am conscious that while the library provides some amazing online services, as have already been mentioned, there is huge untapped potential, and that cannot necessarily be realised just through commercial partnerships. The library has done some interesting things with Google over the past couple of years, but there are limits to what can be done through more partnerships with commercial firms. As we have already discussed a little, the British Library secured £30 million of funding in the Budget this week to expand its intellectual property network to 20 centres by 2023, including, I am glad to say, one just over the border from us in Northamptonshire. That will help our businesses in Harborough, Oadby and Wigston.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): I would like to highlight the work of the British Library and what it has done to promote entrepreneurship with its business and IP centres. As a Conservative, I believe in small business and entrepreneurship. The British Library has done an excellent job in promoting not only small businesses, but young entrepreneurs and ethnic minority entrepreneurs not just in London, but across the country.

I was able to interact with the British Library at a meeting of the all-party parliamentary group for black, Asian and minority ethnic business owners. A gentleman from Burnham in my constituency who is a business owner was there. It was wonderful to see the British Library so actively involved in trying to help start-ups, and I think we need to have such things across the country. We need to support our entrepreneurs at every level, and what is great about the British Library is that it is doing that for young entrepreneurs as well. It is using city libraries and existing libraries across the country to have these hubs and the results have been really positive. All that has a measurable impact for thousands of start-ups and young entrepreneurs. More than 12,000 businesses have been created with the network's support since 2016. I hope my hon. Friend will join me in welcoming the new endeavour, and I hope the Bill will allow the entrepreneurship programme to expand across the country.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Before the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) comes back in, I have to say that the hon. Lady's intervention was longer than some of the speeches I have given. By their very nature interventions should be short, interesting as hers was.

Neil O'Brien: My hon. Friend made an important intervention that was, like the British Library, content-rich. I welcome her words. She is absolutely right that the British Library is helping entrepreneurs, and also that

the Bill will help the British Library to be more entrepreneurial. It was the library's brilliant idea to decide to set up these IP centres—the first in the world—and we are now helping it to expand them.

I welcome the fact that the British Library is going to renew the Boston Spa campus, with all the opportunities around that. The point about having borrowing powers is that it allows for the most to be made of opportunities. I welcome the fact that the library is exploring a presence in Leeds. I love the idea of British Library North. I really like the idea that it might use the old Temple Works. It is a famous building of the industrial revolution that at one point contained the world's largest room, which is pretty cool. The only thing I would say—to grind my own axe for a moment—is that I would love to see some of these things happening in the midlands, especially the east midlands. So, British Library, if you are listening, do not forget your old friends in the midlands! Please use your new borrowing powers to help us too.

All the things that the British Library is doing create opportunities to drive economic growth, in small ways and big. The hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) made the good point that there is an excellent café there. It reminded me of the old advert for the Victoria and Albert museum that described it as a very good café with rather a nice museum attached. So there are small things but also much bigger things. One can imagine the physical regeneration and wonderful things that could be done in Leeds with the new campus. The fact that the British Library could borrow would let it go that little bit further.

This is a slightly different category of thing, but Network Rail recently rejigged Market Harborough railway station. It is great, but everything was replaced, like for like, whereas we could have made more of the opportunity of that regeneration. I hope that this new set of powers for the British Library will enable it to make the most of the opportunities and exciting things that it is doing.

I recently published a report on—Members should not groan—levelling up. It looked at, among other things, innovation, science and culture spending. I was struck that, taking Arts Council England and Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport direct funding of national institutions such as the British Library together, London received 47%—nearly half—of the total spending in England in the period from 2010-11 to 2017-18. Amazingly, that is a slightly lower percentage than in previous decades, but the spending is incredibly London-centric.

James Cartlidge: Is my hon. Friend aware that, in terms of growth of DCMS sectors in the economy, yes, London is No. 1, but not far behind is the north-east?

Neil O'Brien: I thank my hon. Friend for that piece of information. It leads me neatly on to what I was going to say. It is striking that Arts Council England has targets and is aggressively moving to spend more of its budget outside London, which I welcome. It is starting from a base line of an absurd proportion of spending in London and is moving, although more slowly than I would like, clearly in the right direction. The reason why total culture is so heavily weighted towards London is not primarily to do with Arts Council England but mainly to do with

directly DCMS-funded national institutions, of which the British Library is a main example. In that category of spending, 90% of the spending is in London. That is what drives the huge imbalance in spending. So many of the institutions that we love and cherish are in London. The Department is trying to do more elsewhere, but there is a lot more to be done.

Our national museums and arts institutions have become more innovative and commercial over time, because sometimes you have to speculate to accumulate. That is why today we will be giving them borrowing powers so that they can invest to grow.

It is true that the current British Library building on Euston Road is not as universally loved as the old domed reading room in the British Museum. There are so many wonderful things about that old dome. It had, funnily enough, a papier-mâché ceiling and it was opened in the Victorian era to a breakfast feast that included champagne and ice cream, which is my kind of library. The new building still had a much better fate than the French national library. Francois Mitterand's library was built at the same time and has suffered technological problems, industrial relations problems and problems with thermal loading. The heat coming into the large glass L-shaped buildings was damaging the books, and the French press were quick to say that it was typical of a Mitterand project that it ended up cooking the books. The British Library has been more successful than that, and than the old Birmingham library, now demolished, which Prince Charles said looked like a place where books were incinerated rather than read.

Despite the fact the new reading room is not quite as beautiful as the old one, which Louis MacNeice imagined in his poem "The British Museum Reading Room" as a great beehive under which scholars worked away to store up knowledge, it is a hugely important national institution doing more and more every day to support our national life and economic growth. We should be proud of it. It is a wonderful institution. I am also proud of my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden, who is today introducing an important piece of legislation that will support and protect an important national institution to do even more for this country.

1.9 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I will be extremely brief, but first, let me pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) for a brilliant speech, and for presenting this worthwhile Bill.

On the principle itself, as has been said, the 1972 Act did not permit the British Library to borrow, hence the reason for this Bill, whereas other famous British institutions got those powers back in 2013. It is important to refer to the letter from the former Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Secretary of State, now Minister for Media and Data, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale). He wrote to the then chair of the Natural History Museum, Lord Green of Hurstpierpoint, about the change in the museum's borrowing powers. It is important to note that he specifically said this in the letter:

"I encourage you to make the most of these flexibilities, including through considering ways in which capital projects can create income-generating opportunities, making them suitable for loan financing."

That is really important. I have four children and we take them to the Science Museum and the Natural History Museum. Although it is free to get into those museums, they do have specific paid-for exhibitions, which can be absolutely brilliant. I recognise that we should preserve free access, but it is perfectly right to have very attractive features within the museum that are optional and chargeable. It is interesting to understand that that is where the Secretary of State saw this borrowing power being spent—on new income-generating sources. In my view, the purpose of this legislation is to give new gross value added to the sector, so that a museum can create wonderful new creative things around the country, which is part of that agenda that we call—let us have a drum roll—levelling up. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hooray!"] We are not going to stop. We are going to keep levelling up. This is a very good Bill. It takes a great British asset and makes it even stronger. It is part of our soft power, and it adds to our economy.

I will just finish by referring to an experience in my constituency in Suffolk, which, I hope, will be part of the levelling up agenda—east as well as north, and so on. We have a very prestigious artistic heritage in South Suffolk. We could not move any of it, as it exists permanently. We have the tree, which is technically just outside the boundary, in front of which Mr and Mrs Andrews were painted by Gainsborough in Sudbury itself. We have Gainsborough's House, where he lived, which has now become a museum, and just up the Stour, we have Flatford mill, which is the living site of the Hay Wain, the most famous English painting, so we have huge heritage. I spoke to Mark Bills, the director of Gainsborough's House, and asked him whether he had borrowing powers—that is the principle of the Bill. He needs them because there is to be a major refurbishment of Gainsborough's House. Money comes from the national lottery, but 10% is held back on projects, so it needs to have the ability to borrow, even if it is, in the parlance of a library, on a short-loan basis.

I very much commend the Bill. We should all support it because it adds to a great British institution. I look forward to hearing from my old friend the Minister about what more we can do.

1.13 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I, too, rise in support of the Bill and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) on bringing it forward. I am also going to mention those dreaded words "levelling up," as they are a key part of this. It is something that many of us have been banging on about for years. We did not call it "levelling up" then; we called it "a fairer deal for the north" or something like that. Having said that, I fully concede that this is not just about the north; it is about every region in the UK. It is about spreading both facilities and jobs throughout the country. It is great to hear that the north-east is doing well in terms of DCMS funding. That has not been particularly apparent in my trips around the north-east—perhaps it was north-east London.

James Cartlidge: It is about the economics sector, not the spending of the Department. In terms of the growth in the DCMS sector within our economy, the second fastest growing part is the north-east.

Kevin Hollinrake: I absolutely take my hon. Friend's word for that.

My main reason for speaking was to talk about the opportunity for British Library North, the wonderful potential move into the city centre of Leeds. We already have the outpost in Boston Spa, as others have mentioned—the archive—which is probably closer to my constituency than that of the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), but is actually in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke). The archive contains a record of every single newspaper ever published in the UK. It is not open to the public day to day, however, so to have a proper facility in the centre of Leeds is an exciting development.

