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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Friday 12 March 2021

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Virtual participation in proceedings commenced (Orders, 4 June and 30 December 2020).

[NB: [V] denotes a Member participating virtually.]

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab) 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

Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee.

Clause 1

GUIDANCE ABOUT THE COSTS OF SCHOOL UNIFORMS:
ENGLAND

9.34 am

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I beg to move amendment 2, page 1, line 5, after “must” insert “within six months of this Act coming into force”

This amendment will ensure that the guidance has to be issued within a specific time.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 3, page 1, line 9, leave out “the Secretary of State considers” and insert “are”

This amendment will introduce an objective test of relevance in place of a subjective test.

Amendment 4, page 1, line 10, at end insert “including price, quality, design, place of manufacture and country of origin.”

This amendment will ensure that these aspects bearing upon costs are addressed in any guidance.

Amendment 1, page 1, line 10, at end insert—

“(2A) But guidance issued under this section must include guidance on—

- (a) ensuring there is an adequate market for second-hand uniform where that uniform is provided new by a single supplier, and
- (b) establishing a hardship fund for the parents or guardians who struggle to meet the cost of providing uniform for their children.”

Amendment 5, page 1, line 10, at end insert—

“(2A) Any guidance issued under this section must include advice on ways of minimising the payment of Value Added Tax as a component of the cost of school uniforms.”

Amendment 6, page 1, line 11, leave out “must” and insert “may”

This amendment will enable the appropriate authority to exercise its discretion as to whether or not to have regard to the guidance.

Amendment 7, page 1, line 12, leave out “developing and”

This amendment will restrict the guidance to policy implementation.

Amendment 8, page 1, line 12, after “developing”, insert “, publishing”

This amendment will require appropriate authorities to have regard to publishing requirements in the guidance about costs of school uniforms.

Amendment 9, page 1, line 14, leave out “from time to time” and insert

“, no sooner than five years after the first guidance is issued under this section,”

This amendment will ensure that any guidance remains in place for at least five years.

Amendment 10, page 1, line 18, leave out paragraph (b)

This amendment would exclude an alternative-provision Academy from the provisions of the Bill.

Amendment 11, page 1, line 21, leave out paragraph (d)

This amendment would exclude a non-maintained special school from the provisions of the Bill.

Amendment 12, page 2, line 1, leave out paragraph (e)

This amendment would exclude a pupil referral unit from the provisions of the Bill.

Amendment 13, page 2, line 3, leave out from “school” to “the proprietor” in line 4

This amendment is consequential on Amendments 10 and 11.

Amendment 14, page 2, line 6, leave out paragraph (c)

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 12.

Amendment 15, page 2, line 6, at end insert—

“(7) Before issuing any guidance under this section, the Secretary of State must consult the National Governors Association, the Parent Teacher Association UK and representatives of the different categories of relevant school.”

Amendment 16, in clause 2, page 2, line 9, leave out “two” and insert “six”

This amendment will ensure that any guidance under this Act will not apply to the 2021/22 academic year.

Sir Christopher Chope: My opening remarks will, as ever, be brief. First, let me say how wonderful it is that we have Friday sittings back, and I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, and to the Leader of the House for having facilitated that. I understand that Her Majesty’s official Opposition were keen that we abandon Friday sittings, so I hope they have now realised that there is a virtue in this, not least because some of the Bills on today’s Order Paper are being promoted by Opposition Members. Let us welcome that and put it on the record.

I wish to speak to the amendments standing in my name and those of my hon. Friends the Members for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) and for Shipley (Philip Davies), and to amendment 1, which stands in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough. The essence of this Bill is something that everybody in the House supports; after all, who wants the cost of school uniforms

[*Sir Christopher Chope*]

to be higher than it needs to be? I support the idea that we should have good-quality school uniforms at a competitive price, available throughout schools in England. That is the purpose of the Bill, and the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) and I are ad idem on that.

The hon. Gentleman will probably therefore agree with my amendment 2, which is designed to put an end date on what appears to be the Government's prevarication in getting on with the job. They were first talking about introducing statutory guidance on the cost of school uniform many years ago—back in 2015, if I recall correctly. Since then, not much progress has been made and we are now relying on the hon. Gentleman's Bill. Again, I congratulate him on having brought it before the House.

The purpose of this amendment is to try to ensure that we get on with it, which is why the amendment proposes that the Secretary of State "must" issue guidance "within six months of this Act coming into force".

It is a pity that we have not had the draft guidance already. It was exactly one year ago tomorrow that the Bill was debated on Second Reading, and almost six months after that it had its Committee stage. A further six months on from that, so one year after it was first debated, the Government are still saying that they are intent on bringing forward statutory guidance but have not yet produced even a draft. When this issue was raised in Committee, the Minister for School Standards said that it was his intention to get on with it and that he would be consulting people as soon as possible about it. I interpreted that to mean he would be getting on with consulting on the draft statutory guidance, as that is often the norm in this House. While the House is considering—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. An hon. Member should not walk in front of another Member who is speaking. Please, let us show courtesy to each other.

Sir Christopher Chope: I am all in favour of that. Thank you, Mr Speaker. That is another example of why we need to get back to normal sittings in this Chamber, so that people become more familiar with the way we normally work.

Mr Speaker: I do not think we need to debate that.

Sir Christopher Chope: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am going to re-emphasise my frustration, which I am sure is shared by the promoter of the Bill, about the fact that we have not yet seen the draft guidance. Once the draft guidance is produced, it will need to be the subject of consultation, and the Minister has committed to doing that, with the various stakeholders.

The guidance needs to be produced within six months of the Act coming into force. My right hon. Friend the Minister said in Committee that he did not want to be tied down to a particular date because he thought that would be too constraining. I can understand that, but unfortunately the worst fears that lay behind the questions put to him now seem to be being realised. We assumed that getting on and producing the guidance was a top priority of my right hon. Friend's Department. In Committee, he referred to some of the key ingredients

that he expected to be in the draft guidance—namely, exactly the same provisions as are in the current non-statutory guidance, which was last issued in 2013. It does not seem as though an exacting demand was being placed on him by the Committee or, indeed, that he was placing one on the shoulders of his officials, so it is disappointing that that has not yet happened. It is therefore important to put in the Bill an end date or a timescale within which the guidance must be issued. That is the purport of amendment 2.

I hope it will be convenient for Members if, instead of going through all the amendments one by one in the order in which they appear on the amendment paper, I jump ahead and go straight to amendment 5, which goes to the heart of one of the issues that I raised on Second Reading a year ago, for which I got a lot of support from the hon. Member for Weaver Vale, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) and others.

Amendment 5 says:

"Any guidance issued under this section must include advice on ways of minimising the payment of Value Added Tax as a component of the cost of school uniforms."

The issue of VAT is solely within the remit of the Government, and VAT is adding 20% to the cost of a heck of a lot of school uniforms. Although we are going to issue guidance to governing bodies, which we say is very important, on the price and quality of school uniforms, the Government have the ability to reduce, at a stroke, the cost of school uniforms by 20% for all those people adversely affected by the current VAT rules. That would not have been possible before we were liberated as a legislature by our leaving the European Union.

I introduced a private Member's Bill—I cannot remember whether it was in this Session or the previous one—to reduce value added tax. Although it was a financial Bill, I was delighted that, because it would have reduced the burden of taxation, it was within scope for private Members' legislation. I would have tabled an amendment to this Bill along similar lines, had that been in scope, but unfortunately it would not have been, because it has a very narrow title about guidance to schools. Had the scope of this Bill been slightly wider, I would have tabled an amendment that would have removed VAT from all specific school uniforms, and I am sure that it would have received almost unanimous support in the House. As I cannot do that, I have engendered this debate by saying that included in the guidance should be a reference from the Minister to how schools and governing bodies can minimise the impact of VAT.

I will refer briefly to a BBC reality check. I do not know whether you look at these things, Mr Speaker, but this is a very helpful one. It asks:

"Why is VAT charged on school uniform?"

It goes on to say:

"For older children—or those who are taller than average—"

I will come on to the issue of waist size in a minute—

"school uniforms, as well as all other clothing and shoes, attract the full standard VAT rate of 20%. Reality Check explores why these families are paying more and why successive governments haven't acted."

9.45 am

Very helpfully, it sets out what the current rules are and gives us this reminder:

“Clothing and shoes for young children have been charged a zero rate of VAT since the introduction of the tax on 1 April 1973. The problem is that there is no definition of the term ‘young children’ in VAT law. Instead, the VAT relief is based on the maximum size an average child will be on their 14th birthday. So clothes for older children, as well as many children under the age of 14 who are larger than average, are taxed at 20%. And this includes school uniform.”

Very helpfully—I do not know whether the hon. Member for Weaver Vale is familiar with this—Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs sets out maximum measurements for VAT zero-rated clothing. I will not go through the whole list, but let me pick out one, which is the height of boys in inches. The maximum height for a boy is 64 inches before the uniform or the clothes that that child is wearing become subject to VAT and lose the zero-rated exemption. Do you know, Mr Speaker, what the average height of a boy on his 14th birthday currently is in the United Kingdom? It is 64.6 inches. In other words, it is just over 5 feet 4½ inches. That is the average, which means that many average 14-year-olds, and by implication those of 12 and 13 and some of 11, are already having school uniforms purchased by their parents that are subject to value-added tax. That is not acceptable. It does not fit in with the Government’s policy, which is to reduce the burden of the cost of school uniforms on families, and I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister will use our new freedoms to take forward proposals to remove value added tax on school uniforms.

The reality check asks another pertinent question:

“Why doesn’t the Government cut the rate?”

It says:

“The policy would be very popular with parents, and it has been considered in the past, but it has never been taken up. Way back in 1980”—

a long time ago, Mr Speaker—

“HM Customs & Excise considered the possibility of scrapping VAT on school uniforms, but concluded that the zero rate, aimed at children, would be exploited by adults in the larger sizes.”

We can see now that it is a burden not just on larger adults, but on children of average height. It goes on to say:

“After all, the uniform in a great number of secondary schools includes plain trousers, skirts and shirts—items that adults could wear too. There were proposals that elements of school uniform clearly identified as being from a particular school, by a logo for example, could be made exempt from VAT.”

That is my purpose in raising this; it could link two particular elements of the school uniform affordability policy.

One of the complaints made is that if a large number of items in a school uniform incorporate the particular badge or logo into the design, that adds to the costs of that item or uniform. I understand that, but obviously if the value added tax rules were changed to exempt from value added tax any school uniform that had such logos or insignia on it, the cost of those items would be reduced by 20%. That is not a new idea. This idea was raised and by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) back in 1997, when he proposed that such a policy could be policed by the production of a school identification card or that the uniform could be ordered through the school. Interestingly, the Labour Government in place at the time did not support that. Since then, other Members of Parliament have taken up the cause, including

my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker). When he was a Minister at the Department for Exiting the European Union, he basically said, “Be patient. Once we left have, we will have the freedom to deal with this”; and hopefully we will.

Now that we have left the European Union, we are no longer constrained by its restrictions on what we can do. If, prior to leaving, the Government had wanted to add all school uniform to the list of goods that are taxed at 0%, they would have needed the agreement of all other European Union countries. That would have been impossible, as we found out when we tried to remove the value added tax on personal items for the use of women. Now that we have left, that restriction has gone.

The line from the Treasury is always that value added tax is a broad-based tax that contributes an enormous amount to the Revenue. The last time I discussed this with a Treasury Minister, he said that in Ministers’ inboxes, they have about 50 or 70 different propositions as to reductions that should be made on value added tax. I point out that the difference between value added tax on school uniforms and general value added tax is that the Government’s avowed policy is to reduce the cost of school uniforms, and it is now within their power to remove the VAT. The leakage to which I made a reference—non-uniform items being bought up by adults who should be paying the value added tax—could be addressed through the combination of changing the rules and enabling those specific uniforms to be allowed to be exempt from VAT, as long as they had a specific design unique to that school, such as a prominent badge.

It may be helpful to the Government to be reminded that it is currently possible to get around the rules for people aged up to 14, irrespective of their size and waist measurement, by making it clear that the uniform is exclusively for the use of under-14s. This is the type of advice that I have in mind that the Government should be producing in the revised statutory guidance. The zero rate applies to organisations such as Beavers or Brownies for the clothing items that form the uniform, regardless of the size, as long as those organisations cater exclusively for the under-14s. It would, for example, be possible for a school to specify that uniform—

Mr Speaker: Sir Christopher, I hate to interrupt. I recognise the theme, but I think we can both say that Beavers would never be of an adult size. We are not comparing like with like, because there is an age where children go to the next stage in Brownies and Guides—it is the same with Scouts and the Cubs movement—so they cannot be of a size where that would be applicable. As you rightly say, that is applicable to school uniforms that are of an adult size. We would agree—you are absolutely right—that the theme is about the size that uniform comes in, but I worry about trying to compare with something that could never happen.

Sir Christopher Chope: I understand the point that you are making, Mr Speaker. I am drawing attention to this because it actually does happen at the moment. As long as their uniforms are for those up to the age of 14, Beavers and Brownies are able to provide those uniforms free of value added tax, irrespective of the size—

Mr Speaker: I must not have explained it correctly. I think that at the age of seven, eight or nine, children cannot continue, and they go to the next stage within the branch of the organisation. It is a bit like infant school, junior school and high school. That is all I am trying to say. We are getting bogged down in something that would not be applicable.

Sir Christopher Chope: My final line of defence is that this is taken from the BBC's reality check, and it sounds as though that needs to be revised in the light of your helpful and constructive comments, Mr Speaker.

The final point I want to make on this aspect is that there was recently a survey—it was highlighted in *The Guardian*, of all newspapers, but the reference I have is from the Press Association—that showed the waistline spread of UK children. I will not go into the whole detail of it, but the survey found that back in 2011, an average 11-year-old girl was 148.78 cm tall compared with 146.03 cm in 1978—an increase of 2.75 cm over that time—but her waistline was 70.2 cm on average, compared with 59.96 cm in 1978. We are talking about an average 11-year-old girl, and the average has probably gone up since 2011, but the limit beyond which the waistline of a garment is subject to VAT is only 69 cm, which shows that the current VAT limit for the waistline measurement of a piece of clothing is well below the average waistline of an 11-year-old girl. That is another example of the way in which the current VAT rules have introduced a sort of stealth tax upon parents who are trying to pay for school uniform.

This amendment is designed to ensure that these issues are addressed by the Minister when he puts out statutory guidance, with advice included in that guidance to schools on how to get around it. Obviously that advice to schools might change if the Government were to accept my advice—and, I am sure, the advice of the whole House—and intervene now to take away the burden of value added tax on school uniforms, thereby reducing the price of school uniforms for everybody affected. I put that in at the beginning of my remarks because I thought it was sensible to set it in context. Obviously, we want to maximise the quality and minimise the price. Everything that follows in relation to this guidance and this Bill is in a sense subordinate to the point I have made, because the issue of VAT is solely within the control of the Government, and I think if the Government acted on it, that would be very popular.

10 am

Turning to the other amendments in the order in which they appear on the amendment paper, amendment 3 is:

“Clause 1, page 1, line 9, leave out ‘the Secretary of State considers’ and insert ‘are’”.

As it says in the Member's explanatory statement:

“This amendment will introduce an objective test of relevance in place of a subjective test.”

Currently, the Bill says that the Secretary of State must issue guidance and that the

“costs aspects of school uniform policies’ means any aspects of school uniform policies that the Secretary of State considers relevant to the costs of school uniforms.”

The question I ask is: why should this Secretary of State solely be in the position to decide what is relevant to the costs of school uniforms? Why should that not be an objective test, so that any aspects of school uniform

policies that are relevant to the costs of school uniforms would be included in this guidance? I think the example of value added tax is a good one, because the Secretary of State might decide that he did not regard value added tax as impinging on the issue of aspects of school uniform policies or costs, and thereby be able to exclude any reference to that, despite its relevance. That is why I have put in amendment 3, which would introduce an objective test, rather than a subjective test.

Amendment 4 would incorporate within the guidance criteria

“including price, quality, design, place of manufacture and country of origin.”

This is, in one sense, a highly topical issue because we know that there has been a lot of discussion in the context of the Trade Bill about whether our country should change its approach to international trade and whether Parliament should restrict the ability of the Government to enter into a trade deal with a country that is in the dock for genocide. I am not going to get into that debate, but the purpose of this amendment is to enable school governing bodies to take these issues into account when deciding on their school uniform policy.