Temple Works, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) said, contains what was at one point the largest room in the world, a 2-acre room. It is a wonderful part of Leeds, in the South Bank, close to the new High Speed 2 station. Any such contributions and facilities, connecting the north with the midlands and the south, mean more important facilities and jobs moving to our region.

As the hon. Member for Batley and Spen said, this is all part of the West Yorkshire devolution deal. We want to see devolution right across Yorkshire—Leeds and Bradford, great, but also York and North Yorkshire—and such opportunities are the kind to be created with the devolution deals. I welcome the Bill and the Government's agenda to level up through the distribution of jobs and facilities throughout the UK.

1.15 pm

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Caroline Dinenage):

It has been a great pleasure to listen to all the contributions about this interesting Bill. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) on promoting it, but it has support from across the House. There is one take from every single contribution by Members from across the House: how special a place the British Library has in the heart of the British people. That is a measurable take from what we have heard today.

I am tempted to go through a whole range of different library-related puns, but I will avoid doing so other than to say that my hon. Friend's speech was long overdue. It was a fine speech. If the Chamber would just lend me its ears for a little longer, I will congratulate some of the other people who have spoken and explain why the Government will support the Bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) articulated beautifully and exhaustively the scale of the British Library. We heard about all the different bits that many people do not understand, including the speed dating, which I had not hitherto heard of and sounds intriguing. The passion we heard from Members throughout the House articulates how fondly the British Library is regarded and held in the hearts of the British people.

Only a few weeks ago, I had the pleasure of visiting—for the very first time, I am ashamed to say—in my new role as Minister for Digital and Culture. I share the enthusiasm of my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden and of other hon. Members for the amazing work of the British Library and its impressive variety. As so

many others have said, however, it is not just the work done at the London site; it is also a typical example of national outreach, which has been going on for a long time.

We heard a lot today about the two-site organisation, with the amazing presence in Boston Spa—70% of the collection stored there, a public reading room and about 550 jobs in the region—and about how the British Library brilliantly uses its resources to reach across the UK through the Business and IP Centre national network and the Living Knowledge Network. It also works internationally through a range of digitisation, preservation and professional exchange initiatives. The business and intellectual property centres are in 13 town and city libraries across the UK, and there are plans for so many more—I will talk about that a little more. The Living Knowledge Network is a UK-wide partnership of the British Library, the National Library of Scotland, the National Library of Wales and 22 other libraries, which shares ideas and makes connections between libraries, their collections and their people.

A number of Members spoke about the business and IP centres; as a former entrepreneur, and having been a business owner for many years before I became an MP, I would like to dwell on that subject for a second. Also, as a former Women and Equalities Minister, I am super passionate about encouraging people from a range of backgrounds into business and entrepreneurship. The centres provide free access to a range of business databases, so that people can research markets and identify new opportunities in a much less terrifying environment than some of the normal, formal, business-type facilities. The centres provide training and give one-to-one advice on intellectual property. Crucially, they are in spaces that we all instinctively know are dedicated to the provision of reliable information—public libraries.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden pointed out so beautifully, the centres' success rate among women, people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds and people with disabilities is phenomenal, which is fantastic, because we want to tap into everybody's entrepreneurship, no matter where they are in the country, or their background. The centres reach groups that are otherwise fundamentally under-represented in business, and so are brilliant for our country. That is why I was so pleased on Wednesday when my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer confirmed Government investment of £13 million to expand and accelerate the spread of the network, ensuring that this vital service reaches even more brilliant budding entrepreneurs, right across England.

The Government's view is that an institution as important as the British Library should have the same choices and opportunities as its great cultural peers. This Bill will remove the legislative barrier that denies the library the freedom to borrow that its fellow national museums and galleries enjoy.

As we have heard, the British Library Act 1972 created that important national institution to be the heart of the UK's information network, a national archive, and a working repository of printed and digital publications, and to support research of all kinds. Unfortunately, for some reason, that same legislation prevents it from making the most of every opportunity to thrive.

In 2013, our national cultural institutions, including the British Library, were given the operational freedom to be more self-governing and more financially independent. That has given them much greater autonomy, so that they can make decisions independently and have greater flexibility regarding their income. That helps them to innovate and continue their fantastic work. The British Library enjoys all those freedoms—except one, crucially: the power to borrow. Other museums and galleries have benefited from that power, using it to improve their sites, shrink their environmental footprint, provide better access for visitors, and gain more space to display our national collections. It is only fair that the British Library has the same opportunity. The Government agree, so I urge the House to support the Bill.

1.22 pm

Bim Afolami: With the leave of the House, I very much thank all hon. Members who contributed to the debate, and I thank the British Library, its leadership, and all its staff for their work. My plea is that they reach out to me and other Members of this House, so that we can work with them to spread the British Library across the country.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).

Education and Training (Welfare of Children) Bill

Second Reading

1.23 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

All children, no matter what their background or which education and training provider they choose, deserve a safe environment in which they can learn. I am sure that every Member of this House can agree that nothing is more important than safeguarding our children and promoting their welfare. The Bill would ensure that all young people were protected by the same safeguarding, whichever education or training provider they chose.

I am proud to have the outstanding New College Durham in my constituency, which is one of the best further education colleges in the country. I will take a moment to highlight its continued success in the field of technology. It is one of few institutes of technology in the country and we can all congratulate it on that. Like all further education colleges, it has a legal duty to ensure that the education and training it delivers protects its students. It also has a legal duty to consider any guidance issued by the Secretary of State. The college is doing an excellent job of promoting students' welfare and I am sure that it will continue to do so.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on introducing such an important and considered Bill and I am pleased to co-sponsor it. As a governor of Luton Sixth Form College, I know how crucial the extension of statutory safeguarding arrangements is to ensure that all young people in further education get the best in life. Does she agree that, given the increasing level of mental health issues among our young people, it is important that all those in post-16 education are protected by equitable safeguarding protocols to ensure they receive support and have the best possible chance of succeeding in their studies and training?

Mary Kelly Foy: I thank my hon. Friend for making an important point. I know from a recent visit to New College that it takes the mental health of its students very seriously indeed. However, not all young people in my constituency pursue further education through New College. Others choose to do an apprenticeship delivered by a training provider. In the last academic year, 50 students under the age of 19 started an apprenticeship in my constituency. Those apprentices could be training for a career in health and social care, supported by Northern Care Training, an independent provider. They could also be working towards a career as a plumber with South West Durham Training, another independent provider. I was concerned to find out that legal safeguarding duties do not apply to apprentices when their training is delivered by independent providers in the same way as they do for those at an FE college such as New College. While safeguarding requirements are a condition of independent providers' funding, those providers' apprentices are not protected by the law in the same way. That is clearly wrong and something must be done about it. It is vital to protect the welfare of our constituents and that is why it is so important that the Bill passes.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing the Bill to the House. On a related point, does she agree that the inclusion in the Bill of T-level providers underlines the importance of that option in education and that they should be considered of equal merit to more academic qualifications?

Mary Kelly Foy: I agree. T-levels are an extremely important part of our education system. They will be rolled out a lot more in the coming years. In fact, I was about to cover T-levels in the next part of my speech; the hon. Member read my mind.

As New College Durham will be one of the first colleges to provide T-levels from September, this is of vital importance to my constituents—I am sure it is to the hon. Member's constituents, too, and to those all over the country. However, the legal safeguarding duty that protects T-level students will vary, depending on the provider that the student chooses. As MPs, we have a duty to ensure that safeguarding laws apply to all children equally. That is not currently the case. I ask hon. Members for their support to help me to fix this loophole in the law.

My Bill would correct the existing inconsistencies in safeguarding arrangements by extending the legal duty to cover all publicly funded providers of post-16 education. This will directly impose legal safeguarding on 16-to-19 academies, and make the Secretary of State for Education directly accountable for ensuring that all funding agreements with specialist post-16 institutions and independent providers include proper safeguarding duties. The Secretary of State will also be directly responsible for ensuring that funding agreements with apprenticeship and T-level providers include safeguarding duties. This is especially important, because there will be 113 new T-level providers over the next two years, but this expansion can only happen safely if the right safeguarding duties are in place.

These issues are not party political. Across England, the Bill will place safeguarding duties on an estimated 30 16-to-19 academies, 100 specialist post-16 providers and 1,000 independent providers. The Bill will help to ensure that all young people have the same safeguards and protections under the law.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on her excellent Bill, which I am sure my colleagues fully support. I am passionate about ensuring equality of opportunity after the age of 16, as well as before. Children with special educational needs or on the autistic spectrum do not stop having safeguarding issues at the age of 16. Does she agree that these proposals are excellent for equalising opportunity and ensuring that support is in place for further education, so that everybody has the chance to succeed?

Mary Kelly Foy: I totally agree, and that is one of the reasons that this Bill is so important. There are likely to be more children and young people—some who are the most vulnerable in our society—who do not go down the academic route, but pursue the new T-levels in some of our colleges. The hon. Member has made a really important point, and it is why we really need to pass the Bill.

My Bill will ensure that all young people have the same safeguards and protections under the law, regardless of which education or training provider they choose. I

believe that safeguarding responsibilities are too important not to be protected by the law, and I hope that the House will join me in safeguarding our young people and giving parents the peace of mind that they deserve.

1.32 pm

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) on proposing to close an important loophole that she has identified. I enjoyed her speech and her warm words about an important institution in her constituency; Durham is an important city of learning at all kinds of different levels.

I also welcome the new Minister to her place. There is a nice irony here, because the Minister is living proof of the importance of technical and vocational routes. She is proof that people can get to the highest jobs in the country without having been to university at the age of 18; she has done it through work. She is the perfect person to take through this legislation, which I believe is her first Bill. On a day in which we have discussed levelling up, it is nice to see the Minister for levelling up on the Front Bench—just to wind up Opposition Members even more.

The hon. Member for City of Durham has identified an important anomaly, which we will hopefully end today by extending the duty to make safeguarding provisions to all providers of publicly funded post-16 education. The Bill brings 16-to-19 academies, specialist post-16 institutions and independent learning providers into the scope of the statutory guidance. Currently, 16-to-19 academies are not legally classified as schools or colleges, and are therefore falling down a gap and not being captured by the statutory safeguarding duties in section 175 of the Education Act 2002. About 20 sixth-form colleges have already converted to become academies, and that number is likely to rise. Members will recall that one reason this is happening is as a solution to the problem that sixth-form colleges face VAT while, of course, schools do not.

There are all kinds of reasons why we should want more 16-19 academies. It is important that we improve the legal framework in which they operate, because we want more of them. Sixth-form colleges are our most efficient type of school. They achieve the highest results for their age group, even though they do not benefit from the £1 billion cross-subsidy that school sixth forms get. It is clear why they are so effective: having 30 pupils in an A-level class is clearly more efficient than having only two or three.

Colleges and sixth-form colleges currently pay VAT, so in a sense they are being discriminated against. The Sixth Form Colleges Association estimates that the average sixth-form college pays around £300,000 a year in VAT. It is therefore very good for them to become academies, which in turn encourages them to work more closely in federation with local schools. However, we cannot allow the growing number of 16-19 academies to fall outside the crucial safeguarding framework for young people.

Although the Bill will close one anomaly, it is not the only one that has grown up around 16-19 academies. Last year, the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) led a Westminster Hall debate on religious protections for Catholic sixth-form colleges that want

to academise. The director of the Catholic Education Service, Paul Barber, has said that

“because academisation legislation for Sixth Form Colleges was developed separately from schools, the same safeguards given to schools were omitted for Catholic Sixth Form Colleges”.

I hope that the Minister will move to close that similar lacuna.

Catholic sixth-form colleges say that they are currently prevented from converting to academies because their religious character, which is protected under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, would not be maintained under current Government rules. They suggest that they would lose protections in areas of the curriculum, acts of worship and governance. I hope that anomaly will also be closed.

I must declare an interest, because I benefited hugely from attending a sixth-form college, Greenhead College, which I suspect is already thinking about converting to a 16-19 academy. I can say with certainty that I would not be standing in the House today were it not for that wonderful, life-changing institution. It sounds like New College Durham in that it is offering similarly transformational opportunities to young people in Huddersfield, a town that is very close to the national average but has this wonderful institution that is giving young people opportunities to achieve all kinds of wonderful things in life.

Sixth-form colleges are hugely important institutions that are achieving brilliant results, despite being less well funded than other parts of the education sector. Today we are normalising them further by extending to them the important safeguarding provisions set out in legislation, closing a lacuna that nobody intended to be there in the first place. I benefited from wonderful pastoral care during my time at sixth-form college. Many of these institutions are naturally doing the right thing, but it is essential that we have certainty about the law and about the guidance. I congratulate the hon. Member for City of Durham again on bringing forward a Bill that I hope will proceed in short order today.

1.38 pm

Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) on bringing forward the Bill. She has not been in the House for very long, so it is good to see her already using her presence here to make a difference. To be promoting legislation after only a few weeks is quite an achievement and augurs well for the rest of her parliamentary career.

I also congratulate my hon. Friend on identifying such a significant loophole in the existing legislation, and on devoting her considerable energies to seeking to close it. As other Members have said, it is clearly not equitable that legislation on safeguarding does not apply equally to all providers, and that therefore young people who are entering post-16 education or training will get varying legal protections depending on where they are studying. It is clearly not acceptable for that situation to continue.

The Bill will close that loophole by extending the legal duty to all publicly funded providers of post-16 education and training, and it will directly impose the same legal safeguarding duties on all 16-to-19 academies and other publicly funded providers of education and

training. That is the right thing to do. This is a small but significant piece of legislation. It closes a loophole. Opposition Members support it and are grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing it forward. I look forward to the Minister offering the Government's support, so that the legislation can get on to the statute book.

1.40 pm

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): I very much welcome this piece of legislation, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) for bringing it forward. Many parents who happen to be watching the House on a Friday afternoon will be surprised that this measure is not already in place. It speaks to the undervaluing of apprenticeships and such forms of education that this issue has not been fixed earlier, so I welcome the Bill.

It is worth dwelling briefly on the fact that “Keeping children safe in education” is a very good piece of guidance to schools, and its extension is important. It is good because it covers issues of safeguarding in the round, rather than looking at one specific thing. It points teachers to training, to provide understanding of the process and of the indicators of abuse. It covers bullying and female genital mutilation, which many teachers may not be as aware of as they are of other things.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for mentioning bullying in schools. It is incredibly important that the Government continue to stamp it out, particularly LGBT and transphobic bullying. Does she welcome the fact that 1,800 schools have so far taken part in the Government's pilot scheme to stamp out LGBT bullying in schools, and would she encourage the Government to do more to ensure that more schools take part in that programme?

Laura Trott: I could not agree more. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: LGBT bullying in our schools is a scourge, and we need to do all we can to stamp it out.

“Keeping children safe in education” is a very important piece of guidance for schools. The teachers I speak to welcome and praise it, which, as many of us know, is unusual when it comes to guidance for schools. The extension is necessary because schools want it. It gives clarity to apprenticeship providers and new T-level providers. It ensures inter-agency working, which is so important in stopping abuse, and tying together police, clinical commissioning groups and local authorities. We need to deal with abuse in the round, and the extension of the guidance to apprenticeship providers and others is critical.

This will also act as an early warning system when abuse is taking place. The guidance makes it clear that this is not just about intervening when abuse has happened, but about getting in there beforehand. That means being wary and looking out for the signs, and signposting the support that is available to teachers, to ensure that they flag it, so that nothing worse happens to the child.

It is important that we bring in the parents. As I said at the beginning of my remarks, I think many parents will be surprised that this measure is not already in place, but many parents are not aware of the safeguarding procedures in schools and further education at the moment. We all have a role to play in ensuring that they

[*Laura Trott*]

are more aware of those procedures and the support that can be provided by teachers and others in schools.

I also want to make a plea for more training for staff. We all know from schools in our patches that this is becoming more and more of a burden for teachers. There is very good guidance available, and training is mandatory, but the Government could provide more help with the training provided for teachers to ensure that they are fully aware of the support available to them and that this very good piece of legislation is used to its full effect.

1.44 pm

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): I want to start by paying tribute to the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) for bringing the Bill forward. It is vital that we get this done, and it is great to be able to speak in the debate. I am slightly afraid that I may be in an echo chamber with some of my comments. My hon. Friends the Members for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) and for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) have covered a lot of the merits and technicalities of the Bill in front of us, so I want to confine my comments to the merits of the Bill and to my personal experience.

This is quite a personal Bill for me. I am the product of effective welfare and safeguarding at school, and I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute in particular to someone I class as an absolute personal hero of mine, a lady called Helen Bettelley. She went the extra mile for me while I was at school, and she is one of the reasons why I am here now. It was through her care and her understanding of welfare and pastoral care—the importance that it plays in the lives of young people, particularly in the 16 to 19 bracket, which can be some of the most torrid times in a young person's life—that I am here today. I wanted to put on record my thanks to her at the start of this speech.

I will turn now to the substance of the Bill. I know from my experience—I am sure that many right hon. and hon. Members will be aware of this from their surgeries and interactions with constituents—that we have to get this right. It is as simple as that. The reality is that I quite often get at my surgeries safeguarding issues, welfare issues and concerns that are raised with me by parents about schools, and extending this to independent providers of additional training and education is absolutely vital. The welfare issues we encounter absolutely demonstrate why we cannot leave any loophole in this provision.

What we are doing is really just making sure that what should have been done and what—to coin a phrase—is long overdue is now actually done. It is not that radical; it is just making sure that people in 16 to 19 independent training provision are given the welfare that they deserve. Let me touch on some of the comments made about mental health. When we consider that one in six 16 to 19-year-olds says they have a mental health condition or feels under the strain of mental health pressures, it speaks for itself why it is absolutely vital that this loophole is plugged.

The reality is that many of the parents I speak to in my constituency, whose children may be training with independent providers, often feel quite lost when it

comes to the welfare side of things. When they compare the level of pastoral support in sixth-form colleges, which my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough mentioned, or other further education providers with that of independent providers, they often see that it just is not there. It is absolutely right that we align the legislation properly to ensure that 16 to 19-year-olds get the provision they rightfully deserve.