We are talking about price, and I think that needs to be spelled out, but we also need to refer to issues of quality. That point was made very eloquently on Second Reading by, among others, as I recall, my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken). I think even the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) made the same point that we should be talking not just about price but about quality and design, as well as the place of manufacture and the country of origin.

Increasing numbers of people in this country do not wish to purchase goods whose origin is China. In particular, they do not wish to purchase goods comprising cotton, which may have been produced under slave labour conditions in particular parts of China. Obviously, those goods from China are often less expensive than goods sourced from elsewhere, even from places such as India or Bangladesh. Surely it should be open to a governing body to discuss the merits or otherwise of having a school uniform that is sourced from China, or from some other country with which that governing body thinks we should operate at arm's length, rather than indulging its breaches of human rights.

That is why I have introduced those criteria, and I was delighted when my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough supported the amendment. He has an enormous amount of experience on this subject and, as you may know, Mr Speaker, he was chair of the committee that took over from Sir Anthony Steen and deals with international people trafficking. He has shared with me the fact that the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery on 3 December tries to promote the suppression of traffic in persons and the exploitation of others. The idea is to eradicate contemporary forms of slavery because, according to the UN, an estimated 40.3 million people are in modern-day slavery, including almost 25 million in forced labour and some 15.5 million in forced marriages.

Horribly, there are 5.4 victims of modern slavery for every 1,000 people in the world, and one in four of those victims are children. This is an important issue, and it is relevant in the context of this debate because national and international companies supply school

uniforms, and they need to know that it is open to governing bodies to inquire into the place of manufacture and country of origin of the school uniforms being sold. Some interesting data have been produced on this—I am trying to get to the nub of this issue. The garment industry turns over almost £3 trillion a year, yet garment workers, 80% of whom are women, work for poverty pay, earning as little as £15 a month. Human rights abuses are systemic throughout the industry. Poverty wages, long hours, forced overtime, unsafe working conditions and so on are all commonplace in the clothing industry, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough knows, it is an industry built on exploitation that grows as a result of a lack of transparency, and makes holding brands accountable very difficult.

So how do we do that? We can put pressure on the suppliers of school uniforms to ensure that their sources of supply are worthy of our support and schools' support. You may remember, Mr Speaker, that a campaign group, Labour Behind the Label, was established to "raise public awareness and promote collective action from consumers to push for change"

in the garment industry, because it wanted to ensure that companies took

"responsibility for workers' rights throughout the entirety of their supply chains."

The group works with trade unions worldwide and concentrates on protecting the human rights of garment workers.

Labour Behind the Label believes that

"no-one should live in poverty for the price of a cheap t-shirt. That a living wage is a basic human right, as is working without fear for your life."

That is why, in 2019, it started a petition to challenge Trutex, one of the largest suppliers of school uniforms. This story actually has quite an encouraging conclusion, and it is possible that, if amendment 4 is accepted, we could have similarly successful outcomes based on pressure put on those who provide school uniforms.

Trutex is the United Kingdom's largest specialist schoolwear brand. In 2019, its turnover was £27.5 million. It has supplied school uniforms across Britain for 150 years. It sells logoed uniforms and sportswear to thousands of schools, often operating exclusive contracts with schools and selling through individual retailers.

Labour Behind the Label said:

"Uniform monopolies...leave parents in an ethical bind, forced to buy from brands that lack transparency. Trutex's website offers vague promises of a commitment to ethical production and assurances that its production sites are well managed and safe. Yet unlike many other brands who have published lists of where their factories are located, Trutex remain silent and provide absolutely no evidence that what they say is true."

After collecting signatures for the petition to which I referred, it was able to establish that Trutex was working positively in some areas, which had not been recognised, but was doing a poor job of spelling out to others what it was doing.

The good news is that, in 2020, Trutex published a corporate sustainability report. That substantial document lists its suppliers around the globe and contains a list of 20 tier 1 suppliers, including in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the United Kingdom. Trutex has also joined the Ethical Trading Initiative as a foundation stage member and has accepted that organisation's base code—a code of conduct based on key International Labour Organisation conventions. While membership

of the Ethical Trading Initiative does not automatically mean that a member is ethical, or that it properly upholds labour rights, it is obviously a step in the right direction.

Because of that progress, the petition to which I referred has now been closed, but Labour Behind the Label continues to monitor Trutex and other uniform brands "to make sure that parents and families have the right to know that their school uniforms are made in decent working conditions." Trutex responded to the concerns, and it should be congratulated on that. The strong message from that is that we should incorporate in the statutory guidance a reference to the ability of governing bodies to take into account the source of the school uniforms that they adopt for their school.

The Schoolwear Association represents all those involved in the supply of school-specific uniform, from direct retailers to school suppliers, manufacturers, distributors, wholesalers, suppliers, agents and schools. Established in 2006, the association has over 200 members, and between them they clothe three quarters of Britain's schoolchildren, so obviously it is an important organisation. It promotes best practice across the UK schoolwear industry and is committed to ensuring that a long-term, robust and competitive market exists for the supply of schoolwear. Its code of practice sets out its aims and values, including ethical compliance to ensure that workers are treated fairly. It states:

"Members will operate to the highest reasonable standards of ethical compliance".

Obviously, that commitment could be built upon if individual governing bodies wanted to do so.

10.15 am

However, it is not only direct school suppliers for which there is an issue of transparency; the larger suppliers may well be the most guilty of using slave labour, and it is also an issue for the large supermarket chains. That brings me to an issue that was discussed quite a lot on Second Reading and in Committee: alternative sources of school uniform. How is it that some generic items are so much cheaper when purchased from a supermarket? The supermarkets are now able to produce this clothing at significantly lower costs, but the purchaser is unable to be sure about the sourcing. If we allowed governing bodies to deal with this as part of the school uniform, then these items would be subject to the same safeguards to which I have referred.

A 2015 investigation by the *Daily Mirror*—not an organ I read regularly, I must admit—highlighted that two of Britain's top stores, Sainsbury's and Tesco, were selling school uniforms made by workers who were paid just 25p an hour. The large retailer Next was selling uniforms from a 6,000-worker factory in Bangladesh. It vowed to look at conditions after admitting that staff had to put in unacceptable overtime. Sometimes they were toiling—I think that is the right expression—for more than 70 hours a week, and for just £51 a month. That was significantly higher even than the country's weekly legal limit of 60 hours. One mother working in one of those factories wanted parents in Britain to be aware of their poverty. She said:

"Look at the irony, I make school uniforms and can't afford to send my daughter to school."

It is an irony that should stop us in our tracks and make us realise how important it is to get the sourcing of school uniforms right.

The article described how most employees live in terrible conditions, with families in one room. The children often have to fend for themselves, and many leave school early so that they can find work to help the family. A 33-year-old stitcher said that his basic daily wage was equivalent to £1.97. Even with long overtime, he earned only £76 a month. He said:

“It’s a low wage. My elder son goes to school in his one uniform through the year.”

That is a significant contrast with what we are lucky enough to enjoy in this country. The man said that he could not afford to educate his other son.

Those sorts of organisations make garments for large supermarkets which are often incorporated in school uniforms. A clothes finisher with a fixed monthly salary of £56.77 said:

“We are often forced to work overtime to avoid the factory paying charges for late delivery. They make people work four to six hours of overtime a day.”

For each hour of overtime, they get 34p. That is why we need to take action and encourage others to take action by naming and shaming these suppliers and giving the power to school governing bodies, which incorporate an enormous amount of collective wisdom, to take action on these issues. I have not even mentioned the Uyghurs, not because I have overlooked them but because the point has been made sufficiently and others may want to go further into the issue in the debate.

I believe that price, quality, design, place of manufacture and country of origin should be in the guidance. In reference to quality and design, I noticed when I looked at the statutory guidance issued by the Welsh Government that it requires schools to produce school uniforms that do not need to be dry cleaned. It seems to me that a school blazer that does not need to be dry cleaned is probably incompatible with desirable design standards. Design is important so I disagree with that prescriptive Welsh statutory guidance which deals with not just whether garments have to be dry cleaned but other issues. I throw that out as an example, which brings me on, you will be delighted to know, Mr Speaker, to amendment 1.

Amendment 1 was tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough and I and my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley have supported it. The essence of it is that the guidance should make provision to ensure that there is an adequate market for second-hand uniform where that uniform is provided new by a single supplier and to establish a hardship fund for parents or guardians who struggle to meet the cost of providing uniform for their children. This is an important point. We all agree about the virtues of school uniform and we want to ensure that there is a vibrant second-hand market in school uniform because that can bear down on the costs and significantly improve access. Apart from anything else, if there is a vibrant second-hand market, that can also incentivise the emphasis on quality of goods, because they will be able to last rather than going downhill very quickly. I cannot remember which hon. Member it was who referred in Committee and, I think, also on Second Reading to the fact that her son’s blazers lasted about a year each, but her daughter’s blazer, of a higher quality, lasted for about five years. I do not think that that was just because of the different treatment her children were giving to their clothes; it showed the quality of them, and obviously those that last longer are more able to be recycled.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough for bringing to my attention the fact that in September 2020, at the height of the covid pandemic, Hope Uniform Exchange started a pop-up store in Weston-super-Mare, which saw an average of 40 families a day picking up free or affordable second-hand school uniforms. At the time a parent was interviewed by the press about the challenges of keeping up with their rent, bills, job and the overall impact of covid, which had made money tighter for them. They said:

“It makes a huge difference for us because otherwise we would have not gone to the uniform store. We would have kept going all around all the charity shops and try to find what we need because the uniform store would have cost us about £70, which is quite a bit.”

Hope Uniform Exchange received about 200 bin bags of branded and non-branded uniforms from its donation points around the town, and that is just in one town. It asks parents to bring in clothes to swap or, if they did not have any, to offer a donation to the surplus.

This amendment would ensure that schools provide a second-hand uniforms shop where parents could buy affordable second-hand uniforms. It would ensure that, as I said earlier, the blazers could be reused or handed on to another child; not every family has a whole lot of siblings who can take the same blazer on successively as it goes down the age range.

In Committee, the hon. Member for Weaver Vale mentioned the situation of a parent who was concerned about purchasing a child’s uniform because the branding on the clothing might limit the ability of family and friends to use hand-me-downs. This amendment would also ensure that, where there is a single supplier, adequate markets for second-hand uniforms would be available. That would address the issue where a school uniform needs to have a logo, since there would still be availability of second-hand uniforms. I remember that, on that recent occasion when I was at school, we had an active second-hand uniform shop, of which my parents made great use, if I may say so.

Sustainability is crucial. We have seen some people anticipating the growth in size of their children by purchasing blazers three times the size they need, in the hope that it will last longer. This amendment is about trying to avoid those distortions through behavioural consequences in people because of the lack of affordable alternatives to the new uniform.

I refer also as an example to Uniform Exchange, which is based in Huddersfield. It operates across 182 schools in Kirklees and has collected and recycled thousands of donations of outgrown school uniforms and transformed them into new clothes, given for free to local children in need. The Prime Minister, no less, congratulated Ms Kate France on setting up the scheme and honoured her with a Points of Light award. The Prime Minister, no less, congratulated Ms Kate France on setting up the scheme and honoured her with a Points of Light award. He wrote to her, stating:

“By setting up the Uniform Exchange, you have collected an astonishing 100,000 items of school uniform to be saved from landfill. This is an achievement for the environment and also for the families you help with free uniform.”

Uniform Exchange is just one example of thousands of schemes in place to ensure that school uniforms are reused. Not only are they environmentally friendly, but

they help tackle the costs, especially for struggling families. The amendment would ensure that every school had a second-hand uniform shop.

10.30 am

On Second Reading, the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) said of the Bill:

“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”—[*Official Report*, 13 March 2020; Vol. 673, c. 563.]

That is why the second part of the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough deals with the issue of financial help for purchasing school uniforms. Each school would have to have a hardship fund for school uniforms. That would mean that every family, however difficult their financial circumstances, would be able to dress their children in a school uniform like the uniforms of every other child in that school. That might be a very low cost for the school as a whole, but it would be immensely valuable to those children, who would then have a proper school uniform that fit them properly. It would also be perfectly consistent with a school’s having an exclusive uniform supplier. That, in itself, enables a school to establish a strong ethos around its logo, mottoes and so on.

I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Minister would very much encourage all this and say that it does not need to be put into the statutory guidance. But the perennial issue with guidance is what should and should not be put into it—I see my right hon. Friend nodding. That is why it is a bit frustrating that we are having this debate without actually having seen the draft statutory guidance; if we could actually see it, we would know the context and the extent to which any omission would be remedied by the amendments or whether what is in the amendments was already incorporated. It is important that we steer the Minister in the right direction, and I hope that amendment 1 does that.

It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker; you will be pleased to see the progress that I am making in dealing with this large group of amendments. I now turn to amendment 6, which would relieve schools of having to have regard to the statutory guidance and leave the issue to their discretion.

The essence of this is a chicken and egg thing—it depends what is in the statutory guidance. If the statutory guidance is perfectly bland and reasonable, I do not see any problem with requiring schools to have regard to it, but if it is unreasonable and unnecessarily demanding, it could ultimately be counterproductive. Hon. Members may recall that there is currently no requirement in law for a school to have a uniform policy. We have been talking about what should be in a uniform policy if it exists, but if a school takes the view that the guidance is unreasonable and demanding, its best way of avoiding having to do anything set out in the guidance is not to have a uniform policy at all, and it is perfectly entitled to do that.

This is an interesting lacuna, and my right hon. Friend the Minister may wish to comment on it in his response. Why is there no requirement for a school to have a school uniform policy, and why is it that we are going to great lengths to introduce statutory guidance that could effectively, as I have said, be totally ignored? The reason behind the amendment is to ensure that there is a means by which some of the steam can be let

out. Obviously, responsible school governing bodies will look at these issues and ask whether the guidance is sensible and whether they should follow it, and if so, how.

A lot will depend, again, on how much discretion the guidance gives. I referenced the Welsh statutory guidance, which I think now requires that there should not be more than one bespoke item with a badge or insignia on it. How ridiculous is that? Ironically, I do not know how the Government are now doing their counting, but at one stage they were counting a pair of gloves for personal protective equipment as two items, so I do not know whether that would leave a Welsh school that wanted to have the school colours on two socks in breach of the Welsh regulations. I make that point, in a sense reduced to absurdity, because that sort of prescriptive guidance would ultimately lead to school governing bodies saying, probably wisely, to parents that they will have a school uniform, but it will not be the subject of a policy, because if they have a policy they will fall foul of these unreasonable regulations that the Government have introduced. Method and thinking have gone into amendment 6.

Amendments 7 and 8 are, in a sense, alternatives. Amendment 7 would leave out “developing and” from clause 1, page 1, line 12, which would make that provision read:

“The appropriate authority of a relevant school must have regard to guidance issued under this section when implementing a school uniform policy for the school.”

It seems to me that that would be a simplification, because we would be talking about implementing a policy rather than developing one. The authority would be able to look at its policy to see whether it fitted in with the Government guidance before implementing it.

In a sense, the alternative is to keep the existing words—

“when developing and implementing a school uniform policy”—and add in “publishing”, as in amendment 8. I tabled amendment 8 to re-emphasise the point that I was making in relation to the previous amendments, because there is no requirement for a school to publish a school uniform policy. In a sense, that would go as far as the Government could, because they are not changing the primary legislation to require a school to have a uniform policy. These measures would require a school to have regard whether it wanted to have a uniform policy. I would be interested to hear what the Minister thinks about that. As ever, I am trying to be helpful to the Government in their policy development.

Amendment 9 reads:

“Clause 1, page 1, line 14, leave out ‘from time to time’ and insert ‘, no sooner than five years after the first guidance is issued under this section.’

The explanatory statement is:

“This amendment will ensure that any guidance remains in place for at least five years.”

This is crucial. The current non-statutory guidance has been in place since 2013. It is important that we should not have chopping and changing at short notice, which could make it expensive for schools to comply with any changes to statutory guidance. It is less significant if the guidance is not statutory, but we are talking about statutory guidance. Those involved in the manufacture and supply of school uniforms have made strong representations such that adequate notice should be given of any changes to the requirements. It should be a reasonable expectation that when the new guidance is

issued, it is not going to be just for a year or two—that it is not going to keep chopping and changing, as the guidance has in relation to the covid-19 pandemic. The covid-19 pandemic is an emergency, whereas I do not think anybody could argue that the price and quality of school uniforms is an emergency.

The Government should be able to think ahead and say, “This is the guidance we are going to give and it will be in place for five years minimum.” That would enable schools to enter into contracts for supply, subject, in my view—I do not know whether this will be in the guidance—to proper competitive tendering and clear specification. If one goes out to tender and gets a supplier, one will probably get a much better price if one gives a reasonably lengthy contract period, rather than saying in the tender, “This may have to change after a year because the guidance might be changed on the whim of a change of Minister, Secretary of State or even Government.”

Amendment 9 is, then, designed to introduce some stability and predictability into the process on the basis that that will ultimately result in better value for money. I hope the Minister will be able to respond positively to that, and, even if he does not accept the amendment, at least give some sort of public undertaking as to the length of time for which he intends any guidance issued to be operative. This amendment makes it clear that my preference would be for a period of at least five years.

10.45 am

We now come to amendment 10, which is deregulatory. It is designed to ensure that the guidance does not apply to an alternative provision academy. I will also discuss here, if I may, amendment 11. Amendment 11 would exclude a non-maintained school from the provisions of the Bill. The reason I tabled those amendments is that, of all the issues that are faced by schools, particularly schools providing alternative provision, organising school uniforms should not be at the top of the list.

Amendment 12 proposes that we should also exclude pupil referral units. A pupil referral unit—certainly from my limited experience—comprises pupils who have been excluded or whose attendance has been suspended from a whole range of different schools. I would have thought that the idea of having a school uniform policy for those pupils would be superfluous to requirements. The hope must be that, when pupils go to a pupil referral unit, they will continue to wear the uniform belonging to the school from which they have been excluded in the hope that, as a result of the successful tutelage in the referral unit, they are able to return to the school from whence they came, so that they can rejoin their peer group in that school after they have learned better manners or whatever it was that caused them to be suspended in the first place.

I would be interested to know the Minister’s thinking about this. I understand that the Government wish to deal with these issues of costs in relation to academy schools and maintained schools, but do they really need to get involved in these other schools, as set out in clause 1(5)? My answer to that rhetorical question is that they do not need to get involved in all that. Indeed, there is probably something to be said for using the pupil premium income that local authorities have to deal with any issues to do with the clothing and shoes that those attending these particular schools have. These

amendments try to reduce the already very considerable burdens. I take my hat off to all involved in teaching, running and managing alternative provision—academies, non-maintained special schools and pupil referral units—and we owe it to them not to add to their burdens through this legislation. I hope that the Minister agrees.

At the moment, there does not seem to be any discretion under the legislation, because “relevant school” means all those schools set out in proposed new subsection (5). Unless I am wrong about this, there does not seem to be any scope in this primary legislation to remove any of the requirements in that subsection. That is my concern, dealt with in amendments 11, 12 and 13. Amendments 13 and 14 are consequential on those, so I do not need to address them.

I am now getting, delightfully—from my point of view anyway—closer to the end of my remarks, because we are almost at the end of this large group of amendments. Amendment 15 would insert proposed new subsection (7):

“Before issuing any guidance under this section, the Secretary of State must consult the National Governors Association, the Parent Teacher Association UK and representatives of the different categories of relevant school.”

This might be described as a bit of a probing amendment, because the Minister has not so far shared with the House exactly what his plans are for consultation on this draft guidance, once it has been issued. As I said earlier, in Committee we got the impression that he was champing at the bit to really engage with—to use this ghastly expression—stakeholders without further ado. That does not seem to have happened, so we now have a danger that the national governors association, the parent teacher association and other representatives may find themselves left out of the loop, because the Government might suddenly say, “This is all incredibly urgent. We’ve got to get on with this”, and so on.

I hope that the Minister will be able to give some sort of undertaking—perhaps that is too strong a word—or expression of good intent to engage with this list of stakeholders, as well as with other stakeholders whom I have not specified in this amendment. This amendment is not meant to exclude other stakeholders, but just to make the point about, in my view, the absolute necessity that, before any guidance is issued, there should be proper consultation.

That brings me to amendment 16, which is the last of my amendments. I thought it would test the patience of the House if I put down too many more, so I confined the number of amendments to 15, and obviously, we had the extra one from my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough. We talk about burdens. This Bill will impact not just on headteachers, governing bodies and parents but on the providers of school uniforms, the designers of school uniforms, the procurers of school uniforms, suppliers of school uniforms, the retailers that are involved and the manufacturers. It is therefore important that there should be proper notice before any of the guidance comes into effect.

As we said earlier, tomorrow will be the first anniversary of the Bill’s Second Reading; I cannot remember whether you were in the Chair at that time, Madam Deputy Speaker. At that stage, the hon. Member for Weaver Vale, like me, probably expected that his Bill would have been on the statute book and the statutory guidance in place long before now, so that it could take effect in the academic year 2021-22. For reasons beyond

his control, my control and perhaps—I am being generous to my right hon. Friend—the Minister’s control as well, that scenario has not come about.

I thought it would be good, in the course of the debate, for my right hon. Friend to be able to put down a marker as to whether it is his intention that the Bill should still come into effect and become operative in terms of new guidance being applicable in time for the new school year starting next September. Actually, it will effectively start much sooner than that, because if there are going to be changes to school uniform, that uniform will need to be available in the shops in August, and school governing bodies will need to be able to make up policies in the light of any guidance prior to that.

I am inviting my right hon. Friend the Minister to say that, through no fault of anybody’s, time has now passed to such an extent that it would be unreasonable to expect this legislation to take effect, in terms of the statutory guidance being mandatory for school governing bodies, for the 2021-22 academic year. If he were able to give that assurance, it would allay a lot of concerns. I am not a school governor at the moment—I used to be an acting chairman of a school governing body in Wandsworth some time ago—but I am well aware of the burden and responsibility that people take on when they are running governing bodies. I do not think anybody could do anything other than give them the highest praise for the way in which they have been dealing with the consequences of this pandemic, so let us not burden them with having to respond to statutory guidance for implementation prior to this coming academic year.

The reason I make a bit of a meal of this is that my right hon. Friend the Minister said in Committee that it was still his intention that the Bill should come into effect in time for the next academic year. He said that on 15 or 16 September 2020, so I think it is reasonable that he should be able to give us an update six months later as to what his intentions are.

Having said all that, I hope from the tone and the content of what I have been saying that it is clear that I am very much enthusiastic about school uniforms. I want to see good-quality school uniforms at a price that people can afford. If this Bill contributes to facilitating that, all to the good. It has been a useful exercise, on Second Reading and in Committee, for people to have been reminded that there is almost unanimous cross-party support for the principle of school uniforms, and for the belief that school uniforms are a means of levelling up—to use that in vogue expression—and ensuring an improved ethos and even discipline in a school.

11 am

There are often schools that get into really hard times. When I was the leader of Wandsworth Borough Council, we had just been able to break free from the constraints of the Inner London Education Authority, and I can think of lots of schools in Wandsworth then of which the council was, frankly, quite ashamed. Now there are some brilliant schools in Wandsworth. I see that the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) is nodding enthusiastically. I am delighted to see her in her place. If she does not know, let me tell her that I was born in Putney many years ago. Indeed, my grandfather

founded a prep school in Putney because he could not afford to educate his six children. I will not go into that, but I think it is relevant to this debate. That school had a very good uniform, which I remember from when I went to celebrate the school’s 75th anniversary. Sadly, it is no longer there, but it was in Carlton Drive—the hon. Lady may know about it. I am going to leave that there; I was going back to my happy memories of when I lived in the Putney constituency and was on Wandsworth Council.

The point that I am making is about the burden on governors, governing bodies and all those who have to deliver for parents and pupils across the country. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister, in responding to this, will accept that I am trying to get a proportionate response from the Government so that we minimise the unnecessary regulation and do not have the application of the law of unintended consequences, which I think is what is going to happen in Wales. I hope that we can in due course—later today, perhaps—congratulate the hon. Member for Weaver Vale on having steered this Bill through, even if none of the amendments to which I have spoken are accepted by the Government. There is a problem of which you are probably aware, Madam Deputy Speaker: however meritorious an amendment, the Government are always reluctant to accept it because of the “not invented here” syndrome.

Finally, let me revert to the point I was making about value added tax. For all that we are talking about, changing the rule on value added tax would deliver a bigger financial relief for parents and children up and down the country, including girls of average girth aged 11 and boys of average height aged 14 across the piece. This is the area on which we should now concentrate. I hope that when we come to the new Session, with the opportunity for fresh private Members’ Bills, the Government may even be prepared to sponsor a hand-out Bill to remove value added tax from all branded school uniforms.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope). I am only too pleased that, after his lengthy introduction and thorough examination of the Bill, we are not marking the second anniversary of its introduction.

First, I relay my sincere thanks to Mr Speaker, Madam Deputy Speaker and the team; the Leader of the House; the Minister, the Secretary of State and their Department; my Front-Bench colleagues, and all those who have campaigned over a number of years to ensure that the Bill reached this stage.

This is a short Bill, but it will make a significant difference to hundreds of thousands of children, families, carers and grandparents throughout our constituencies. I thank everyone across the House who has contributed to the Bill’s journey so far, whether or not they are a sponsor and regardless of their political affiliation. As the hon. Member for Christchurch acknowledged, the Bill has considerable cross-party support.

A number of the amendments are quite useful markers to ensure that the Bill has proper, almost line-by-line scrutiny. There are 16 amendments in total. Some, as the hon. Member acknowledged, go beyond the scope of the Bill, and some, I would argue, undermine the very essence of statutory authority.

[Mike Amesbury]

Amendment 6, for example, refers to a discretionary approach. I say with respect that we have a discretionary approach at the moment, through voluntary guidance, which, as the hon. Member rightly referred to, was put in place in 2013. There are some good elements of that guidance, but voluntary is voluntary, and voluntary can be ignored at people's discretion.

Sir Christopher Chope: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mike Amesbury: I need to move on. The hon. Member had a considerable opportunity. Lots of young people up and down the country have waited a considerable time for this legislation to come to fruition, and I hope that it does, so respectfully, I need to move on.

Some of the amendments have considerable merit for discussion. Amendment 1 refers to the market for second-hand goods. The hon. Member referred to a scheme in Weston-super-Mare and the uniform exchange scheme in Huddersfield. I know from discussions that I have had with the Minister that he is very keen on that, and I hope we can capture that in the draft statutory guidance. The amendment also mentions a hardship fund. Certainly, some schools operate such hardship funds, and again, I certainly hope we can capture that in the draft guidance.

The hon. Member for Christchurch has campaigned on the issue of VAT for a considerable number of years. While we were on different sides of the debate on Europe and Brexit, it is a reality that we have now left, and it is also reality that there is discretion on VAT. He already knows my opinion; it is on the record. I am sure that there will be opportunities in Parliament to take that campaign forward, and I will certainly endeavour to assist him in that process. It is a good idea, and it is the right thing to do in the broader mix. Of course, as he acknowledged, it goes beyond the scope of the Bill, but he mentioned that something may be in the draft statutory guidance. Certainly, those are discussions that we can have with the Minister. The hon. Gentleman has rightly put that point on the record, and so have I, as the Bill's promoter.

This Bill is pro-school uniform, but pro-affordable school uniform. There are far too many children in hard-pressed families, and it is particularly pertinent now—given the national and international health pandemic and the economic consequences we are facing—that affordability is put centre stage in statute, and this Bill will do that. That is the fundamental aspect of it, and it is also about opening up competition, which I know the hon. Member for Christchurch and people across this House would agree with. For far too long, we have had single supplier relationships with schools or school communities and there has been no fair, open and transparent competition. This will help bring costs down for hard-pressed families, while maintaining quality and bringing into play other manufacturers, such as one in Northwich in my own constituency, that are excluded from the process at the moment.

I am going to bring my remarks to a conclusion. Mine have been very brief, because as I said at the beginning, children and families have waited long enough. The Children's Society, the National Education Union, Members right across this House and the Minister are all keen to move things on, so I hope we can all do this

with the House coming together and demonstrating that when we work together, we can achieve so much more. Thank you all.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I very much welcome this Bill, and I commend the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) for proposing it. It provides the teeth of the good intentions contained in current school uniform guidance, it serves the interests of children and their families, and it is good for small businesses.

I am going to comment on the general thrust of the amendments being proposed, but I want to make some brief general remarks at this stage. Education is devolved to the Scottish Parliament, so my main interest in this Bill is on behalf of businesses, such as Border Embroideries in Greenlaw, that produce high-quality school uniforms for sale in England and across all of the United Kingdom. Scotland's place in the UK means not only that firms in my constituency can sell into a large and lucrative market with no barriers, but that their elected representative has a voice in this place, which decides on the rules for that market.

School uniforms are important inside and outside the classroom. At school, they are a social leveller, eliminating the pressure to keep up with the latest fashion trends and helping to reduce peer pressure to look a certain way. At home too, research conducted by the Schoolwear Association has found that many pupils remain in uniform to complete their homework, creating a useful separation between learning and downtime. Just as football fans wear their team's colours to a match, so school uniform fosters pride through shared identity. Uniform is cohesive, not exclusive. Well made, durable school uniform also delivers great value for money. Items can be passed down between family and friends or sold on second hand.

I attended a state comprehensive school on the west coast of Scotland, and I am sure Members across the House will be shocked to hear that, at Abbey Primary School and Kilwinning Academy in Ayrshire, I cannot recall being a particularly fashionable youngster. In fact, none of us, no matter our background, had to worry about meeting the latest trends or fashions. I know this was a relief and continues to be a relief for most parents. Having uniform standards from a young age is good preparation for the workplace, particularly for speaking in this place, may I suggest, Madam Deputy Speaker? I know that Mr Speaker and his deputies are very keen to maintain high standards of dress in this place, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) recently discovered.

My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) spoke about quality and design, which was one of his main concerns in his amendments proposed today. In my own constituency, Border Embroideries has been involved in the production of school uniform for nearly 30 years. Billy Smillie and his wife Shirley Anne started their business using a single embroidery machine. Now it is one of the UK's leading specialist school uniform suppliers, serving customers across the UK. Border Embroideries is a prime example of a business providing competitively priced products, providing jobs for local people and helping the community thrive. It has remained a family business, with Billy and Shirley Anne's three children Aynsley, William and Ross all taking charge of different aspects of the business.

When I last visited their purpose-built factory in Greenlaw, I was impressed by the scale of the operations, and the range of different addresses to which shipments were being made. In 2020, Border Embroideries received a pivotal enterprise resilience fund grant from South of Scotland Enterprise. That enabled it to employ an additional 80 temporary staff, on top of the existing 80. Those extra staff worked night shifts to enable Border Embroideries to fulfil all incoming orders.

11.15 am

Border Embroideries is located in the Scottish borders, but it serves the whole UK. Roughly 25,000 items are delivered each week to the four corners of the country. My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch is right to be concerned about the quality of garments and the working standards of those involved in producing them, but many local producers across the UK are producing high-quality school uniforms, and there are no concerns about how they are produced or the workforce standards.

Sir Christopher Chope: I am much reassured by my hon. Friend, but does that include the sources of the materials that are used in the manufacture of school uniforms?

John Lamont: I am grateful for that point, but I am not sure whether the amendment would address that concern. I do not know where all the materials come from, but having spoken to the company, I am confident that it is not only looking after its workforce but concerned about the quality and ethical production of its garments.

Border Embroideries is one of many Scottish businesses that sell their products across the UK, which remains by far Scotland's largest and most important market—larger than the EU and the rest of the world combined. The amendments, and the Bill more generally, address the affordability of school uniforms, and I welcome what the Bill seeks to achieve. It serves the interests of children, their families and local businesses. Imposing a duty on the Secretary of State for Education to issue statutory guidance on the cost of school uniforms, to replace the current non-statutory guidance published by the Department for Education, will deliver real improvements for parents in England.

Scotland has no legislation to govern school uniform policy, which is entirely determined by individual schools. My colleagues in Holyrood are supportive of any measures to keep school uniforms affordable for parents, and I hope that Members of the Scottish Parliament will look at this Bill, and at the debates that have taken place so far, to see whether they can do anything to ensure affordability of school uniforms in Scotland.

While broadly supportive of the Bill, the Schoolwear Association, which has more than 200 members, has concerns about amendments on the issue of sole supply, where a single business is the only supplier of school uniforms to a school. Most businesses in the Schoolwear Association are small or medium-sized, and it is crucial for them to be the sole company fulfilling demand, as that allows them to build up suitable stock. Sole supply should never result in individual items being more expensive for parents, and competitive tendering should ensure good value for money. Instead of taking place at the point of sale to families, competition should occur at the point of supplier selection by schools.