I want to pay another tribute. In my own area of Sandwell, we are actually quite good at the welfare and stakeholder working side. I pay tribute to Sandwell College, which is based in West Bromwich. Its approach to this is absolutely spot-on, and it chimes with the approach in the Bill. It is a cross-stakeholder approach. It is about saying, “We’re not going to do this silo-ed. We’ve not going to do this contained. We’re actually going to reach out.” As my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks pointed out, it is about getting parents and other parts of the community involved in the wider welfare and safeguarding of these young people.

I want to confine my comments to this: this is absolutely the right thing to do and we absolutely have to get it done. I pay tribute to the fantastic FE providers that have been given a call-out today and who are absolutely getting this right. I say once again that I stand here as someone who has benefited from proper safeguarding and welfare, and I hope that right hon. and hon. Members will see what we can achieve by getting this right.

1.48 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) on bringing forward this Bill. As somebody who was also drawn out high up on the private Members' Bills ballot a few weeks after I was elected to this House five years ago, I know that, as soon as that result is published, successful Members are not short of advice and suggestions as to measures they might like to pursue, but I think she has chosen extremely well with this Bill. It may seem like a technical Bill, but it could hardly be more important.

What the Bill will deliver is clarity and legal certainty that the safeguarding provisions that we expect to be in place for all our schools should also be in place regardless of the stage of young people's education and regardless of who is operating that education. As a former school governor at a special school in a local borough council, I know how important it is that no institution—but particularly one that works so directly with children and young people—should ever imagine, “Well, it couldn't happen here.” Sadly, it almost certainly could. Fortunately, we have some fantastically dedicated and skilled teachers, staff and social workers, working with young people in schools and colleges to try to reduce and minimise the risk as far as possible, but the provisions in the Bill make sure that those protections are extended comprehensively.

As parents and, indeed, as members of society we expect our children and young people to be safe when and where they learn. We expect that, regardless of whether those children are in nursery, primary, secondary or tertiary education. We expect it, regardless of whether those institutions are local authorities, schools, academies or independent learning providers. The Bill will help to ensure consistency, clarity and legal certainty about what is required.

We expect our children and young people to be kept as safe as possible from bullying, which in many instances can have a lifelong and scarring effect, and we expect our children and young people to be kept as safe as possible from even more sinister forms of abuse. By widening the terms of the existing provisions to clarify that they apply to the institutions referred to in the Bill, the hon. Lady, and hopefully the House, will help to make sure that those young people can enjoy the protection and the safeguarding that everybody should be able to take for granted throughout their education. That is why I enthusiastically and without reservation support the Bill this afternoon.

1.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): I thank the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) for introducing this important Bill. This is a subject that clearly many of us feel passionately about, particularly the need to safeguard children from many types of harm, including online harm and harm that affects their mental health, such as bullying. I know she has a long-standing interest in this area, and in particular in people's health and wellbeing.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions to today's debate. Safeguarding of children is one issue that I think all Members agree is extremely important. The Government take it very seriously, which is why we support the Bill. Young people, especially those in their mid to late teens, can be particularly vulnerable. They are in that transitional phase—they are growing up and starting to become more independent, but they are still children in many ways. I am sure many hon. Members will recognise that from their own experience, while others may still have the joy of teenagers to come. It is a difficult time in a young person's life, and the education landscape is suddenly becoming a lot more complex, with many more different options and important choices to make, which will have an impact on their lives and careers.

The Bill has been described as a technical change to place all Government-funded post-16 providers of education and training on the same statutory footing. As many hon. Members have highlighted, that is important. Whether they are studying A-levels, T-levels, an apprenticeship or other qualifications in a school, college, sixth-form college, 16-to-19 academy, specialist post-16 institute or independent learning provider, it is important that students are safe and that the institution they are in has responsibility for their safeguarding.

Such institutions do have responsibility for safeguarding today, but rather than being buried in contract conditions or other conditions such as Ofsted requirements, having a single statutory guidance note will make it clear and transparent to all what is expected. That is important for parents, students, providers and bodies such as Ofsted. Parents and students in particular should be reassured by the underlying principle of "Keeping Children Safe in Education". All practitioners must ensure that their approach is child-centred. It means that they should consider at all times what is in the best interests of the child. Safeguarding covers all forms of harm. It covers abuse, whether mental, physical, sexual or online. It covers bullying in all forms. It covers child exploitation, county lines, female genital mutilation and neglect. The "Keeping Children Safe in Education" guidance covers

all those areas and more, not only in terms of what providers need to do, but, critically, where extra advice and help can be found. Having one single approach to safeguarding will, I believe, help all providers to know their obligations and where they can get advice to help them to safeguard children.

This debate has shown how strongly we feel about the need to safeguard children. In the interests of time I will not cover all the issues raised, but I would like to reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien), who raised the academisation of faith schools. It is our ultimate ambition that every school that wants it should have the opportunity to benefit from the autonomy and freedom that academy status can provide. Going forward, we will continue to look for a suitable opportunity to address this issue and level up the playing field.

I want to make three clear points. First, every provider already has some form of requirement on safeguarding. In simplifying the landscape, I agree that the Bill will not place any additional costs or administrative burdens on providers. In fact, it may help them, because it will make it simpler and clearer to understand. Secondly, I feel strongly that the provisions will result in a levelling up of safeguarding, making it clearer for all concerned, whether they are a parent, student or provider, and ensuring that the guidance remains relevant and up to date in a timely manner. Finally, the Bill will result in the need to amend the statutory guidance note "Keeping children safe in education". We will consult openly and widely with the sector to ensure that the guidance is both appropriate and proportionate.

In closing, I reiterate my thanks to the hon. Member for City of Durham for bringing the Bill before the House. I congratulate her, as a new Member, on driving forward these important proposals so early in her career. I am sure we will hear a lot more from her. I look forward to visiting the outstanding New College Durham. I thank her again and confirm that the Government will support the Bill.

1.59 pm

Mary Kelly Foy: With the leave of the House, I would like to make some final remarks. I thank every Member who contributed to the debate: the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), the hon. Members for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey), for Dudley South (Mike Wood) and for Harborough (Neil O'Brien), my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Steve Reed) and the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), who made speeches, and my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) and the hon. Member for Bury North (James Daly), who made interventions. In particular, I thank them for raising the importance of the Bill for the most vulnerable young people in our society and for highlighting those who might be suffering from abuse or mental health issues or have special educational needs. That is one of the main reasons the Bill is so important. We may sometimes disagree on a few issues, but on this one it seems that we are all in agreement.

The purpose of my Bill is simple. I believe that every child should be protected by the same safeguarding legislation. My Bill would address an anomaly in the current legislation and bring all training and education

[Mary Kelly Foy]

providers that receive Government funding under the same legislation. I think we can all agree that every young person in education should have the same protections. Apprenticeships form a key part of further education. In the coming months, we will see the roll-out of T-levels. Technical qualifications are extremely important. While my constituency is very lucky to be the home of one of the best universities in the country, academia is not a path for everyone. When done well, technical qualifications offer young people a different option—one that provides both an education and a path to work. The expansion of the further education and training sector must be accompanied by steps to ensure that the welfare of young people is fully protected. Under current legislation, that cannot be guaranteed, and it is our duty as MPs to correct this.

Until this safeguarding oversight is corrected, some parents will not be able to send their children to study with peace of mind. Young people pursue further education to learn and gain employment. Everyone in the House wants to see young people in education and then in work. The young people who currently fall into this loophole are doing their best to prepare themselves for the world of work and to contribute to the economy, and they should be supported in this. The least we can do is make sure they are properly protected. In this matter, we can set aside party politics and put the welfare of our young people first.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).

Public Sector Exit Payments (Limitation) Bill

Second Reading

2.2 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill is simple: it imposes upon the Treasury a duty to make regulations under section 153A of the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015. You might think it extraordinary, Madam Deputy Speaker, that we have to legislate to require the Treasury to implement legislation that we in the House approved in 2015 and that I have been promised by numerous Ministers since is on the cusp of being brought into law. It has not yet been brought into law, and the consequence is that the taxpayer is probably about £1 billion worse off—the benefit to the Exchequer of the provisions in the Act was about £200 million each year.

It is against that background that I was very pleased to have a meeting with the new Chief Secretary to the Treasury. He has some background knowledge of this that dates back to before even I took an interest, because he was on the Public Accounts Committee when it looked at this issue in the early 2010s. The beginning, after the Committee had looked at it, came in January 2015, when the current Home Secretary, who was then a Treasury Minister, announced that it was intolerable that there were so many exit payments of such large sums. She called it a long-overdue reform and said:

“It’s not right that hard-working taxpayers, many on low salaries, have to fund huge payouts.”

As a result, after the Conservative election win in May 2015 the then Chancellor confirmed the commitment to legislate that was in our 2015 manifesto, saying:

“We will end taxpayer-funded six-figure payoffs for the best paid public sector workers.”