The crux of the Bill, and the tension behind most of the amendments, is affordability. The Schoolwear Association has raised some important points that I believe are crucial to uphold the principle of affordability. Comments by the Minister in Committee highlighted the importance of transparent and competitive tendering processes, particularly where a sole supplier exists. Once again I congratulate the hon. Member for Weaver Vale on his success in bringing forward the Bill. It prioritises the interests of children and families, and recognises the importance of local businesses such as Border Embroideries in my constituency.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) for bringing this Bill forward. My involvement with this issue began after I was deeply affected by the testimony of a group of mothers at an Education Committee evidence session: they told us how the increased costs and demands of school uniforms meant skipping meals to find the money.

I have tried, Madam Deputy Speaker—I honestly have—but I simply cannot comprehend or understand for the life of me why anyone would want to try to block this Bill to help families in need. Politics is not a game. But then I also cannot understand the level of self-importance of an individual who believes they have something of value to speak on for more than an hour and a half.

Uniform dress codes are no longer about just plain, straightforward uniform, but often involve a badge, sweatshirt and dark trousers, typically also consisting of shirts, ties, blazers, PE kits indoor and out—all branded and often available from only a single supplier. The Children's Society report "The Wrong Blazer 2018" revealed that families, on average, have to find £340 per year for each child at secondary school. That represents an increase of 7% since 2015. Parents of primary school children spend on average £255. Parentkind's 2019 annual survey of parents showed 76% of parents reporting that the cost of sending children to school is increasing and more than half are worried about meeting that cost.

I have spoken about this before, but in some areas within the city of Hull more than half the children live in poverty. New Government figures reveal that 18,515 children in Hull were living below the breadline in March 2019—and that is before the cost of housing was taken into account. The number has been rising year on year and is up from 15,629 in 2015. That is before we even look at the impact of covid-19.

One child in 20 has been sent home for wearing incorrect uniform as a result of being unable to afford the uniform specified by the school. In some cases, children miss school altogether because either they or their parents feel ashamed of the condition of the uniform that they could not afford.

The Education Policy Institute report found that disadvantaged pupils are already over 18 months of learning behind their peers by the time they finish GCSEs. In primary schools, that gap has increased for the first time since 2007: up from 9.2 months in 2018 to 9.3 months in 2019—again, before we even look at the impact of covid-19. If Conservative Members are serious about trying to close the attainment gap, surely they will be delighted to support the Bill.

[Emma Hardy]

I was a primary school teacher before becoming a Member of Parliament and I absolutely support schools having a uniform, but it needs to be practical and affordable. As a parent, I know that a school uniform makes life much easier in the morning when getting children up, dressed and ready for school. But some school policies insist that parents must buy clothing from specialist shops or suppliers rather than giving them the choice of buying items at cheaper stores such as supermarkets or high street chains.

I have taken action on this locally by working with the Methodist Church to set up RE: Uniform, which asked parents to donate unwanted uniform that was then redistributed to families who wanted it. We have held giveaway events, “click and collect” events and handed out hundreds of items of uniform.

I would like to put on the record my thanks to the Methodist Church for their support with RE: Uniform, and in particular to our Methodist district chair Leslie Newton, Reverend David Speirs, Susie Steel, Kevin Appleyard, Liane Kensett, Louise Zborowski and all the volunteers. All are making a difference where it counts for families and the community in Hull.

But this is just fighting fires. The time has come to protect the millions of families in England living in poverty from further unnecessary hardship by making the guidance on affordable uniforms a statutory duty. That was promised by the Government. In reply to a parliamentary written question on 31 July 2019, the schools Minister stated:

“The Department intend to put the school uniform guidance on a statutory footing when a suitable legislative opportunity arises.”

I urge hon. Members to stop the games, stop the self-importance and seize the opportunity to make life more affordable for parents in this country.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I assure you I will be speaking to the amendments. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), even though she does not yet seem to have grasped the purpose of the Report stage, which is to try to improve Bills. I am sure she will get the hang of that at some point. The purpose of this stage is that we table amendments to try to make Bills better.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) on getting his Bill to this stage, which is no mean feat. In principle, the Bill proposes to place school uniform guidance on a statutory footing. Like all previous speakers, I am in favour of what he is seeking to achieve: having high-quality school uniform at an affordable price for parents. However, it is crucial that the Bill is implemented appropriately and that the right amount of time is given to schools and families for the guidance to be introduced, in order to avoid any unintended consequences. I worry, as I do with lots of Bills, that without some of these amendments unintended consequences may counter the purpose of the Bill, which is to protect families and children from mounting costs and exclusion from school life.

It is important to say that school uniform is a vital part of school life—it creates belonging, focus and discipline. In itself, it reduces the cost to parents, by

ensuring that there is not an arms race in the latest trends being worn in schools. The Bill is based on findings by the Children’s Society estimating that the annual spend on compulsory schoolwear is £337. That figure is disputed; it is a study based on perception rather than on reality, and on a very small sample size of parents. It does not account for competing research that the Schoolwear Association has commissioned that finds that the annual spend on compulsory schoolwear items is nearer to £36. I thank the Schoolwear Association, with which I have met on multiple occasions during this Bill’s journey. It wishes to flag up concerns about sole suppliers, parents and students being put at a financial disadvantage, on the basis of questionable research.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) and for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) for the amendments. [*Inaudible.*] I hope the Government will agree to support some of these things. I was disappointed that the promoter of the Bill dealt with the amendments so rapidly and did not treat them with the courtesy with which they should have been dealt with. Unfortunately, I cannot take interventions remotely, but it seemed to me that the promoter said that he agreed with many of the amendments but would not accept them. That is a slightly bizarre approach on Report. If the promoter agrees that amendments would improve the Bill, one would think he would accept them and we could move on with a better version of the Bill. I am not sure why we are agreeing with the amendments but not supporting them and agreeing to adopt them. I hope the Minister will make a better fist of that and perhaps support these essential amendments.

Amendment 2 would ensure that the guidance being introduced by the Bill has to be issued within six months of the Act coming into force. The Bill will mean that schools should follow the guidance, but we have yet to see the guidance, as my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch said. Saying that this will be issued within six months will at least give some certainty as to when it can be expected, so that schools, suppliers, parents and students can plan for the change. Without this amendment they are left in limbo.

I understand from the answer to a parliamentary question that I asked back in January that:

“The Department’s existing guidance on cost considerations will form the basis for the new statutory guidance.”

That clearly provides some indication to schools to help them understand what it is that they can expect, but for the avoidance of doubt, this amendment would give absolute assurance to everybody concerned. It would give schools firm dates and sufficient time to review their school uniform policy as a result of the guidance. It would also enable parents to wait until a uniform needs replacing before buying a new one if required to by these guidelines, and it would hopefully avoid the entirely counterproductive effect of forcing parents to purchase a new uniform or uniforms in the near future only to find that a policy has been superseded by the new guidance. Given what the Bill is about, that would be an ironic, unintended consequence, so I think amendment 2 would be incredibly helpful in giving the certainty needed and in keeping down costs for parents.

11.30 am

Amendment 3 would introduce an objective test of relevance, in place of the subjective test, by amending the Bill to say that the

“costs aspects of school uniform policies’... are relevant to the costs of school uniforms.”

Again, this would give greater certainty by ensuring that different Secretaries of State could not just make new judgments on the situation willy-nilly, which could create untold issues for suppliers, parents and students and again could mean parents having to fork out more in uniform costs, rather than less. The change would mean that only factual considerations should be taken into account, not the prevailing fad of the day, as it were. If we are going to have guidance—on anything, for that matter; not just this—it should be based as far as possible on fact rather than fad or any prevailing opinion that any Minister may have at that particular time in order to justify its imposition. So again, I think amendment 3 would be helpful and would actually do what the promoter of the Bill rightly seeks—to keep down costs for parents.

Amendment 4 would ensure that the following aspects’ bearing on costs are addressed in any guidance: price, quality, design, place of manufacture and country of origin. As I have said, the figures on the costs of uniforms from the Children’s Society that inform the Bill have been disputed. The Schoolwear Association states that

“the average cost of compulsory items of secondary school uniform and sportswear is £101.19 per pupil when they start secondary school”,

which is considerably lower than the Children’s Society figure that I mentioned at the outset. Quality and affordability, which the hon. Member for Weaver Vale states to be the prime objective of the Bill, cannot be separated, in my opinion. Focusing on cost alone is only half the story. Quality has to play a huge part in this, and therefore schools should focus on value, rather than solely on cost. The better the quality of something, the longer life it is likely to have, and therefore the lower the overall cost to parents in the long run, although obviously it is not lost on us that a high up-front cost is difficult for many parents.

However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) said on Second Reading, someone who has to buy three pairs of trousers for £10 each, instead of one pair for £25 that will last three times as long, is not saving any money. It is therefore absolutely vital that price and quality go hand in hand in this regard. As for design, well-designed uniforms, and manufacturers and suppliers that prioritise durability, should be a big consideration. Many school suppliers already do both, in response to consumer preferences. It is absolutely vital that the design of the uniform is part of the guidance that is in place.

My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch spoke at length about the importance of the place of manufacture of school uniforms, and he made some important points. Obviously, it is important that schools are able to make sure that their uniforms are ethically sourced. That may be a big part of the values a school adopts, and it would in many respects be perverse if a decision that they wish to take to ensure that their school uniform is ethically sourced was taken away from them because of a Government diktat. I hope that the Minister will bear that in mind when he brings forward the guidance. My hon. Friend covered that particularly well in his remarks.

Country of origin, which my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch also mentioned, is an interesting consideration and another balancing act that the

amendment addresses. I am sure that we all want to support local businesses, so considering whether something can be produced in this country, rather than abroad, is certainly worthwhile. Uniform produced by a local supplier might end up being marginally more expensive, but reduced transport costs and a potentially easier and more convenient returns process are clearly factors that a school should be able to consider, rather than cost alone. Schools should take into account the wider cost of uniform, not just the headline cost.

There is also the wider issue, which my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch also mentioned, of the suppliers to the supplier. If the supplier of a component part is also in the United Kingdom, that has knock-on effects for transportation. If we can help to keep local jobs by not pricing them out of the market, it is our duty to do so. It would be a perverse outcome if, as a result of the Bill, we ended up with Government guidance that in effect priced good UK suppliers and manufacturers out of the market. Indeed, it would be outrageous if local businesses were to go bust because of regulation passed in this House without proper consideration.

Amendment 1, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough, would require the guidance introduced by the Bill to include guidance on:

- “(a) ensuring there is an adequate market for second-hand uniform where that uniform is provided new by a single supplier, and
- (b) establishing a hardship fund for the parents or guardians who struggle to meet the cost of providing uniform for their children.”

Let me deal with each point in turn. Paragraph (a) relates to situations where uniform is provided new by a single supplier.

I should just say in passing that I think we should protect sole suppliers of school uniform. I have a school uniform supplier in Shipley, Whittakers Schoolwear, which provides a very good service to my constituents, and I certainly would not want anything in the Bill to be detrimental to its long-term interests or the way it looks after its customers.

Sole suppliers should be protected if that is a school’s preferred arrangement. I understand that two thirds of schools work with their uniform retailer on a sole supplier basis. A school having one supplier means that all children wear the same brand of clothing, which can mitigate teasing and bullying in cases where some children might otherwise wear cheaper alternatives. It can also eliminate the risk of different suppliers not having enough stock in the right sizes all year round, which is an important consideration. Supermarkets are rightly praised for selling school uniform items cheaply. Having spent 12 years working for Asda before becoming an MP, I bow to no one in my admiration for supermarkets, which have done an awful lot to make school uniform much more affordable for parents, for which I praise them more than anyone.

However, we must not forget that school uniform is very much a seasonal product for supermarkets—it is often available only at the start of the school year. A few months in, people might struggle to find items of school uniform they need in the supermarkets, because they will have moved on to the next seasonal product. Sole suppliers can ensure that all school uniform in all sizes is available all year round. I think that that point is not given enough consideration.

In answer to a parliamentary question that I tabled in January, in which I asked what assessment had been made of the value for money of sole supplier arrangements for school uniforms, the Minister said:

“The Department has not carried out an assessment of the value for money of sole supply arrangements. The Department publishes guidance for schools on school uniform. Our guidance is clear that when deciding how to source school uniform, the governing body should give highest priority to the consideration of cost and value for money for parents. The governing body should be able to demonstrate how best value has been achieved.”

Now, guidance alone will never be sufficient in ensuring that uniform is affordable to all, and for that reason, there should be a safety net. Second-hand uniforms have many benefits, not least when it comes to cost. During the Second Reading debate there was cross-party support for second-hand uniforms, which amendment 1 deals with.

The answer to my parliamentary question went on to say:

“The guidance also recommends that schools avoid single-supply contracts unless a regular competitive tendering process is run to secure best value for parents. The Department believes that this approach provides the right balance to secure open and transparent arrangements and good value for money.”

I understand that these regular competitive review mechanisms are in place in some schools. Some could be looked at, say, every three to five years, although that should be a matter for the school to decide. The provision of second-hand uniforms, whether that be through the single supplier themselves and officially a factor in the procurement process or through a school-run scheme, or even through families making use of good-quality uniforms with different children, is a sensible consideration for any uniform policy.

I would like to mention in passing Dawn Coleman, who is the founder of the Shipley area school uniform bank in my constituency. She has won volunteer of the year award for the work that she does in ensuring that second-hand uniform is available to parents. She runs it with other volunteers based at the Shipley Salvation Army. They provide a fantastic service to the local community, and I would certainly like to pass on my thanks for everything that they do. That goes to highlight how important it is that there is a thriving second-hand market for school uniforms, and it goes to show the demand for it, not just in my constituency. We have heard from other speakers about the demand in their areas for second-hand uniforms. So amendment 1 is really important.

I understand that the Schoolwear Association has already provided the Department with draft tender documents that it drew up to support schools and its members to ensure that this process is relevant and not too onerous. The Department for Education passed it to its procurement specialists and did not have any comments.

Subsection (2A)(b) of the amendment deals with hardship funds as an additional assistance for parents or guardians who struggle to meet the cost of providing uniform for their children. Many schools have for many years operated their own systems and initiatives to support low-income families, including second-hand sales. They have also helped with discounts for multi-sibling families, because obviously uniform is a big cost for many such families. Initiatives such as these must be

protected and promoted by the Government to avoid overregulation, which would mean that suppliers were the only option.

To support parents, the association makes the case for the Government to mandate schools to offer hardship support to parents who need it. School uniform must be affordable for parents, and I know that the Schoolwear Association members already offer several cost-saving initiatives to struggling families, including the hardship funds that are the subject of this part of the amendment. They also help with swap shops and payment plans, which must be a great relief to parents who need that support as well.

11.45 am

For example, I also understand that one supplier—Stevensons, I believe—which works with schools on a contract of sole supply arrangement, offers support through the donation of gift vouchers for parents in situations of hardship. Those are provided annually direct to the school, allowing the school to recognise situations of poverty and support those families who are in need. Stevensons also supports local charities, which often procure uniform for low-income families, and supplies the uniform to those charities at heavily discounted prices. There are a range of measures already being taken, and amendment 1, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough, is incredibly helpful in ensuring that we keep to the purpose of the Bill, which is to make school uniform as affordable as possible.

Amendment 5 would mean that any guidance issued must include advice on ways of minimising the payment of VAT as a component of the cost of school uniforms. I wholeheartedly support the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch in that regard, and I was delighted that the hon. Member for Weaver Vale appeared to agree with them. Leaving the EU has provided the perfect opportunity to revisit the VAT policy for school uniforms, and such a review received cross-party support on Second Reading.

On compulsory items such as school wear, VAT should be minimised. Taking VAT off branded uniform items is an entirely logical and sensible approach since, quite clearly, these items will only ever be worn by schoolchildren. There is currently a 20% VAT charge on uniforms for children over the age of 14 or approximately the size of a 14-year-old. That seems to be a relic from the days when many children left school at the age of 14, which has not been updated since. There is no logical justification for 14 being the age at which VAT should start to be charged on uniform—or clothes, for that matter. That is senseless, and the Government need to update it urgently.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch pointed out, it is worse than that, because it is based on sizes, and out-of-date sizes at that. The parents of even average children under the age of 14 have to pay VAT, but, if someone has a particularly tall child, for example, they will be paying VAT at a much earlier age.

That is completely unjustifiable, as my hon. Friend said, because the sizes have not been updated, while the sizes of children have been changing rapidly in recent years. It is a stealth tax that must be addressed. The VAT imposed on secondary school uniforms, in particular, coincides with a time when parents see not only a jump

in the amount of items required by schools, so that they have more items to buy and an increased outlay, but the double whammy of VAT added on to that.

I understand that this policy has not been reviewed since it was introduced in 1973, and by anybody's standards it urgently needs a fresh look. Amendment 5 would force the Government's hand to do that. As my hon. Friend touched on, as far back as 1980, Her Majesty's Customs and Excise, as it was then, considered the possibility of scrapping VAT on school uniforms, but concluded that the zero rate aimed at children would be exploited by adults in the larger sizes.

But that is a nonsense when it comes to school uniform, because why on earth would any adult want to purchase and wander round the streets in branded school uniform? Of course they would not—it is a complete and utter nonsense. Even if the Government did not want to go the whole hog on children's clothing generally, which could be used by smaller adults, that is no basis at all for continuing VAT on branded school uniform.

I hope the Minister will address this in his remarks. Accepting this amendment would go a long way to reassuring parents that this stealth tax will come to an end. Now that we are free from the shackles of the EU, scrapping VAT on all school uniform items would be a perfect Brexit dividend for parents, and I hope the Government will take this very seriously indeed. Given that we are trying to cut the cost of school uniforms, this is the best way possible for many parents of kids at secondary schools.

Amendment 6 would enable the appropriate authority to exercise its discretion as to whether or not to have regard to the guidance. The hon. Member for Weaver Vale rather pooh-poohed it, but this is a key amendment. It would mean that schools maintained the right to assess and set their own uniform policy independently, without having to adhere to any centrally prescribed rules. The guidance would be there, but it would just be that—guidance. That must be better, especially if these rules are constantly subject to opinion rather than fact, which I mentioned earlier in support of amendment 3. If amendment 3 were adopted, it would reassure people, and maybe amendment 6 would not be so necessary.

I believe that schools should retain the ability to make decisions about what is the most appropriate approach to uniform for pupils in their care based on their local circumstances, which they certainly know better than Whitehall. One of the key purposes of the roll-out of academy schools was to enable schools to have more autonomy. As it says on the Government's website:

“Academies have more control over how they do things, for example they do not have to follow the national curriculum and can set their own term times.”

For a school to have autonomy in the areas of the national curriculum and term times and yet to have every nook and cranny of school uniform policy forced upon it by a Minister seems highly contradictory to me and seems to fly in the face of the whole academy process.

As is the case with special educational needs schools, which I will discuss when I come to amendment 11, it should be for the school to decide whether there should even be a school uniform. I make no apology for the fact that I am a big fan of school uniforms and believe

they provide many benefits. Many others agree with that, and it seems to have support across the House. They provide academic and behavioural benefits. Six in 10 school leaders believe that a school uniform helps to improve students' educational outcomes, and nine in 10 teachers believe that it positively affects pupils' behaviour. I hope that school uniforms will always be required by schools where appropriate, but it is important for them to distinguish their own policy to suit their specific school needs.

I have always been a believer in trusting the people who are on the frontline. They tend to know better than we do about virtually everything. I trust the teachers, headteachers and governors to be able to make a better decision for their schools than any Minister. Guidance should also not be so harsh as to restrict admissions to schools, and that important point was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Rob Butler) on Second Reading.

Amendment 7 would restrict the guidance to policy implementation by leaving out “developing and” from subsection (3) of proposed new section 551A of the Education Act 1996:

“The appropriate authority of a relevant school must have regard to guidance issued under this section when developing and implementing a school uniform policy for the school.”

As I said, I believe that schools should retain the ability to make decisions about the appropriate approach for their school and their pupils, but schools should also have discretion in how they develop their school uniform policy. The amendment would mean that schools would not have to have regard to the uniform policy when developing it as well as implementing it. We should surely trust the headteachers and the governors to develop the policy in the way that they think is best for their school.

Amendment 8 would require appropriate authorities to have regard to publishing requirements in the guidance about the costs of school uniform. Requirements could be published to ensure transparency over costing and the sourcing of uniforms. By publishing a school uniform policy, following the introduction of new guidance, schools can perhaps benefit by learning from other schools' school uniform strategy. One problem with a centralised approach that is too prescriptive is that it knocks out anything new that might emerge from schools—good, innovative ideas that other schools might want to follow. We should not be trying to knock out any kind of school innovation in this area. Again, it is really important that we do not become too prescriptive in this area.

Amendment 9 would ensure that any guidance remains in place for at least five years. Again, this is very important, as a definitive minimum period for the guidance to be in place will help schools plan their uniform policy and avoid any unexpected sudden changes. A longer period for the guidance to be in place would allow the Department to measure the efficacy of the new guidance, which will hopefully lead to a more accurate assessment of the success of school uniform policy and better inform future policy decisions. It will also protect against the introduction of more guidance against the will of both schools and local uniform retailers.

This minimum period will prevent the guidance falling victim to the various opinions of different Secretaries of State, as opposed to facts and research, which again brings us back to the purpose of amendment 3. The point is that suppliers need certainty if they are to

produce a sufficient stock of school uniform for people when it is required. The amendment means that they would not be left with having to destroy huge quantities of uniform at huge cost at the whim of a new Minister coming along wanting to impose their particular ideas on everybody.

The important point about this, coming back to the whole purpose of the Bill, is that if the suppliers do not have this certainty, they will, when they come to bid for the tender for the school uniform, put up the price. If they think that they might be left with a load of stock that they cannot get rid of, by definition, they will have to put their prices up. Amendment 9, therefore, is critical in making sure that suppliers have no reason not to give the best possible price for schools when they are bidding for the school uniform contract. Again, I hope that the Government will look very closely at this matter to make sure that there is period of time—I think five years is an absolute minimum—that the guidance remains in place, and it should remain in place for at least that length of time.

Amendment 10 would exclude an alternative-provision academy from the provisions of the Bill. I mentioned earlier about why academies should be given freedoms. Amendment 11 would exclude a non-maintained special school from the provisions of the Bill. Schools that provide for children with special educational needs often do not have a school uniform. The Good Schools Guide explains that for children with special needs, such as physical disabilities or sensory difficulties, traditional school uniforms are often not appropriate. Parents of children with special needs will often need to go further than their local uniform store to find appropriate uniform for their children. Government guidance on sourcing local affordable uniform might therefore be misinformed as to the nature of this particular market. This is a very important amendment, as it would be wrong to have statutory guidance that covers schools that do not normally have school uniforms for good reason. It could be said that the guidance would specifically exempt them from it. If they had to have regard to the guidance when it was never going to apply to them, that would be a bureaucratic burden that they could do without. If it is clear that the guidance is not to apply to them, let us adopt the amendment and make it clear now. I hope that the Minister will confirm in due course whether my understanding of whether the guidance will apply to schools that provide for children with special educational needs is correct.

12 noon

The Government may say, “We will look at this issue at the time,” but as someone who used to chair the all-party group on state boarding schools, I know all too well how the Department for Education often forgets about certain categories of schools when it introduces new policies and guidance. Amendment 11 would ensure that certain schools did not suffer from that tendency in respect of uniform policy. Even if the Government say they will make special provision for certain schools, in my experience with state boarding schools the Government often introduce things that apply to such schools, having not given them any consideration, and then have to make a hasty change afterwards.

Amendment 12 would exclude pupil referral units from the provisions of the Bill. Pupils at pupil referral units have specific challenges that vary significantly

from those of other children in mainstream education. Such schools often concentrate on the social and emotional wellbeing of their students, rather than on their academic flourishing, as the extent of the personal challenges that students face can be enormously demanding and difficult. Claire Lillis, ex-headteacher of Ian Mikardo School in London, said:

“When you have kids who end up in a school like Ian Mikardo you have to do something more deep-rooted than focus on discipline and uniform.”

As I have mentioned, many agree that uniforms are a force for good because they instil a sense of discipline and belonging, but for schools at pupil referral units uniforms could be an issue in some instances, and such schools may refrain from enforcing strict uniform policies, where appropriate, in case it is counterproductive. I believe that it should be for the school to decide for itself and that a Government Minister should not try to impose something against its wishes.

The enrolment turnover rate at pupil referral units might be high, so a school uniform policy will have to take that into account. The uniform is often more flexible at such schools, and parents might not be forced to buy a uniform when their child starts a new school. This puts pupil referral units in a position completely different from that of other schools. It would be helpful and give certainty to those schools if it was made clear in the Bill that they will be excluded from its provisions; otherwise, they will always be at the whim of a particular Government Minister, who may have their own ideas about this issue. Statutory guidance might mean that they will have to be a lot less flexible in their approach.

Amendments 13 and 14 are consequential on other amendments, so there is no need for me to talk about them. Amendment 15 would require the Secretary of State to

“consult the National Governors Association, the Parent Teacher Association UK and representatives of the different categories of relevant school.”

As I said at the start of my speech, we all want to ensure that parents who are struggling with costs, many of whom are reluctant to discuss the financial challenges of school uniforms as that can be a sensitive issue, are assisted wherever possible. If parents are not consulted, the guidance cannot properly reflect the needs and interests of the parents the Bill is ultimately trying to help. Governors will understand the needs of parents, as will parent teacher associations, so by including them as consultees we can hopefully provide valuable information and feedback.

If representatives of the different categories of schools are consulted, it would ensure that if special educational needs schools are included in the Bill yet the guidance should not really apply to them, they will be able to reaffirm that when they are consulted. It would be especially helpful to make sure that they are guaranteed consultees. The amendment would also ensure that any other categories of school have a voice in respect of the school uniform policy guidance. Hopefully, that would provide all kinds of different perspectives to make sure that the best and most appropriate guidance is adopted for each individual type of school.

Amendment 15 would mean that the Secretary of State should develop policy after in-depth consultation with the national governors association, the parent teacher association UK, representatives of the relevant

categories of school and, ideally, industry players. Given the fact that uniform suppliers are largely high street, family businesses, which I am sure we all want to see flourish, it is vital that the Secretary of State engages with industry players when consulting on potential changes, which will ultimately take place at a local level. I am sure that this Minister and this Secretary of State would do that, but we have to future-proof the legislation for when we might not have Ministers who are as sensible as the current ones. That is why this amendment and the others are essential in doing just that. It is about protecting schools and others from the whim of a Secretary of State or a Schools Minister who are not as sensible as the ones that we have.

The final amendment—amendment 16—would mean that any guidance under this Act will not apply to the 2021-22 academic year. Again, it is absolutely vital that the guidance does not come into effect too quickly, or many parents may have already bought uniform for the start of the next academic year. Given everything that has been going on recently, with schools being closed and all the uncertainty surrounding covid, it would certainly be a kick in the teeth for anything to change too quickly that would add costs for families who have already been through so much, when this is part of a Bill that is designed to try to reduce the cost for families. I understand that uniform retailers, whose sales will have been impacted by the lockdown, are sitting on high stock levels, so to avoid wastage, they need sufficient time to sell their existing stock. I hope the Minister is aware of that and is not planning on doing something that would have the unintended consequences that I talked about regarding unnecessary cost.

In conclusion, as I just mentioned and as the Schoolwear Association, with its expertise on the subject, said, if the Bill is not implemented appropriately—these amendments go through a large range of areas where there could be unintended consequences—this could cause difficulties and undermine the whole basis of the Bill, which I think everybody in the House supports. As I said at the outset, I am particularly grateful to the Schoolwear Association for its assistance, as its membership includes over 250 small and medium-sized enterprises—principally local family businesses—based in high street locations that support their local communities. Together, they clothe over three quarters of UK schoolchildren, so their insight is invaluable when considering the Bill. Their major concerns are that relaxing uniform requirements risks creating greater inequality in schools; deregulating or removing branded items from school uniforms undermines consistency and uniformity, making it harder for schools to have an identity; and ending sole supplier arrangements would make it harder to guarantee uniform supply and potentially drive up costs for families.

I hope that people will see that these amendments are very sensible and are designed to protect the integrity of the Bill, not undermine it. I am very sorry that the Bill's promoter decided that he would agree to the amendments but did not agree to implement them in the Bill. That is the whole point of legislation in this House. It seems perverse that he thinks they will be beneficial but is not going to adopt them. I therefore hope that the Minister will intervene in this, accept that these amendments would make the Bill better and say that the Government will agree to adopt them, so we can have a Bill that everybody can be confident will deliver the benefits that we all want to see.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) on bringing this very important Bill to this stage. I have been encouraging parents in my constituency to tune in and watch the debate. If any are still listening and watching, I think there are a few busy parents who may think that they could have agreed this Bill, written the guidance and got it done and dusted by now.

I would like to speak to some of the amendments, especially those about the timing of the Bill. I will also make some general points raised by the amendments. The enormous costs of school uniforms are of huge concern to my constituents. Owing to covid-19, that is the case even more so now than a year ago when the Bill was first brought forward. More families are now struggling in my constituency and across the country. I know the cost of school uniform myself, as my eldest child started school in 2002 and my youngest is in school for another four years. That has been a lot of years of buying uniform.

In my constituency of Putney, there is an increased need for more affordable school uniforms as we approach the dreaded time in September when people know they have to face that bill. There are now 4,335 people claiming benefits in Putney. That is a 46% increase on only a year ago, and a lot of those people are families. Wandsworth food bank provided 5,770 emergency food supplies to needy families in Wandsworth last year; that is the highest ever number, representing a 78% increase over the last five years. The majority of those people are families who also face this school uniform bill. There is a crucial need to bring forward this legislation as urgently as possible, and that is why amendment 2 has some merit. However, it does not need to be an amendment; the Minister can clear the issue up by telling us the timetable for the Bill in his remarks, to which I look forward.

In the time that I have been paying so much for school uniforms for my own family, I have seen the creeping number and cost of additional items that need to be bought for the uniform. I have seen the inconsistency between schools and school uniform policies, and the incremental use of “my uniform costs more than yours” as a proxy for better school standards and to attract students to some academies. When my youngest child went into year 7 a few years ago, his uniform bill was an eye-watering £468. I then had to top it up with another £200. In that school, the blazer costs between £95 and £115, and it is true that VAT is a component part. I should also say that my 14-year-old is 6 feet tall. I encourage the Minister to take the issue up with the Chancellor, but I do not think it needs to be addressed through amendment 5.

The sums I have mentioned are unaffordable for many families. I support school uniform guidance to ensure that there are fewer branded items and fewer exclusive suppliers that do not put affordability at the top of the list; that good quality, own-brand supermarket choices can be made; and that clothes swaps are easy. These points are mentioned in the amendments, but they can be put into the guidance and legislation; it does not have to be through the amendments.

This Bill is for that mum, who, when I was looking around a local school at an open day, sat down in front of me, looked at the school uniform list, shook her head, said to her son, “We can't go here” and had to leave the open day. These are the choices being faced by families, and that is why we urgently need to bring in

[*Fleur Anderson*]

this legislation. The Bill is also for the families that I took on trips in the summer of 2019—when we could go on trips. I sat down with them and talked to the mums, who said they had not been able to afford to go on any other trips with their children that summer because they knew about the bill that was coming up in September. They said they were eating less during the summer months and having to make all their choices according to the fact that that bill was coming up in September. We have seen how quickly the Government can act during this time of covid. I urge them to act fast on this.

Amendment 16, which would mean that the guidance cannot be brought in for the next school year, is contradictory to the amendments that say we should be putting schools in the driving seat and that this should be up to schools. Schools should be able to decide whether they can introduce part or all of the guidance in the next school year, and they should be able to do so from September, when those big bills are looming and more families are struggling.

The Bill is also for governors and parents. It will put them back in the driving seat, able to challenge the school uniform bill. I support the amendments about promoting this guidance, because it needs to be known about. I hope that the legislation will receive Royal Assent very quickly, but parents and governors need to know about the guidance so they understand the powers they will have.

To conclude, as we consider amendments to this crucial Bill, I would like some assurances from the Minister. When—I am sure it is a case of “when”—the Bill is passed, will the guidance be agreed very soon, and will it be promoted to staff, governors and parents? Will branded items be kept to a minimum, and will there be some indication of what constitutes “a minimum” so that it does not just creep up again? Will parents be given a choice of where to buy uniform? How will the guidance ensure the transparency of single supplier agreements and competitiveness of tendering?