Then, in 2017, when nothing had happened, I had the temerity to ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 27 June

“when the Government plans to bring forward secondary legislation to implement the policy”,

and the answer I got on 6 July from the then new Chief Secretary, now the Secretary of State for International Trade, was:

“The Government announced in 2015 that it intended to end six figure exit payments for public sector workers. We legislated for a £95,000 cap in the Enterprise Act 2016 and are currently in the process of drafting the necessary regulations.

In the interim, the government expects every part of the public sector to demonstrate that it is using public money efficiently and responsibly and to ensure that pay and terms are always proportionate, justifiable and deliver value for money for taxpayers.”

Having received that non-committal reply, I asked more questions and then introduced a private Member’s Bill in the 2017-19 Session that was exactly the same as this one, except with different dates.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): As a former local government leader, I was involved in many cases in which we had to ensure that the person leaving had received the correct money and final settlement, but does my hon. Friend agree that some of these people have often been working for a local authority

—I can only speak for local authorities—for decades? Their salaries will have increased over time, and there should, whatever the legislation, be flexibility in such cases. If a case is sensitive, the local authority should be given powers to ensure that that person is given the amount of money that they are due, but not too much for the public purse.

Sir Christopher Chope: That was a very long intervention, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I am afraid that I do not really agree with the tenor of it, which excuses some of the appalling behaviour that is taking place in local government. A recent article in *The Times* revealed that Steven Mason, a former Northumberland County Council chief executive, was given a £370,000 pay-off, but took up a job four months later at South Tees Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust on £180,000 a year, despite Ministers having pledged to take back exit payments if the recipient returned to the public sector.

One reason why I got interested in this subject was that I was concerned that proposed local government reorganisation in Dorset would be an excuse for a whole lot of public officials employed by local councils to look after each other's interests at the expense of the local taxpayer and give themselves big handouts. I am afraid that my worst fears proved to be well founded, and some unconscionably high payments were made as a result.

I take the view, unlike my hon. Friend, that this issue is urgent and overdue for action. Indeed, I think an alternative title to my Bill might be the Overcoming Sir Humphrey's Resistance Bill, because the resistance of the civil service to what is proposed in this Bill is a textbook example of how the civil service can conspire to frustrate the will of Parliament and, indeed, of the elected Government. How is it, all this time later, that we do not even have the regulations? We have not even had a response to the latest consultation, which was originally promised to be delivered in 2018. I went to see the then Chief Secretary back in 2017 and said to her, "Has it occurred to you that this measure is supported by almost everybody in politics and in public life? Has it occurred to you that the resistance to it is coming from the civil service, because they are going to be losing out as a result of the implementation of the Bill?"

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): My hon. Friend is highlighting an important point. Is he aware that the same issue arises in Scotland, where we have police chiefs, university bosses and other public sector servants getting paid huge six-figure sums as they leave their taxpayer-funded jobs?

Sir Christopher Chope: I am sure that the issue does happen in Scotland, and I hope the measures will apply across the whole country, although the latest consultation document that the Government issued indicated that there might be different treatment in different parts of the United Kingdom.

The matter has reached the stage of being a public scandal, because money is tight and the Bill is a means of recovering £200 million a year for the taxpayer, both locally and nationally. It is unfortunate that, as a result of answering questions from me, successive Ministers have had words put into their mouths or put on the record that have now proven to be completely untrue, I

am afraid. What more can one say? The current Chief Secretary has assured me that he will not fall in the same trap as his predecessors.

The regulations could be issued pronto. Why have they not been? We were told that there needed to be a consultation. After a lot of pressure, the consultation was issued in April 2019, and the responses had to be in very quickly by July 2019. Have the Government yet issued their response to those responses? No, they have not, because it is all so complex.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is rightly drawing attention to a significant problem. Is there not another aspect to it, which is that many of these individuals, quite frankly, should not be being given any payments, because they should actually be being sacked for failure to perform their jobs? They are taking sums of money and then transferring to other parts of the public sector, where they will have a repeated pattern of failure. Is there not a need for a real change in culture inside the public sector, particularly, I regret to say, inside management levels of the national health service?

Sir Christopher Chope: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about that. That is why organisations such as the TaxPayers Alliance are trying to work with the general public to raise the profile of these subjects. What is happening is a concerted fraud upon the taxpayer by these officials, who are cosying up to each other and ensuring that they are the only people who do not suffer as a result of their own incompetence.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): In one of my small local councils, Hambleton District Council, two officials have had pay-offs in excess of £300,000 over the past three years. One of them was only earning £100,000—"only", he says. The local authority says that it wants the measures brought forward so that it can cap future payments. Does my hon. Friend not agree that it is high time that we did that?

Sir Christopher Chope: Absolutely, I agree with that. Of course, the Government said that pending the implementation of the regulations, they would ask the public sector to comply with the spirit of them and the primary legislation that had been passed, but I am afraid that is almost impossible for local councillors and, indeed, the Government to do in practice, because we need to have the law in place. That is why I hope we will hear from the Chief Secretary that we will get the law on the statute book later this year so that public sector exit payments are limited to £95,000.

Clause 2 of my Bill suggests that we should give notice to all people who might be thinking of getting ahead of the game that they would be subject to the provisions of the Bill in respect of any public sector exit payments agreed after 1 April 2020. I do not know whether the Chief Secretary thinks that to be a sensible safeguard, but I hope it will find favour.

It is ridiculous that we should have to legislate to force the Government to introduce regulations. Many new colleagues are here today. I should tell them that on Fridays the Government often promise the earth and never deliver. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) introduced a Bill to

[Sir Christopher Chope]

deal with rogue parking operators last year. It got on to the statute book and everyone thought that the Parking (Code of Practice) Act 2019 meant that we would get rid of rogue parking operators. It may be months or years before anything effective is done in regulations.

John Lamont: Does my hon. Friend accept that the Government have been rather distracted in the past few years getting Brexit done?

Sir Christopher Chope: I am not sure that that is an adequate excuse. It could be a justification for everything, but in the Treasury it is an issue of priorities. There is no reason why, if hon. Members are given a promise that something is going to be done on a particular date, that promise should not be honoured.

John Spellar: The hon. Gentleman should come down a bit harder on that explanation from his hon. Friend, who is fundamentally saying that the Government are incapable of chewing gum and walking at the same time.

Sir Christopher Chope: I am not sure that my hon. Friend would have put it quite that way. The House needs to have a mood of intolerance of serial incompetence, if not a conspiracy of silence and inaction among people in the civil service.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Sir Christopher Chope: No. I am going to bring my remarks to a close in the hope that we will be able to hear something from my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury before we reach 2.30 pm.

2.16 pm

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): The problem of high public sector exit payments is not only the amount—sometimes £100,000 or £200,000; truly shocking amounts—but the acceptance of such payments by public sector workers when they seamlessly take up employment with another public sector body. For example, a council officer I knew received a £200,000 exit payment from one council and started at a new local authority the following week. There is no statutory obligation to post a declaration of interest in the way we do as Members of Parliament. We would have to declare that payment and it would be on public record. We do not have any sort of mechanism for, say, the chief executive of a council who moves to another council to do that. There is no way to see how much money they have received from the public sector for—we are not sure what. I see this happen again and again in the public sector. I welcome the transparency that we now have for Members of Parliament. We are held to account.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that, while we agree on the sentiment of the Bill, we need a wider cultural change and to encourage more diversity in such roles? Organisations should look not at lateral hires but at hires from outside—perhaps more people from the private sector. A cultural

change in addition to the initiative in the Bill is perhaps the way in which to bring about proper fundamental change.

Joy Morrissey: Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Mergers between the public and private sectors are something that I welcome. Bringing private sector efficiency to the public sector increases productivity and allows for a merger of ideas. I have seen a lot of success in the past, where local authorities and even the NHS have brought the two together. It is something we should look at.

In my constituency, we have many entrepreneurs and self-employed people who work very hard to be successful, and they are somewhat incredulous that a public sector employee who cannot be fired or let go can walk away to another job and take with them a £200,000 exit payment and not even have to declare that as an interest when starting at a new place of public employment. There is scope for looking at this and figuring out how we can hold public sector spending to account, making sure that we have value for money. In 2016-17, it was identified that 500,917 exit packages were paid that exceeded £50,000—almost double the average salary that year. Worse, 1,600 of those exit payments were for more than £100,000—that one-off payment was almost three times the average household income in 2016-17. The total cost of exit payments such as these was a staggering £1.2 billion.

In the running of any organisation, it is important to ensure that a payments system is constructed to incentivise the activities that are desired from employees. I have no problem with that, particularly in the private sector. However, when we are talking about public money that is being used for the public good, a different level of accountability is required. After all, it is all taxpayers' money at the end of the day.

We need to look carefully at the diligent application of the Government's balanced approach to economic management. The potentially unlimited sum being paid as exit payments is alarming. We really need to look at value for money and at ensuring that every penny that we give to a public body is used effectively and efficiently. As Members of Parliament, everything that we spend is on the public record—people can see it all. I welcome that level of transparency, but why has that level of transparency not been applied to other areas of the public sector, particularly to executives? We cannot easily access how much a chief executive of a council is being paid, and we certainly cannot access how much they were paid in an exit payment from another council. These are the things that we should be considering and I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) has mentioned these important topics.