12.15 pm

Will there be financial support, such as school uniform grants, for struggling parents, and will it be promoted and properly funded? That is addressed in amendment 1, but it does not need to be in the Bill; it can be in the guidance. Finally, will the Minister give an assurance that schools should not send home or exclude children who fail to comply with uniform policies for financial reasons? I have welcomed the Government’s support for the Bill so far, and the support of organisations such as the Children’s Society and of colleagues across the House, but parents now urgently need to see that support turned into action.

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con) [V]: As I outlined in my speech when the Bill was first introduced, it was clear from the cross-party support it attracted that many Members were keen to address the concern that families faced undue financial pressure when buying school uniforms. While there are differing opinions on how this issue should most effectively be addressed, it is important, at the stage the Bill is now at, that all efforts are put into ensuring that the guidance that will be put

on a statutory footing works in the interests of all parties involved. My hon. Friends the Members for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) and for Shipley (Philip Davies) have tabled several amendments, which seek clarity on a number of important issues. I will speak particularly about amendments 4 and 16.

On amendment 4, a range of factors, alongside price, contribute to an effective school uniform policy, including quality, durability, sustainability and availability. It is important, therefore, that the guidance the Department formulates, if it is truly to seek to promote a fair and value-for-money approach to uniform, considers and balances all those considerations.

Over the last year, I have met many specialist school uniform suppliers, in my constituency and across the country, and it is clear that they understand and care about the price pressures their customers face. As a sector, they seek to address those through innovative business models that prioritise sustainability and ethical material sourcing, producing uniforms that are high-quality and long-lasting.

It is imperative that the way this specialised sector works is properly understood in formulating the guidance, so that those sustainable British SMEs are supported. That is why I take issue with the request that we have just heard to demand that different suppliers are available to parents. That is not how a large section of this sector works; nor, in fact, does it ensure value. That is a very important distinction.

Amendment 16 seeks to ensure that the Bill does not apply to the 2021-22 academic year. It is also important that, in the light of the covid-19 pandemic, the guidance is brought in gradually. That will give families, schools and schoolwear providers time to adjust, helping to avoid unnecessary and unintended expense.

If the guidance is brought in too quickly, many families will feel the need to purchase new uniform items before current ones are outgrown, and schools may feel the need to push out a rush for new tenders, having made agreements prior to the Bill being discussed or enacted that might have been drawn up in a different way from that now desired. The schoolwear providers, many of which are family-run businesses on our high streets in small towns and communities, will have to throw away high levels of stocked clothing that they have been unable to sell over the last year, as we have asked them to keep their doors shut during the pandemic.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): We have had a very thorough debate on the amendments, which fall into two categories. The majority cover areas that really ought to be covered as part of the statutory guidance proposed in the Bill. I am sure that the Minister will have heard the contributions in that spirit and will take them into consideration when drawing up the Department’s statutory guidance.

Reasonable points have been made about the importance of consultation and the range of stakeholders who ought to be consulted, and the statutory guidance will be subject to consultation when such issues can be raised. As my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) highlighted, at least one amendment would go against the entire thrust of the Bill and undermine the importance of having any statutory guidance at all.

The hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) mentioned the response of my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale to the amendments, and the degree of sympathy that he has for them. We all know that the passage of a private Member's Bill into statute is a rare occasion, and particularly when a Bill is brought forward from the Opposition Benches, an inevitable degree of compromise is necessary. In that spirit Her Majesty's official Opposition have no desire to undermine the huge amount of work that has taken place to get the Bill to this stage. I congratulate all members of the Committee on their work in scrutinising the Bill, and I pay tribute to the Minister and his officials for their work. They put a great deal of time and consideration into these matters, not just on Second Reading and in Committee, but also in discussions with my hon. Friend.

Sitting Fridays can do one of two things. They can be an advertisement for the House of Commons at its best, where Members work on a cross-party basis to solve common problems of interest to our constituents, or they can be an advertisement for the worst of our politics—the game playing, the filibustering, and the attempts to prevent things that have an obvious common-sense value and widespread support from getting into statute. I hope that today will be an advertisement for the good, and for the House of Commons at its best. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale on his work. I am delighted to see him in his place, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister.

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): I congratulate the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) on successfully stewarding the Bill to Report and, I hope, shortly on to Third Reading. School uniforms are an important part of establishing an ethos and common identity in a school. They are a shared endeavour and a sense of belonging. School uniforms help to remove the inequalities caused by differences in the prosperity or disadvantage of a pupil's family, and they help to ensure that schools are disciplined and safe places for students, where it is good to be ambitious, and admirable to be conscientious and hardworking.

For some families, the cost of purchasing school uniforms for growing children can be a financial worry. In 2015, the Government commissioned a cost of school uniforms survey, which found that, after adjusting for inflation and excluding the PE kit, the average cost of a school uniform had decreased since 2007 to £213. While two thirds of parents were happy with the cost of a school uniform and PE kit, nearly one fifth reported that they had suffered financial hardship because of having to buy school uniforms for their children. The Bill, which the Government wholeheartedly support, is designed to ensure that the costs of schools uniforms are reasonable, and that schools secure the best value for parents.

Amendments 1, 3, 4, 5 and 8 relate to the content of the statutory guidance to be issued under the Bill. It is important that such issues are considered in the statutory guidance rather than in primary legislation, as suggested by the amendments. That approach maintains a level of flexibility and responsiveness, so that over time, statutory guidance on uniform costs can be amended and improved. I welcome the way that the hon. Member for Weaver Vale has constructed the Bill.

On amendment 1, I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) that every school should ensure that second-hand school uniform is available for parents to acquire. It is, however, important for this to be a matter for statutory guidance, rather than primary legislation, so we can get the details right and schools have some flexibility about how to do this.

On amendment 5, as we know, families already benefit from a zero rate of VAT on clothing designed for children under 14 years old. This is already a significant cost to the Exchequer, costing £2 billion each year in lost revenue. Expanding this to include a wider size of school uniforms would not specifically target low-income families. HMRC already provides guidance on this matter in VAT notice 714. However, my hon. Friend is right to point out that, having left the European Union, we are now free to make these changes if we wish, and I am sure the Chancellor of Exchequer will have heard his comments.

On amendment 8, we want to see schools providing clear information to parents about their uniform policies, but we consider that this is a matter for the statutory guidance to enable us to ensure that these requirements are flexible and responsive, rather than placing a requirement to publish in the Bill. My hon. Friend raised the issue of schools that do not have a school uniform policy. The current non-statutory guidance says:

“The Department strongly encourages schools to have a uniform as it can play a valuable role in contributing to the ethos of a school and setting an appropriate tone.”

That is in the current non-statutory guidance, so I will take my hon. Friend's point in his speech as an exhortation to include that sentence or something similar in the statutory guidance, which we continue to work on.

On amendment 6, the crux of the phrasing in the Bill—“must have regard to”—is that schools must comply with the guidance unless they have a good reason for departing from it. Put simply, it means that schools cannot ignore this guidance. This amendment would in effect mean that schools would be able to disregard the guidance whenever they wished, which is the opposite of the intention behind the principal tenet of the Bill.

On amendment 7, it is important that the principles that will be set out in the statutory guidance on the costs aspects of uniform are considered by schools when they are developing or changing their uniform policies so that they are embedded right from the start. This amendment would mean that schools would not have to have regard to key factors that Members have raised as being crucial to the cost of a uniform when developing such a policy. This would severely undermine the reasons for introducing statutory guidance, as it would in effect mean that the application of the guidance would be limited and unlikely to be effective in keeping costs down.

On amendment 9, the Government will want to update the guidance as and when necessary, and as circumstances require it. The Government want the new statutory guidance to have time to bed in once issued and would not want to be looking to make arbitrary or unnecessary changes, but placing arbitrary restrictions on the Government's ability to make changes to the guidance, even if schools were to make it clear that revisions would be welcome, would prevent us from being responsive

[Nick Gibb]

to the needs of parents and schools, and risk schools being required to have regard to guidance that was out of date.

Amendments 10 to 14 seek to disapply certain types of school from the Bill. There is no good reason to treat these schools differently. For example, not all special schools and alternative provision schools have a school uniform, and that is appropriate. However, for those that do, it is important that this Bill applies to them, as well as to mainstream schools, to ensure that they also consider value for money for parents when setting their policy.

On amendment 15, I do not consider it appropriate to list selected external bodies to be consulted in primary legislation, but as I said in Committee, I am committed to engaging with representatives of schools, parents and other interested parties as we draft the statutory guidance.

On amendment 2, we are progressing well with the changes to the draft statutory guidance. We will reflect on the comments made during this debate and the debates in Committee as the Bill progresses through this House as we draft the statutory guidance. That includes the comments made by all hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), as well as, of course, my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch and other hon. Friends and hon. Members who have spoken in this debate.

Sir Christopher Chope: What my right hon. Friend has said is delightfully vague. Why can he not be more specific? Who is controlling him? Surely he is in charge of his Department and can tell us when this statutory guidance will be issued—or perhaps even issued in draft. I am sure that Members in the other place would like to have a draft of the statutory guidance before them so that they can consider these issues. He has said that many of my amendments should be incorporated in the statutory guidance, so let us see the statutory guidance.

12.30 pm

Nick Gibb: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I said that I would reflect on the comments he has made in this debate. Of course, all comments made during the passage of this Bill will be taken into account as we consider the drafting of this statutory guidance. I will be consulting, as I have been, interested parties to this debate. What I do not want to do is delay the passage of the Bill through the other place while we wait for the statutory guidance to be finalised. It is important that we get the Bill on to the statute book before the Session ends. Given all that I have said in response to the amendments, I hope that my hon. Friend will not wish to press his amendments to a Division.

Sir Christopher Chope: I thank all those people who have participated in this debate, where we have had a good discussion about the Bill. I am glad to see that the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), on the Opposition Front Bench, is agreeing with that, although he did not make any reference in his short speech to any of the points I have made in support of the amendments.

My right hon. Friend the Minister is basically saying, “We are entering upon a period of reflection.” Or at least he is. May I suggest, with the greatest of respect, that there has been a very long period in which to reflect

already? The Government first signposted the intention to deal with this issue in a statutory way in 2015. It was then the subject of various commitments given in the run-up to the last general election. Then we had the Second Reading and Committee stage—that was in September. My right hon. Friend said that he did not think we should wait for the statutory guidance before making further progress. I do not know whether he misunderstood or misheard what I was saying. I was making a suggestion about the draft statutory guidance. Obviously, if he is consulting about statutory guidance, he must be consulting on a draft of it. If that is the case, why are Members of this House not able to see that draft? In particular, why is he going to deprive Members of the other place of being able to see it? The normal conduct of proceedings in this House is that when statutory guidance is under consideration, the Government will, if at all possible, present the House with a draft of it. My right hon. Friend seems, in his own charming way—I am not charmed by this or misled, because I can see what he is trying to do—to be avoiding a situation in which there can be any debate about the draft statutory guidance. The very reasonable questions put during this debate, including by my new friend the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), show that there is an importance of timing here; people need to have some certainty about the timing and intentions. Is the Minister planning for the statutory guidance to take effect in this coming academic year—yes or no? I may not like the answer he gives, but surely he can tell us what his intentions are, or is he still further reflecting upon it? How much more information does he need before he can reach a conclusion to his reflections?

The Minister grouped a whole lot of my amendments together. It is all very well for him to say that they relate to content and will be considered with the statutory guidance, but he is not prepared to stop teasing us about the timing and content of that statutory guidance. I am afraid that that makes me extremely disappointed, if not nervous, about what is being cooked up and will be sprung upon unsuspecting governors, parents and suppliers of school uniforms before we know what has happened. Perhaps we can come back to this on Third Reading, but the fact that the Minister is unwilling to expand at all upon those points is disappointing.

I also hoped the Minister would give an undertaking that, because of his commitment and the Government’s commitment to minimising the avoidable costs of school uniform, the Government would bring forward legislation to remove value added tax on school uniforms. That would be a really good move, and strong support for that proposition has emerged in this debate and on Second Reading. I hope that, as a result of that, when we get to the new Session of Parliament, someone who is successful in the private Members’ Bills ballot—perhaps with encouragement from the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), if he is unsuccessful on the second occasion in the ballot—will take up the cudgels of a short Bill to remove VAT from school uniforms. I think that that would be an extremely popular Bill. I have been in the House for some time, and I have never had the opportunity of taking forward a Bill that was successful in the ballot, but if I were to be successful in the ballot, that might well be at the top of my priority list, because I think it would make a difference. Frankly, it would make a much bigger difference than what will be contained in this statutory guidance.

I am going to be blunt: I am disappointed with the Minister's response, and I will leave it at that. In terms of the other contributions made in the debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) is somewhat of a national expert on this. He had a big feature in the *Daily Express* and perhaps other great organs, setting out his support for the Bill but also his concerns that we should not have unintended consequences flowing from it. His point about the need for availability, as well as durability, sustainability and ethical sourcing, was very well made. He also pointed out—again, the Minister did not respond to this—that, as a result of the covid nightmare, many suppliers of school uniforms have built up stocks that they will want to be able to use rather than have to put on the scrapheap. I am grateful for his contribution, and I am disappointed that the Minister did not specifically address it.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Putney for supporting my views on the VAT issue. As she rightly said, there would be no need for amendment 2 if the Minister made a commitment at the Dispatch Box.

Fleur Anderson *indicated assent.*

Sir Christopher Chope: She is nodding her head, but of course we did not get that commitment.

Fleur Anderson *indicated dissent.*

Sir Christopher Chope: She is now shaking her head to agree that we did not get that commitment from the Dispatch Box. I do not know—she almost tempts me to say that we should divide the House on amendment 2. Perhaps she would like to join me in being a Teller if that is the situation.

Fleur Anderson *indicated dissent.*

Sir Christopher Chope: She is shaking her head again. Perhaps we can come back to that issue when we discuss this matter further on Third Reading.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) gave a typically erudite analysis of the Bill. I am grateful for his support for my amendments and the amendments from my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone). It was an exemplary performance by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley, because he did not engage in tedious repetition, or any repetition, but highlighted the gaps I had left in the arguments I was putting forward in support of my amendments. If I had been able to speak at greater length on those amendments, I would have wished to include in my remarks the additional comments that my hon. Friend incorporated.

The extra added value that my hon. Friend brought to the debate was his experience as the chair of the former all-party parliamentary group for state boarding schools, and in that capacity he brought some expertise to bear as to why it is ridiculous to include within these provisions the special schools to which he referred. He also made a point that I had omitted from my opening remarks about the gap in the evidence relating to the actual costs of school uniforms at the moment. He said that the Children's Society's estimates were based on questionable evidence. I am not sure whether, given the position we are at in relation to the Bill, that makes too much difference. The Children's Society says that the costs are higher than the Government say. The Minister

reminded us that the costs of school uniforms, excluding PE gear, had fallen between 2007 and 2015, which shows that it is a pretty competitive market.

In so far as the Bill was justified on the basis of dubious material from the Children's Society, I am disappointed, because to produce questionable evidence is to undermine the case. We know that there are people for whom the current cost of school uniforms are a significant burden, which is why there is so much support for the Bill, but it does not help anybody's cause for the issue to be exaggerated and for the sums involved to be inflated. That is why it is all the more important—I am grateful to the Minister for saying that he is supportive of the idea—that we enable schools to be able to sell second-hand uniforms, thereby reducing the cost burden on pupils.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) said that one child in 20 is sent home—I am not sure whether she was talking about schools in general or one particular school in her constituency—for not wearing the right uniform, or any uniform. She wanted constraints placed on the ability of schools to enforce school uniform policies. There is no point in having a school uniform policy unless it is consistently enforced. Ultimately, the final sanction that a school has for a pupil who does not comply with the school uniform requirements is to send them home, in the hope that they will return the following day properly dressed and equipped. As Dicey said, there is no point in having a command without a sanction, and that applies in this case, and that is my response to what the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) had to say.

12.45 pm

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) referred to the manufacturer and supplier in his constituency. Like many other colleagues who have detailed knowledge about the supply of school uniform, he praised the quality of the products and underlined the importance of a strongly competitive market that is easy for small and medium enterprises to enter and leave and in which they are able to flourish. Coherent and effective competitive tendering is one of the watchwords that I have supported in my time in the House. Years ago I campaigned successfully for the incorporation of CCT for local authority services.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Weaver Vale for introducing the Bill. I was disappointed that he felt inhibited about expressing his support for some of my ideas. I put that in the context of the shadow Minister's comments that compromise is necessary and the Opposition do not always wish to undermine things. The hon. Gentleman may have been under pressure from his Front-Bench colleagues not to be more robust in his support for me. Having said all that, I appreciate his continued support for the campaign to remove VAT from school uniforms. As one campaign, which has taken a long time—we have talked about it going back to 2015—comes to a successful conclusion, we have today given added oxygen to that new campaign, which I hope will not take so long to reach a conclusion. It is good to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Third Reading.