I hope that we can improve transparency and accountability in all aspects of public finance, leading to better value for money for the taxpayer. There can be some disagreement about the best criteria and what those are for judging what constitutes value for money, but the core concept is that, when we spend taxpayers' money, we make sure that we know exactly where it is going.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, the Government have undertaken a consultation on this issue. I believe the consultation creates draft regulations that would apply

to the civil service, all civil service agencies, non-ministerial departments, public bodies, the NHS and local authorities. This seems to be adequate scope for the application of this cap.

The Government are due to respond to the consultation by the summer, with the regulations laid before Parliament before the end of 2020. I hope that the Government's measures will strike the right and fair balance and make sure that the scope of regulatory compensation and the regulatory framework that we put in place are appropriate for the circumstances. That will go a long way in dealing with this issue. I look forward to the consultation's findings being released in the summer. I hope that this will be something that the Government take forward to ensure that we hold public sector spending to account in a much better way.

2.24 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I will speak exceptionally briefly because I am keen to hear from the Minister.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) for introducing this important debate on an issue which I know exercises the minds of many of my constituents and other people across the country. For most, the idea of having a redundancy payment of six figures is far beyond their reach. Since the great recession, astonishingly, in a number of high-profile cases, severance payments have been seen to be rewarding failure. I am sure that Members are aware of examples. In Scotland, as I said, a string of police chiefs, university bosses and others have seen six-figure payouts in recent years.

So I am pleased that the Government are taking action on this. I again congratulate my hon. Friend on highlighting the issue. I await to hear what the Government are doing to tackle this important issue.

2.25 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Steve Barclay): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) for his work to secure value for money, an issue close to the heart of Her Majesty's Treasury.

I note that my hon. Friend suggested that Ministers have a tendency to "promise the earth" on a Friday in the House. That is not a charge usually levelled at Chief Secretaries and I will try to allay his concerns, not least with an eye to the forthcoming comprehensive spending review, in case any other Members have a similar expectation.

My hon. Friend also accused Ministers of having words put in their mouths, just reading out what they are given. I hope I can reassure him that I have written my remarks and that they will reflect my long-standing interest in the issues reflected in his Bill.

The Bill raises a legitimate issue, which is shared across the House, as reflected in the interventions: excess payments for people leaving roles in the public sector, often far in excess of what other members of staff in those organisations have earned over many years of service. My hon. Friend, through his Bill, signals his objection. As the Minister charged with overseeing spending, I share his concern. The point at issue is not in dispute for this Government and, in turn, the Government intend to act.

The second issue my hon. Friend raises through his Bill is the amount of time needed to resolve this issue. He is absolutely correct that, in the Conservative manifesto in 2015, we said that we would end taxpayer-funded six-figure payoffs for the best-paid public sector workers. He was also right to highlight and draw the attention of the House to the coverage in *The Times* newspaper, which has raised a number of recent cases of public servants receiving high-value exit payments. So it is understandable that he has brought the Bill forward, and I thank him for the timely reminder to the House and the Government of the importance of the issue.

My hon. Friend drew the House's attention to the fact that, as a member of the Public Accounts Committee in the 2010 to 2015 Parliament, I also highlighted the importance of the issue. I hope that that gives him some comfort—along with the remarks I will come on to—as to my commitment as the Minister responsible and as to the Government's commitment to address the points within the Bill.

I confirm to the House that we intend to publish the response to last year's consultation this April. I will ensure that legislation is brought forward before the summer recess, providing parliamentary time allows. I will work with fellow members of the Government to ensure that time is found.

I thoroughly agree with the intentions of my hon. Friend, but the Government cannot support the passage of this private Member's Bill. However, as I say, we will bring forward the consultation and ensure that we move forward at pace. He and I have met to discuss the issue in recent weeks in order to understand and address his specific concerns.

Significant responses to the consultation were received—600 or so—and I assure hon. Members that we have taken considerable effort to go through them in order to ensure that what is brought before the House will reflect the fact that a passage of time has happened, but it is a complex area of regulation, not least in terms of how we capture pension top-ups, for example, within the scope of the cap. There are other issues, such as the additional cost to the employer of allowing an individual access to their pension ahead of the normal pension age; that is the sort of issue that we have been looking at during the time to which my hon. Friend refers.

The issue concerns Members on both sides of the House. I reassure my hon. Friend that—

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 11(2)).

Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 11 September.

Business without Debate

GREEN BELT PROTECTION BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 September.

BAT HABITATS REGULATION BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 September.

Roadworks: Rayleigh

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

2.30 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, I thank you and Mr Speaker for granting me this Adjournment debate on a subject that, as you will see, is of pressing importance to many of my constituents.

It is good to see the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), at the Dispatch Box to reply for Her Majesty's Government. I have known him for many years. Ironically, I lobbied him very recently about the atrocious performance of Abellio Greater Anglia on the Southend to Liverpool Street line. However, as today's debate is about roadworks, I will concentrate my remarks on those—but the rail line is not getting any better.

Let me give the background. Last autumn, Essex County Council's Essex Highways granted three property developers, Barratt David Wilson, Countryside Properties and Silver City Estates, permission to begin digging up the roads in and around Rayleigh, all at the same time, in some cases on the day that schools resumed after the summer holidays. Unsurprisingly, that led to traffic chaos in and around Rayleigh, including in nearby Hullbridge. As the local MP, I had to intervene repeatedly with Essex Highways and all three developers to try to sort the situation out. Crucially, this included Countryside agreeing to lift its contraflows during the morning and evening rush hour on Rawreth Lane, and Barratt David Wilson working 24/7 in Hullbridge to finish the job.

After an autumn of severe disruption, the works finally concluded, and I held a summit in my Westminster office with Essex Highways, the developers, local councillors and residents' groups, at which we all faithfully agreed that this could never be allowed to happen again. Crucially, we agreed that when further planned works took place in Rayleigh in the following year, it would be necessary to separate the works, and ideally lift the contraflows during morning and evening peaks, and during the school run, to make the situation liveable for local residents, even if it took longer to complete the works as a result.

However, a further meeting took place at Rochford Hundred golf club in February this year, at which Essex Highways and the developers agreed a new schedule of works, to commence in March, principally on the A129, London Road—a single carriageway that is one of the principal arteries in and out of Rayleigh. It now transpires that Essex Highways officers granted Silver City permission to work throughout March, seven days a week, from 7 am to 7 pm, with contraflows in place throughout that time—that is, they were not to be lifted during the morning and evening peak and the school run, as was previously suggested.

Moreover, Countryside was then told that it could work for three months on its much larger site from early April to late June, again from 7 am to 7 pm. In other words, the developers would be able to dig up one of the primary arteries in and out of Rayleigh for 12 hours every day for four months. Thereafter, Barratt David Wilson would begin work off Rawreth Lane to construct

a new major roundabout. Some of that work can be undertaken offline, but there will still be weeks of disruption when the roundabout is connected to the main carriageway. Yet again, that work is permitted to be carried out from 7 am to 7 pm. For the avoidance of doubt, I declare that I am a resident in the Rawreth Lane area.

I am afraid to say that part of this has occurred because of a total lack of effective oversight by Essex Highways, which has clearly reneged on the commitments it gave me in my Westminster office prior to Christmas. Moreover, there appears to be an unhealthy cosy relationship between the highways officers and the developers, much of it based on first-name terms, with the county council failing my constituents in its regulatory duties to oversee the roadworks effectively.

As a result of those decisions, Silver City began its work early in March and, to cut a long story short, my constituents have gone up the wall. There have been extremely long tailbacks trying to get in and out of Rayleigh during the rush hour and the school run, with some constituents reporting journeys that would normally take about 15 minutes now taking well over an hour each way. In some cases, it is even worse. Businesses have suffered, with one small dance school having been put in real financial jeopardy because parents have cancelled lessons. Medical appointments have also been missed and children's education has been interrupted.

No one undertook any strategic communications to warn my constituents of these four months of impending chaos until I posted a video on Wednesday evening on my Facebook page to explain to my constituents exactly what is going on. The Minister might like to know that that post has since been viewed by more than 24,000 people. Aside from perhaps coronavirus, this is currently the overwhelming topic of conversation in Rayleigh. Many residents have left comments, of which the following four stood out. Mr A said:

"Well done Mark. And thanks for the best efforts possible. It's a shame it's all about the fast profit for fat cat companies in construction, and the quick buck and fast turn over in more council tax, etc. Than the thought of others losing out from struggles to get to work or schools."

Mr P said it is an

"Absolute joke of a system. How can we get them out of a job? It's the only thing they will listen to. Enough is enough—crazy when a five minute journey takes 40 minutes."

Ms B said:

"It's completely unacceptable that these two works run consecutively. That in itself should not happen. Developers should be inconvenienced, not existing residents and our livelihoods...Developers in this situation should be forced to work nights irrespective of cost to them. As per usual, why is it the general public that appear to have more common sense than the idiots that make decisions?"

Lastly, Ms C said:

"24/7 working is a fantastic ethic to implement. Silver City should cover the cost for overtime or be fined if they don't complete by a certain timeframe. I live on Little Wheatley Chase"—

one of the local roads—

"and I can tell you...the workmen don't seem to be in any rush! Lots of cups of tea...smoking...slowly walking up and down whilst cars sit in queues. It is very distressing."

There have been some instances of residents abusing the workmen. For the avoidance of doubt, I completely deprecate that behaviour, but that does give some idea of how frustrated local people have become. Yet again, I

have had to intervene on behalf of my constituents to try to sort out this mess, which I was faithfully promised by Essex Highways would never happen again. In the last week I have had meetings in Westminster with the managing director of Silver City, the new corporate chief executive of Countryside and County Councillor Kevin Bentley, the current deputy leader of Essex County Council and cabinet member for infrastructure, including roads.

I asked both Silver City and Countryside if they would consider lifting the contraflows during the rush hour in order to make the disruption more bearable. I also asked Countryside, whose work site is a couple of hundred yards away from any inhabited dwelling, if it would consider working 24/7—as, indeed, Barratt David Wilson did in Hullbridge last year—in order to try to accelerate the works as much as possible. I regret to inform the Minister and the House that neither has been forthcoming. In the case of Silver City Estates, which is based in Rochford, I received a two-paragraph email, written with the grammar of an eight-year-old, effectively saying that it intended to carry on regardless. The company is clearly only interested in its own profits, and obviously does not give a damn about my constituents, who I hope would not want to buy its houses in return. This is the two-paragraph memo—I am ripping it up to show the House what I think of Silver City Estates.

Countryside, conversely, has written me several charming letters, admittedly saying that it would look into all this, but not actually promising to do anything at all. Given my experience of dealing with developers over nearly 20 years as an MP, particularly last autumn and this spring, I have reluctantly come to the conclusion that they generally do not give a damn about the disruption they cause to local communities, and that all they are really interested in is maintaining at least a 20% profit margin on house sales while keeping construction costs, including for labour and roadworks, to an absolute minimum.

I know that the Minister is not responsible for housing, but I think that one of the reasons that almost any major housing development in this country is met with hordes of placard-waving local residents is that they have come to realise the utterly hard-nosed attitude of the developers and the local traffic chaos that is likely to result if and when the houses are actually built. In fairness, that is a challenge for the whole house building industry, not just the three companies that I have highlighted today, but I throw it out there none the less, and will be interested to see whether any of the developers have the moral courage to reply.

When I met Councillor Kevin Bentley two days ago, he agreed that the situation was unacceptable and said that he would look again at Essex County Council's process for giving consent to these proposals—not least as I understand that Essex County Council has not yet signed Countryside's permits to legally allow it to commence the work. In other words, it has agreed in principle, but has not formally permitted it. County Councillor Bentley has now agreed to review the situation to see if the proposals can be altered, and I am very grateful to him for doing so. Silver City is clearly beyond the pale, but I do hope that Countryside might yet be reasonable, perhaps encouraged by Essex County Council, and might yet adopt some of the mitigating proposals that I

have recommended before its work commences on the London Road in April. I shall certainly be keeping up the pressure on it to do so.

One thing that I have learned from this whole debacle is that the regulation of roadworks in this country is a mess. One of the great frustrations in modern life is queuing for ages to get through a contraflow on the highway to then discover that there is no one actually working on the site in the first place. The whole process is massively weighted in favour of the developers and the utility companies, at the clear expense of local residents and motorists. Indeed, Councillor Bentley has told me frankly that he would like to see the law changed to give highways authorities much greater powers to limit how and when people should be able to dig up the roads.

By sheer chance, after 19 years in this place, for the first time ever I got a placing in the private Members' Bill ballot this year, and my Control of Roadworks Bill is now due for its Second Reading on Friday 12 June. I plan to publish a draft Bill—for consultation with interested parties in May—designed to materially speed up roadworks in this country and to fine heavily those who do not comply. I very much hope that Ministers in the Department for Transport might look favourably on this initiative, and see it as an opportunity to help to address one of the great banes of our everyday lives. I very much hope that the Minister will carry back to the Department my genuine desire to try to improve the situation for all concerned, and to promote a sense of urgency among anyone who tries to dig up our roads.

In summary, I had honestly hoped that lessons had been learnt from the chaos last autumn and that I would never again need to intervene like this. Nevertheless, now that these problems have arisen once again, I have sought to raise them in the House of Commons and, in so doing, to reflect the extreme frustration of many of my constituents at the whole way that this has been badly maladministered. I hope that County Councillor Kevin Bentley will now indeed act proactively to help sort this mess out, and that Countryside, and Barratt David Wilson after it, will adopt a more co-operative approach, even if it costs them money.

Finally, I hope to get legislation on to the statute book to codify the regulation of roadworks, which is currently spread across multiple pieces of legislation, into one clear and simple Bill that everyone can follow. That will be designed to ensure that when people do unfortunately have to dig up the roads, they will do so with a sense of urgency, rather than complacency, and with a determination to respect the local communities within which they are working. I earnestly hope that the Minister can offer me some comfort that in that aspiration I might yet receive Government support. Thank you for your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker.

2.45 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) for securing the debate. Having recently had a number of meetings with him about his constituents' concerns about their rail service, I am pleased that this debate is about the roads. I am quite sure that, following his speech, members

[Chris Heaton-Harris]

and officers of Essex County Council will take a much more pragmatic and hands-on approach to the issues he has raised.

I also congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing a private Member's Bill—it is a lottery that I have won previously—and on the thoughts, views and ideas that he is clearly giving towards how the impact of roadworks on congestion can be reduced. I promise that my Department will work with him constructively on his Bill, and I look forward to seeing a draft in due course.

We all use our highways to travel every day, and how we manage them has a direct impact on everyone's lives. Congestion, with all its causes, and the condition of our roads are recurring themes that the Government hear about regularly, so it is a clear focus of attention for my colleagues in the Department for Transport. That focus is only going to become more important as, over the coming years, the number of roadworks will increase as a result of new housing developments and in order to deliver the Government's commitment that full-fibre and gigabit broadband will be available for every home and business across the UK as soon as possible. That will involve digging up a lot of roads.

We all want our road network to be improved, and my right hon. Friend will be pleased to have heard the commitment in Wednesday's Budget that £2.5 billion will be available to fix potholes and to resurface roads in England over the next five years. We know that there will continue to be roadworks, but that does not mean that they should last any longer than is needed. We all want the services provided by utility companies, and we want them to maintain and improve their infrastructure, but we also know that there are over 2 million roadworks taking place in England each year, and that these result in about £4 billion of congestion costs. That is a nut that it is worth trying to crack.

There is a great deal of scope for works to be planned, managed and co-ordinated more effectively, and for the public to be told about when works are happening and warned about the impact they might have on their journeys. That is why the Government have taken a number of actions in recent years. We have invested over £10 million in the new street manager digital service, which will transform the planning, management and communication of roadworks. This new service will be used by all local authorities and utility companies from 1 April this year. From July we plan to publish open data on live and planned works for technology and sat-nav companies and app developers to develop products for road users so that they, in turn, can plan their journeys more effectively.

Street Manager will deliver many benefits, including data that can be used to monitor performance. It will support greater co-ordination, forward planning and more joint works. All local authorities, utility companies and their contractors will be able to have a single view of the street and visibility of the whole network, to plan and co-ordinate works for the benefit of road users. We also have a commitment to continue improving the service to ensure that it continues to meet users' needs.

Street works permit schemes have been available for local authorities to operate since 2007. Those have proved to be a very effective way of managing and co-ordinating works. Authorities that operate schemes

have also seen that road user satisfaction is much improved. We have strongly encouraged all authorities to introduce schemes, and almost every authority now has a scheme in place. Essex County Council has operated a scheme since 2015. We will continue to ensure that all authorities have schemes in place, and as a result, there will be greater consistency for the industry and benefits for all road users.

We will shortly publish an updated technical specification for reinstatements, which will improve quality and performance. Reinstatements are needed after works have been completed. That update will be the first since 2010, and it will support and allow greater innovation and improve quality and performance.

We announced in 2019 that local authorities can introduce lane rental schemes, which allow authorities to charge utilities up to £2,500 per day for works on the busiest roads at the busiest times. That is normally around 5% of the authority's network. Charges encourage companies to move the location of their works, carry them out at less busy times, complete them as soon as possible or carry out joint works, which can attract discounts or charges that can be waived. Any surplus revenue can be spent by the authority on ways of reducing the impact of works on congestion. Two schemes are operating at the moment in Kent and on Transport for London's network. Authorities that want to set up schemes can bid to the Secretary of State for approval, and we have issued bidding guidance on how they can do that.

We will continue our work and plan to look at other aspects of how to regulate roadworks, to see whether further improvements to those schemes can be made. For example, works start and stop notices at weekends, which are needed to give real-time updates to road users, do not need to be sent until 10 am the following Monday, and overrun charges do not currently apply at weekends. An amendment to legislation following a period of consultation, including within Government, would be needed to resolve that—indeed, my right hon. Friend might choose to look at that in his private Member's Bill. The Department is amazingly sympathetic to the issue and will consider that, as well as other specific problems.

Mr Francois: I have only been a Member of Parliament for 19 years, but I have learned when not to look a gift horse in the mouth. If there is a lacuna in the current legislation, I would be pleased to talk to the Minister and his colleagues about how I might genuinely be able to help them address it.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Private Members' Bills on a Friday—some people think they are not worth a hoot, but we can achieve some great things.