12.49 pm

Mike Amesbury: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Friday 13 March 2020, a year ago tomorrow, turned out to be rather a lucky day for me: an opportunity to help thousands of children, parents and carers across our nation to bring down the cost of school uniforms by means of this Bill. The world around us was changing; it was 10 days before we entered the first lockdown, and I could not have imagined on that day that it would take a whole year to get to Second Reading, Committee, Report and now Third Reading—and hopefully beyond.

I thank everyone who has helped on this journey and ensured that today's sitting happened. I am grateful for everybody's efforts, and I know that families across England are, too. I know that because, despite the delay in getting to this stage and the many school closures that our children have had to endure, families have still been getting in touch with me, continuing to raise the impact that these costs have on them, and telling me how the Bill will affect them. It will really make a difference.

Of course, the Bill has become more important than ever since the last time we discussed it in the Chamber. The economic impact of this pandemic is hitting families hard. According to the Child Poverty Action Group, before the pandemic 17% of low-income families reported that they were finding things difficult financially. By December, that number had risen to 76%.

A parent's choice of school for their child should not be based on their ability to afford the uniform, but I am afraid the evidence compiled by The Children's Society, and demonstrated throughout the journey of the Bill, highlights that that is the case. That is simply not acceptable. Some hon. Members have disputed the figures provided by The Children's Society, but they were real families' experiences: 1,000 families were surveyed in 2020, and the average cost of a secondary uniform was £337. For primary schools, it was £315. That is their experience, although people can certainly dispute it.

A vital part of this guidance will be ensuring that choice and availability for parents are extended, while opening up competition to all uniform suppliers—an opportunity welcomed by many manufacturers up and down the country. If a family simply cannot afford to keep up with uniform costs, it is ultimately the child's education that suffers.

We heard on Report from MPs across the political divide of cases where children have been sent home or punished where they have been unable to replace the required item of school uniform, or have faced bullying from other students. That indignity needs to stop. The practice of branding everything a child wears as part of a school uniform must be curtailed. Branded facemasks have now been added to branded socks, blazers, ties, skirts, caps, bags, coats and much more. I hope that the statutory guidance will minimise that.

All families should benefit from the Bill, and people should not miss out because of the type of school they attend. Thus, it is important in building the new guidance that it is there to benefit every school, not excluding schools of certain types. It is important that the guidance is issued as soon as possible, so that schools have time to adapt uniform policies before it comes into force. Picking up on a point made earlier on

Report by the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), I would hope that the guidance would be in place by 2021-22.

This campaign is not new; children, and The Children's Society, have been campaigning since 2014 to make this happen. Today is a real chance to make it happen. Let us all work together—let us make it happen.

12.54 pm

Nick Gibb: May I once again congratulate the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) on progressing his private Member's Bill to this stage? I look forward to continuing to work with him on this important issue. I thank all Members who have contributed to the debate, including my hon. Friends the Members for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), for Shipley (Philip Davies), for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) and for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer).

Sir Christopher Chope: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I did not rise in my place to speak on Third Reading because I understood that, as I was on the call list, I would be called, but the Minister is after me on the call list.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Well, that is an interesting point of order. I must say to the hon. Gentleman that the order of the call list is a matter for me. Yes, things are written down and these are unusual proceedings, but the order in which Members are called to speak is still a matter for the Chair. He will of course have his turn in due course.

Nick Gibb: I also thank the hon. Members for Putney (Fleur Anderson) and for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy).

Uniform helps to promote the ethos of a school and set an appropriate tone. Moreover, by creating a common identity among pupils, a school uniform can act as a social leveller. The Bill will protect and reinforce that role.

I know that many Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch, will want to know the intended contents of the statutory guidance, so I will take this opportunity to set out briefly our proposed approach to the key issues raised in the debate. In developing and implementing their school uniform policy, schools should consider the total cost of all items of uniform or clothing that parents will need to provide while the pupil is at the school.

On the question of branded items, the current non-statutory guidance states that compulsory branded items should be kept to a minimum. We plan to keep that approach in the statutory guidance and, additionally, specify that their use should be limited to low-cost or long-lasting items. We will provide guidance about ways to reap the benefits of a branded item while also keeping costs low. The Government believe that this approach will set a clear expectation on schools not to overuse branded items, while allowing schools to take sensible decisions in their own contexts.

On sole-supplier arrangements, schools should be able to demonstrate that they have obtained best value for money in their supply arrangements, but we do not intend to ban sole-supplier contracts. To ensure that there is competition and transparency, we want schools to tender their school uniform contracts regularly—at

least every five years. To support schools to carry out good tenders, we will provide information on the key areas to consider when tendering their uniform contracts. The Bill will not punish good suppliers; far from it. Their emphasis on quality and value for money will be rewarded as standards across the industry increase due to competition.

I believe that second-hand uniform can play a valuable role in keeping costs reasonable for all parents, and I know that many Members share that view. I would like every school to ensure that arrangements are in place to make second-hand school uniform available for parents to acquire. I myself had a second-hand rugby shirt at school, and I can confirm that when I grew out of it, after a few years, it remained in the same pristine condition it had been in when my parents purchased it.

Sir Christopher Chope: I will resist the temptation to comment on the Minister’s last point, but he has made an important statement about second-hand uniform. Will there be a requirement in the statutory guidance for schools to provide facilities for the sale and exchange of second-hand uniform?

Nick Gibb: The statutory guidance will of course refer to the importance of there being facilities for parents to be able to acquire second-hand uniform.

It is my intention to engage with representatives of schools, parents and other interested parties in drafting and finalising the statutory guidance. My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch and the hon. Member for Putney asked about the timing of the implementation of the guidance. We want schools to implement changes in a timely and considered manner to ensure that they work effectively, but we would want to make sure that in doing so parents do not incur additional costs from sudden uniform changes. We will therefore set out clearly in the statutory guidance when we expect schools to implement the requirements. I can commit that schools will not be required to make sudden changes to their uniform policy for September 2021.

The Bill will help many families throughout the country who may struggle to afford a school uniform, so the Government support it, and I urge all Members of the House to support its Third Reading.

1 pm

Wes Streeting: We have had a great debate this morning and into this afternoon, and I am delighted that it looks as though the Bill will be passed and will hopefully continue its passage on to the statute book.

I strongly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) on his leadership in bringing the Bill forward. I thank the Minister and his Department for their engagement with the Bill, and I am grateful for the engagement of so many others, particularly the Children’s Society, which has provided a strong bedrock of research that demonstrates why the Bill is needed and has engaged constructively throughout to make the Bill possible. The Schoolwear Association and school uniform manufacturers have also engaged constructively and made some important points about the value of domestic supply chains, of ethically produced and sourced products, and of good-quality, durable products. We should not lose sight of that.

School uniforms ought to be the great social leveller. Those of us who remember the struggles that our parents had affording uniforms when we grew up, and who looked ahead to non-uniform days with trepidation rather than excitement because of the pressure of having the right trainers, the right clothes and the right brands, understand why school uniforms are so important from a social justice perspective. It is not just about the importance of a school’s ethos and identity—points made very well by the Minister.

Let us get the Bill passed and make progress, and let today be an advertisement to people right across the country about the good that this House and our politics can do when people come together in common cause.

1.2 pm

Andrew Lewer [V]: In the first debate on this Bill, which was only a year ago but, for obvious reasons, feels like a lifetime ago, there was much discussion among many Members, ranging across not only their clearly lasting memories of school uniform but the practicalities, and a general view that uniforms play a significant and valued role in educational settings.

Many of us are proud of the schools that we attended, and this sense of school pride starts with a school’s uniform, which acts as an identifier but also as a leveller. That levelling factor seems to have resonated especially strongly with the Minister and throughout the discussions that have taken place on and offline, in all senses. A sense of collective identity is important in helping children to belong, but it also helps to suppress peer pressure in respect of what children wear while on school grounds, so that we do not end up with individuals being picked on for the brand of clothing they wear. At a time of increased pressure on young people’s mental health, for very obvious reasons, that represents an unnecessary worry.

All that is why sole supplier arrangements and schoolwear suppliers are a very welcome part of the landscape and should be protected for numerous reasons that relate to that important word: values. There are the school’s values and the disciplinary advantages of avoiding the “My black trousers are Gucci; yours are from Tesco’s” situation that comes from vaguer uniform requirements—which, ironically, are often championed by those seeking lower costs for parents. There are the values of supply chains and ethical sourcing—we have heard about China, but that applies to other places, too. And there is the starting point of the Bill: value for money. A well-made £20 pair of trousers that lasts three times as long as a £10 pair is better for parents’ pockets—my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) was good enough to quote me saying something similar in the debate a year ago.

Although it is late in the progress of the Bill to rake this up again, I will just mention the value for money of uniform, which was demonstrated very clearly by the very high-quality research published by the Schoolwear Association, which set right some other less well-based research that came up with much higher figures. There is also an element of the cultural value of the British education system, which is exemplified by the wearing of school uniforms—something that should be celebrated and is replicated by many schools across the world. I can think of many British overseas schools that

[Andrew Lewer]

take pride in the wearing of uniforms, which highlights the importance the British education system is given abroad.

I am grateful to the Minister for his acknowledgment on Second Reading that single supplier contracts are valuable in ensuring year-round supply of uniform, availability of the full range of sizes, and, with all items being of the same colour and design, uniformity among pupils. I will, however, be seeking assurances from the Minister that these contracts will be explicitly protected. He has touched on this already with his hints about the guidance. As he is aware, competition on the price of school uniform happens when those contracts go out to tender, and companies compete against one another to produce an attractive bid. My concern is that this process is misunderstood. If schools work with more than one retailer, this competition is lost. Sometimes the competitive element is the tender between the school and the supplier, not between the parent direct and the suppliers. That is not always sufficiently understood. Not understanding it can mean that purchasing power is damaged for retailers, which, in turn, raises prices for customers.

I did have some grave concerns about this Bill and the ramifications that could have arisen from it in its original form. I want to emphasise to the Government that they must match their rhetoric with the action that they take in terms of being a deregulating Government, cutting red tape and not over-centralising. As some Members know, I was far from convinced that the Bill fitted very well into that expressed ethos and, indeed, used it as an example of the opposite in other policy speeches and contexts. Furthermore, the ethos of a school and what it stands for must come chiefly through the school's own culture and leadership and the attitudes of school leaders, teachers, governors and parents. Ideally, it should not be imposed from a great Whitehall height.

In conclusion, I am glad to say that the Minister has been forthcoming and helpful throughout this process—long though it has been. Throughout the course of discussions in Committee early last year, he listened to the concerns that I and other Members raised and I thank him for that. I especially thank him for what he said in this very debate just now. I am now of the opinion that, aside from that much wider philosophical over-regulatory point, some potentially damaging worries about the Bill have been either wholly allayed or diminished. That has been helped by the added reassurances that we have received today. I will continue to reference them as that guidance is consulted on to ensure that it does not lead to excessive micro-management.

1.8 pm

Sir Christopher Chope: It is a pleasure to speak on Third Reading. I am glad that the Minister was able to respond so quickly during his period of reflection. It was a period of reflection that lasted from the end of Report to the beginning of Third Reading. In those few moments of reflection, he was able, at a stroke, to satisfy some of the concerns that had been expressed on Report. Essentially, he has accepted, from what he said, my amendment 16. That means that schools will know that they will not be burdened by changes as a result of this Bill, which would impinge on their freedoms in the forthcoming school year starting this September. That was a very important statement and I appreciate the fact that my right hon. Friend made that today, so that the schools and their governing bodies and all the other people involved in this industry can act accordingly as a result. It was also implicit in what he said that the period of waiting, which has been going on since 2015, is now coming to an end and that people can prepare to implement this new statutory guidance. What he described as the intended content of that guidance is spot on and the schools should indeed consider the total costs of all items, including how long they will last and the quality to which they are produced. That should also apply to compulsory branded items.

As far as the sole supplier provisions are concerned, the Minister's decision not to outlaw such agreements again accords with common sense. Contracts should be the subject of tender every five years—I think that seems a reasonable compromise, which fits in with commercial practice. He is not going to punish good suppliers, he will promote the benefits of second-hand uniform, and he is not going to go down the prescriptive route of the Welsh Labour Government, which I am sure will be a matter of great relief.

So there is a lot to celebrate. That is not a word I often use in the context of legislation that is supported by the Government, but there is a lot to celebrate in the Bill and the considered way in which it sounds as though the Minister will respond. I have just listened to my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer), who is a great expert on this, and if his worst fears have been allayed, I am sure that the worst fears of lots of other people will likewise have been allayed by what is in the Bill. Let all the people who are going to benefit from the Bill move forward and I encourage them, as they appreciate what is happening in relation to the forthcoming statutory guidance, to pressurise their Members of Parliament to campaign on the issue of VAT on school uniforms.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

British Library Board (Power to Borrow) Bill

Consideration of Bill, not amended in Public Bill Committee

1.12 pm

New Clause 1

EXPIRY

“This Act expires at the end of a period of 5 years beginning with the day on which it is passed.”—(*Sir Christopher Chope.*)

Brought up, and read the First time.

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

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment 1, page 1, line 3, clause 1, leave out from “powers” to end of the section and insert

‘at the end, insert “in excess of £1 million in any calendar year”.’

This amendment would limit the British Library Board’s power to borrow money to £1 million per year.

Sir Christopher Chope: New clause 1 provides that the Act expires at the end of a period of five years beginning from the day on which it is passed, otherwise known as a sunset clause. I have tabled this new clause because I think it is particularly apposite in relation to this subject.

When the Government, or the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, first contemplated the idea that the British Library might be given the power to borrow, which it does not have at the moment, the report said that there would be an opportunity to have a full debate about the pros and cons of so doing, and I am not sure that that debate has ever really taken place. I am also not sure that the British Library board is that keen to exercise these powers. The reason for that may well be associated with the fact that borrowing incurs future costs, and those costs then have to be budgeted for from a grant in aid. It is well established that many of what are described as “arm’s length authorities”, which are the subject of grant in aid from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, believe that it is better to rely on grant in aid, where they know where they stand, than to go down the route of borrowing.

My concern is that the Bill could be used as a means whereby the Government cut their grant in aid to the British Library board and, if the board whinges, tell it to borrow the money instead. Given that our national debts are at record levels, it seems to me that such an attitude would be completely out of place. If the Bill becomes law, however, there is no guarantee that that will not happen—that it will not be used as an excuse to ramp up costs for future generations: “Spend now, pay later”. The grant in aid process is designed to ensure that the British Library board can receive funding sufficient to enable it to do its work during the course of the year.

My background interest in this comes from the fact that I was the Minister responsible for the Property Services Agency. One of the biggest projects on its books was the construction of the new British Library. That whole process and the way in which it was funded should be the subject of a treatise.

The grant in aid process was used to fund the construction project each year; there would be an agreement between the Government, the Department and the British Library about how much money could be spent on it in any given year. But no limit was put on the overall costs. It was only when the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher got to hear about that that she decided that we could not carry on just funding the capital project of the British Library on a year-by-year, hand-to-mouth basis. We needed to say that that could not go on indefinitely and that there should be a finite sum of money for the project—and that would be that.

I do not know whether you have been round the British Library, Madam Deputy Speaker, but it is almost in two halves: part of it is adorned with fantastic panelling and money-no-object interiors, but I can only describe the second part as rather more utilitarian. That is a direct consequence of the then Prime Minister’s having said that there had been an abuse of the grant in aid process. I still have the trowel used in the British Library topping-out ceremony—as we would expect for such an extravagant project, it is made of finest silver and came from Garrard, I think. But that is by the by.

Just as the grant in aid was abused before Margaret Thatcher got a grip on it, I fear that the power to borrow could also be abused if we do not keep a tight rein on it. A five-year sunset clause would enable that assessment to be made, so that at the end of five years, if it had been a great success, it could be renewed, and if not, there would not be any need to renew it. Effectively, it would give this House the opportunity of policing what had actually happened under the powers being granted in this primary legislation. I go back to the point that we are not even sure that the British Library really wants these powers, and certainly it does not want these powers if the consequence is a reduction in its grant in aid.