On the issue of fines and penalties, a range of criminal penalties are already in place, covering, for example, safety and compliance with permits. Local authorities can also issue overrun charges of up to £10,000 per day for works that are not completed in time. I know that Essex County Council is using those powers. In the last year, 513 charges were issued for overrunning works, imposing charges of just under £500,000. We are not convinced of the need to raise those limits any further, but the powers do exist.

I understand that the situation in my right hon. Friend's constituency mirrors the experience of many others, but I also understand that Essex County Council is using the powers available to it and that it is working with developers and utility companies to co-ordinate works and ensure that they are completed as soon as possible or that work is done during off-peak times or school holidays, to minimise the impact on local road users.

To conclude, I thank my right hon. Friend for the way he has gone about this debate, for his positive contribution—as positive as it can be in the circumstances—

and for quite rightly being demanding on behalf of his constituents. I hope and expect that we will all see improvements in the way that works are planned and managed as a result of Street Manager, greater use of permit schemes and the other reforms we are taking forward, and perhaps his private Member's Bill will add to that.

Question put and agreed to.

2.54 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Friday 13 March 2020

DEFENCE

Single-source Defence Contracts

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace):

I am today announcing that I have set the baseline profit rate for single source defence contracts at 8.22%, in line with the rate recommended by the Single Source Regulations Office (SSRO). The baseline profit rate is calculated on a three-year rolling average of underlying profit rates. The underlying profit rate decreased from 8.50% for 2019-20 to 8.23% for 2020-21. I have accepted the methodology used by the SSRO to calculate these figures.

I am also announcing new capital servicing rates and an SSRO funding adjustment as recommended by the SSRO, which can be found at the table below. These rates have been published in the *London Gazette*, as required by the Defence Reform Act 2014.

All of these new rates will come into effect from 1 April 2020.

Recommended rates agreed by the Secretary of State for Defence

Element	2019 rates	2020 rates
Baseline profit rate (BPR) (% on contract cost)	7.63%	8.22%
Fixed capital servicing rate (% on fixed capital employed)	3.98%	3.66%
Working capital servicing rate (% on positive working capital employed)	1.18%	1.22%
Working capital servicing rate (% on negative working capital employed)	0.53%	0.61%
SSRO funding adjustment	-0.042%	-0.052%

[HCWS157]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Store Deliveries: Covid-19 Response

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): I wish to update the House on the urgent matter of enabling retailers of food, sanitary and other essential items to increase the frequency of deliveries to their stores to support the response to covid-19.

Many supermarkets, food retailers and distribution centres in England are subject to controls which restrict the time and number of deliveries from lorries and other delivery vehicles, particularly at night. These include planning conditions, which are necessary to making the development acceptable to local residents who might otherwise suffer from traffic, noise and other local amenity issues as a result of these deliveries.

Given the exceptional challenges facing the UK from the coronavirus however, it is vital that deliveries of food, sanitary and other essential products over the coming weeks can be made as quickly and safely as possible,

minimising disruption to the supply chains on which our communities depend. The likely pressures on driver capacity mean additional flexibility is needed so that retailers can accept deliveries throughout the day and night where necessary.

The national planning policy framework already emphasises that planning enforcement is a discretionary activity, and local planning authorities should act proportionately in responding to suspected breaches of planning control.

The purpose of this written ministerial statement, which comes into effect immediately, is to make clear that as a matter of urgency local planning authorities should take a positive approach to their engagement with food retailers and distributors, as well as the freight industry, to ensure planning controls are not a barrier to food delivery over the period of disruption caused by the coronavirus.

Given the current situation local planning authorities should not seek to undertake planning enforcement action which would result in unnecessarily restricting deliveries of food and other essential deliveries during this period, having regard to their legal obligations.

The Government recognise that the increased frequency of deliveries, particularly at night, could have a temporary impact on local residents. However, this needs to be balanced by the significant public interest in ensuring local residents have continued access to food, sanitary and other essential goods in their local shops. The retail and logistics sectors have also worked to minimise impacts on residents over recent years through quiet deliveries and the Government expect that such good practice continues. The Government will review the need for the flexibility outlined in this statement after the pressure from the coronavirus has reduced, and it is the intention to withdraw it once the immediate urgency has subsided.

This written ministerial statement only covers England. We are working closely with the devolved Administrations to consider similar arrangements.

[HCWS159]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Contingencies Fund Advance

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £1,500,000,000 will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Department for Work and Pensions. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £1,500,000,000 will be met by a repayable cash advance from the Contingencies Fund.

This is not a request for additional funding but is to meet the Department's cash requirements pending Royal Assent of the supplementary estimate 2019-20 and will enable the Department to continue to deliver an effective welfare system for our citizens.

[HCWS158]

Petitions

Friday 13 March 2020

OBSERVATIONS

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Over 75s free TV licences

The petition of The residents of Glasgow East,

Declares that free TV licences to households with someone aged over 75 should remain for the foreseeable future; notes that this scheme should remain in governmental hands rather than being privatised by the BBC; further that the removal of the free TV licences will have a negative impact on some of the poorest pensioners in the constituency and across the country; further notes that one of BBC's proposals in the consultation is means-testing the concession by linking the free licences to Pension Credit; further that the Department for Work and Pensions own estimates show that nationally 40% (two in five) of those entitled to receive Pension Credit are not in receipt of the benefit and would be excluded; further that access to media, especially if frail or housebound, can reduce loneliness in old age and improve well-being.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to reverse the planned decision to end the funding of the free TV licence to households with someone aged over 75 and privatisation of this to the BBC.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by David Linden, *Official Report*, 28 January 2020; Vol. 670, c.751.]

[P002552]

TV licences for the over 75s

The petition of residents of Barrow and Furness,

Declares that television licences should be free to all those aged over 75; further that free TV licences matter because for many older people television is their main source of news, entertainment and information, and provides a link to the outside world; further that for older people living on very limited budgets, having to pay the full cost of a TV licence would put an even bigger strain on their finances; and further that the plan to make it free to those households who are claiming pension credit will not benefit those most in need - it is well known that pension credit, for a variety of reasons, is massively under-claimed (in this constituency alone up to 1,915 predicted households entitled to, but not

claiming, pension credit, to the tune of an estimated £4,649,324); further a related local petition on this matter has received 564 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take back responsibility for funding this important concession for all those aged over 75.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Official Report*, 15 October 2019; Vol. 666, c.259 .]

[P002531]

Observations from the Minister for Media and Data, (Mr Whittingdale):

Section 89 of the Digital Economy Act 2017 provides that the BBC is responsible for the future of the over-75s TV licence fee concession. This reform was subject to public discussion and debated extensively during the passage of the Digital Economy Bill through Parliament.

The BBC announced in June 2019 that only people who are aged 75 and above and in receipt of pension credit will continue to receive a free television licence from June 2020.

The Government recognise the importance of television to people of all ages, particularly for older people who value television as a source of entertainment, companionship and a way to stay connected with the world.

The Government remain disappointed with the BBC's decision to restrict the over-75 TV licence fee concession to only those aged over 75 and in receipt of pension credit. The Government believe that TV licences for over-75s should be funded by the BBC.

The Government agree that the BBC should set out clear information about how the over-75 concession will operate. It corresponds with the Government's request to the BBC to do more in supporting those affected by the decision, as it is important that those affected have information that will help them in understanding the steps they can take.

The Government recognise that some of the most vulnerable people may struggle to pay for their TV licence. We have announced a new flexible payment scheme—the simple payment plan—to help vulnerable people, including those over the age of 75, currently struggling to pay the licence fee. Eligible vulnerable customers will be able to spread the cost of their first-year licence equally over 12 months.

Pension credit is an important protection for the retirement incomes of some of our most vulnerable people. The Government remain clear that they want everyone eligible to claim those benefits to which they are entitled. DWP staff in pension centres and jobcentres, including visiting officers, are committed to engaging with people who may be eligible to benefits to provide help and advice about entitlement, as are staff in local authorities who administer housing benefit.

Ministerial Correction

Friday 13 March 2020

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Support for Small Businesses

The following is an extract from Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions on 3 March 2020.

Paul Scully: The Post Office, under its new chief executive officer, has since accepted that it got things wrong. **He has apologised** and said that it aims to re-establish a positive relationship with postmasters. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is working

actively with the Post Office on this matter and will hold it to account on its progress. We are also looking into what more needs to be done.

[Official Report, 3 March 2020, Vol. 672, c. 739.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully):

An error has been identified in my response to my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore).

The correct response should have been:

Paul Scully: The Post Office, under its new chief executive officer, has since accepted that it got things wrong, **apologised and said** that it aims to re-establish a positive relationship with postmasters. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is working actively with the Post Office on this matter and will hold it to account on its progress. We are also looking into what more needs to be done.

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

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Single-source Defence Contracts		9WS	Contingencies Fund Advance		10WS
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Friday 13 March 2020

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DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT		5P	OBSERVATIONS		5P
Over 75s free TV licences		5P			
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MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Friday 13 March 2020

		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY		3MC
Support for Small Businesses		3MC

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