Amendment 1 is designed to limit the amount of borrowing in any calendar year to £1 million. That is an off-the-cuff, arbitrary sum of money, but it seemed to be a reasonable sum for starters, in the absence of any other evidence as to what the British Library needs to borrow and for what purpose it needs to carry out those borrowings. I have tabled this more as a probing amendment, rather than one that I expect to be accepted just like that by the Government. This is quite a short point—and, indeed, it is a short Bill—but in the context of the national situation of public borrowing, it takes on a totemic significance greater than it might have had when the Bill was introduced last year.

I hope that those introductory remarks in support of my new clause will engender not only a debate but an opportunity for the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman), who I am pleased to see in his place, to respond and to share with the House his vision for the British Library and how much he thinks that vision is dependent upon the British Library Board having the borrowing powers set out in the Bill.

I would be interested to know whether the Minister has any idea of how much the British Library Board is thinking of borrowing. The explanatory notes make it clear that the board would not just be able to borrow willy-nilly; it would have to get approval for so doing from the Department. My understanding is that, at the

[*Sir Christopher Chope*]

moment, there is a sum of £60 million available for borrowing for all the arm's length bodies that the Department sponsors. Would the British Library Board's borrowings be subject to that limit, or would they be in addition to it? In the spirit of the need to ensure that we scrutinise these proposed pieces of legislation, I would be grateful if we could get some response on those issues.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I shall speak only briefly on my private Member's Bill. I listened carefully to what my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) said. In relation to the point about whether the British Library Board or the executive committee want these powers, I can assure him that they do. It is also worth pointing out that what is proposed here is simply to align the British Library with all the other similar arm's length museums, galleries and others that currently sit under the auspices of the Department. The Bill does not propose anything different from what various other similar institutions have. That is a very important point.

The third thing to say is, simply, that this is not about the Government reducing the grant in aid. In fact, in the Budget of March 2020, the Government gave £13 million to the British Library to help it expand. This money is not just for books or for the British Library in London; it is to help the levelling-up agenda all over the country. It is to help the business and intellectual property centres, which help thousands of individuals and successful start-up businesses. The success rate of those businesses—the proportion that are in existence three years after being started—is about 90%, double the national average, showing the value of those business and IP centres.

That is the sort of thing that this money is for. This is simply about aligning the British Library with all sorts of other institutions that sit under the auspices of the Department. I really believe that this is a sensible, practical measure that will help not just the British Library but communities up and down the country.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab) [V]: I commend all those involved in the Bill. I will just say, on behalf of the Opposition, that we fully support it and agree with the comments just made by the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami).

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman): I am pleased that we are at this point with the Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami). As he said, it is absolutely the case that the Bill seeks solely to put the British Library on the level playing field that it deserves to be on.

My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) raises two points. Putting an expiry date on the powers proposed in the Bill would risk taking up further parliamentary time, which we all know is valuable, but it would also entrench the inequality that we are trying to resolve. The idea that the British Library's power to borrow would be subject to review when none of the other arm's length bodies are subject to the same review does not seem to me to be in that spirit of fairness. Of course my hon. Friend raises

entirely reasonable points about the burden on the public purse of any borrowing, but it seems to me only fair that we take that as a whole rather than trying to impose separate conditions on the British Library.

The British Library is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden said, absolutely enthusiastic about the powers that the Bill would give it, it is enthusiastic about the opportunity to use them, and it is enthusiastic about the practical developments that that might bring, be it broader access digitally to its own artefacts or broader engagement with the community. That is currently constrained by the inequality that we see today. That is not fair on the British Library, but more to the point, it is not fair on the British public. It is important that we try to address the legislative barrier that currently and inexplicably prevents the British Library from having the same freedom to borrow that its fellow national museums and galleries enjoy.

Operational freedoms introduced in 2013 have given our national cultural institutions, including the British Library, greater autonomy to make decisions independently and greater flexibility over their income, helping them to innovate and continue their expert work. Flexibility and innovation will be more important than ever as we recover from the effects of the pandemic.

The British Library is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch accepted, subject to a host of scrutiny already. The Bill does not propose to subject it to any greater scrutiny than exists already for other arm's length bodies. While I agree with him that we should pay close attention to those conditions, I hope that he will agree that imposing further specific conditions on the British Library when we would like, I think, to have the efficiency of dealing with all arm's length bodies as one is not a sensible approach. While I understand the sentiments behind his amendments, I hope—

Sir Christopher Chope: My hon. Friend talks about the other arm's length bodies. My understanding is that they have the power to carry over surpluses from one year to the next. Is that power now being made available to the British Library? Will the borrowing that it will be able to make under this power be out of the same capped fund that is available for the other departmental arm's length bodies? Or will this be in addition? If so, how much will the addition be each year?

1.30 pm

Matt Warman: The Treasury allocates a pot of £60 million per year that can be loaned out to all cultural organisations given the freedoms I mentioned. The responsibility for allocating that pot is with the Treasury. To my knowledge, there is currently no proposal to change the size of that pot, but of course all of these things are under review in the usual way. On that point, and on my hon. Friend's first one, I hope he understands that we are not proposing anything here that it is in any way unusual, and that this is putting the British Library on a fair and level playing field. Unless he wants to intervene again, I hope that that clarifies the points he has made. In the probing spirit that he mentions, I hope the Government have been able to provide him with sufficient information so that he does not press his amendments to a vote and he allows the British Library to flourish in a way that will benefit all of our constituencies.

Sir Christopher Chope: That sounds a perfectly reasonable proposition that my hon. Friend has put forward. Therefore, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the clause.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Third Reading

1.32 pm

Bim Afolami: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I wish to put on record my thanks to the Opposition Members, particularly the hon. Members for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) and for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), and the Minister and all those who have supported the passage of this Bill so far. I hope for it to have speedy passage in the other place.

1.32 pm

Matt Warman: It is a great moment for libraries across the country to see the United Kingdom's flagship British Library put on this level playing field. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) for getting his Bill this far. I thank him and all those who have worked on this Bill, and indeed all those who have scrutinised it in this House today.

1.33 pm

Alison McGovern [V]: I join the Minister and the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) in thanking all those who have worked hard on this Bill. I also thank all those who work in our libraries and the British Library—they serve our country so brilliantly.

1.33 pm

Sir Christopher Chope: I would like to put on the record my appreciation of the great efforts that my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) has made and his phenomenal success in bringing this Bill to a successful conclusion in this House. I hope that that will be duly recognised by his constituents—I am sure it will be appreciated by the British Library. May I put on the record the fact that I think that the British Library is one of the greatest of our British institutions and that I am an immense supporter of it? Although there was a lot of scepticism about the cost and design of the new library, I think it has been able to prove its worth in practice, and we much appreciate it.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Education and Training (Welfare of Children) Bill

Consideration of Bill, not amended in Public Bill Committee

Clause 3

EXTENT, COMMENCEMENT AND SHORT TITLE

1.35 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I beg to move amendment 1, page 3, line 3, leave out from “force” to end of subsection and insert “on 1 October 2021”.

This amendment will incorporate into the Bill the guidance for policy makers issued in August 2010 that there should be two common commencement dates each year, one of which is 1st October, for the introduction of changes to regulations affecting businesses.

Amendment 1 is a short amendment, supported by my hon. Friends the Members for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) and for Shipley (Philip Davies), but it has a deeper purpose, which is set out in the explanatory statement. It means that the regulations under the Bill would come into effect on 1 October 2021.

In thinking about all this, it occurred to me that over the years we have lost sight of an important deregulatory policy of the Government, introduced, I think, in 2010: that, to reduce the burdens on business, regulations passed by this House should only be implemented on two implementation dates each year. One was, I think, 1 April and the other was 1 October. The idea behind that was that people in business should not have to keep an eye on when another regulation was going to be implemented or when those regulations that had been passed would be commenced. I thought it would be useful to try to tease out from the Government what their thinking is.

This Bill, in particular, contains an enormous amount of regulatory burden affecting the providers of important apprenticeships and training for youngsters. I do not disagree with the substance or the idea of what it is doing, but we must not underestimate the fact that what we are talking about is creating an additional burden. It would be better, in my view, to say that instead of its coming into force at the end of two months beginning on the day on which it is passed, it should come into force on 1 October and we could then re-adopt the practice that was begun, that there should only be two days each year when we commence these regulations.

That is quite a short point, and it will not be made any stronger by repetition, but I hope it will be taken seriously by the Government. I imagine the Minister, having received notice of this amendment, will be able to give me a definitive response from the deregulation unit, or whatever the equivalent body now is that deals with these matters on behalf of the Government and tries to ensure that this is a business-friendly Government.

Years ago, I was on a deregulation taskforce that made many different regulations. I wish this suggestion had been one of the ones that came out of our particular taskforce. It was not, but I think it was a sensible suggestion, so I am trying to use the vehicle of a Friday private Member's Bill day and the opportunity of the Report stage of this Bill to ventilate the matter and try to engage the Government in a dialogue about it.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab) [V]: I will be speaking against the amendment, and I will keep my remarks brief out of consideration for my colleagues whose Bills follow my own.

[Mary Kelly Foy]

The intervention by the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) is not, in my opinion, needed for several reasons. First, the guidance he refers to in the amendment was intended to give time for businesses to prepare for costs associated with changes in legislation or for any significant changes in their practices. As this Bill does not result in any increased costs for education providers or any significant burden for business, I would argue that this extra time is not needed.

Secondly, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that many designated safeguarding leads in further education are aware of the potential change in legislation, so again, I do not believe that further time is needed for providers to prepare for the change in law. Finally, as the Bill relates to education and aims at simplifying the safeguarding process for providers of post-16 education, it would make more sense for this legislation to come into effect for the start of the academic year in September. In fact, a change in legislation mid-term would arguably be more burdensome to business.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab) [V]: I wish to speak against the amendment that has been proposed. I believe I have been listed to speak in the Third Reading part of the debate on this Bill, so I am happy to contribute my opposition to this amendment and be called in the second part of the debate as well.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I have really nothing further to add to the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy). I look forward to hearing the Minister's response and to moving on, hopefully promptly, to Third Reading.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): I would like to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) for his interest in this Bill and for raising his concerns on behalf of businesses and training providers. However, I do believe the amendment he has put forward is unnecessary. This Bill does not place any new or additional burdens or costs on education and training providers. It is a technical change to put all Government-funded providers of post-16 education and training on the same statutory footing.

As I made clear in Committee, all children in post-16 education or training are currently protected by safeguarding arrangements. If a provider is already properly discharging its safeguarding responsibility, the change in this Bill will make no practical difference to it. It is not anticipated that this will add burdens or costs to businesses and training providers. As I am sure my hon. Friend is aware, safeguarding duties on providers can come from a variety of sources. This Bill simplifies a situation that is more complex than it needs to be.

The Bill, as currently drafted, will come into force two months after it is passed. Amendment 1 would add several months to that period, going beyond the start of the academic year, as the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) said. I do not think it is in the spirit of clarity and simplification that has characterised the cross-party support of this Bill, and I ask my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch to withdraw his amendment.

Sir Christopher Chope: Unfortunately, I do not seem to have achieved my purpose, which was to try to draw out a response from the Government the issue of having two separate days each year when regulations are implemented to reduce the burden on business. The promoter of the Bill, the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy), and the Minister have said in response, "Well, not me, gov"—this legislation does not impose any fresh burdens, and therefore the point I was making in my amendment and the remarks I made in addressing the amendment are really of no relevance. I think that is really the point that my hon. Friend the Minister is making. I shall have to explore other ways of developing the idea that we should reintroduce the practice that was first introduced in 2010 of having a maximum of two days each year when we introduce regulatory burdens on business, and hopefully many more days when we deregulate. I am grateful to those who have participated in this short debate for explaining that the Bill is not in the least burdensome and that everyone is absolutely hunky-dory about it so we should be content. In those circumstances, I seek leave to withdraw my amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Third Reading

1.46 pm

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

While technical, this Bill is relatively simple. I am conscious that a number of hon. Members are keen to ensure that their Bills are also heard, so I will keep my remarks as brief as possible, especially as the contents have been well covered in previous stages.

Legal safeguarding duties do not apply to independent providers in the same way as they do for those educated at school or in sixth form or further education colleges. The Education and Training (Welfare of Children) Bill aims to ensure that all young people are protected by the same safeguarding duties in the law, irrespective of the education or training provider that they choose.

The Bill contains two substantive clauses. Clause 1 amends the Education Act 2002 to extend the existing safeguarding duties that apply to further education colleges, schools and sixth forms to post-16 academies. As more sixth forms convert to academies, the requirement for this change becomes more pressing. Clause 1 also brings independent learning providers and specialist post-16 institutions into scope by imposing direct responsibilities on the Secretary of State for Education, requiring them to include the safeguarding duties as a condition of any agreement with those institutions. The Bill would also compel providers to have regard to any guidance on safeguarding issued by the Secretary of State such as the document "Keeping children safe in education".

Clause 2 will amend the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009 to ensure that apprenticeship providers, as well as those who assist with the training or education of T-level students that is funded under the Act, must follow those safeguarding duties, while having regard to any guidance issued by the Secretary of State. Again, the duty is on the Secretary of State to include those requirements in agreements, while the duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children at the institution falls on the provider.

I introduced the Bill because in the City of Durham I am privileged to represent a constituency that contains a number of top-class further education providers in both academic and vocational subjects. There is the leading further education college, New College Durham, one of the first education providers to offer T-levels, as well as the excellent Houghall college, part of East Durham college, which I share with my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris). We also have a number of brilliant sixth forms as well as a number of independent providers. I place on the record my gratitude to the staff, students and family members who have put so much effort into ensuring that there has been as little disruption as possible to education during the pandemic.

While I welcome the diversity training and education courses available to my constituents, I do not welcome the potential for variation in safeguarding requirements. As a parent, I know how important it is to be secure in the knowledge that children are kept safe in education. For many, further education is a new experience, full of different challenges for young people and their families. Between further education colleges, sixth-form academies and independent providers, there are a variety of options for how young people are educated, which can be confusing for parents. We could debate in the House all day how education should be provided, but I think we all agree that every child and young person, regardless of their background or education provider, should be subject to the same safeguarding requirements as their peers. By closing this loophole, we can help protect young people while giving parents the reassurance and peace of mind they deserve when it comes to their child's education.

However, this Bill is about more than protecting young people and reassuring parents; it is also practical for education and training providers. Currently, the system for post-16 academies, independent providers and specialist institutions is somewhat complex and inconsistent. By extending legal safeguarding duties to cover all publicly funded providers of post-16 education, safeguarding requirements for institutions will be simplified, making the whole process easier for educators. The Bill will also benefit providers to which these duties already apply by ensuring that there is a level playing field when it comes to safeguarding requirements, meaning that schools, colleges and sixth forms will operate on the same terms as the independent sector.

This is a good, simple Bill aimed at addressing an anomaly in safeguarding legislation that we all recognise must be fixed, and it does so in a way that benefits providers, parents and young people. I hope that we can continue the fantastic cross-party work so far on the Bill, to help me close this anomaly in law.

1.52 pm

Gillian Keegan: I thank the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) for her work on this Bill, and I congratulate her on introducing it and steering it through the House. Safeguarding, and particularly protecting children from online harm, is a subject that we are passionate about, and I am privileged to lend my support, and the support of a Government, to the Bill.

Cross-party support and co-operation have characterised the passage of the Bill, which is testament to the hon. Lady and to the importance that the House places on

safeguarding children. I am extremely grateful to all hon. Members who have taken time to contribute during debates at each stage of the Bill. I know that, in many cases, these interventions have been informed by personal experience or the experience of constituents or training providers and other educational institutions.

It is vital that, at this challenging and important time in their lives, children feel safe; it is vital that parents can trust education and training providers, however these are constituted, to keep the children in their care safe; and it is vital that providers are clear about their duties and responsibilities to these children. I put on the record my thanks to all those in the sector who have worked so hard to welcome students back so successfully this week.

Let me be clear: all children in post-16 education and training are currently protected by safeguarding arrangements, but the duties that determine these arrangements come from a wide variety of sources, depending on the nature of the education or training provider. The post-16 landscape is diverse, to meet our diverse education and training needs, but the safeguarding duty does not need to be different. It should be clear and it should be universal. The changes in the Bill are important, but they are technical. They should not lead to additional costs or burdens on education or training providers. A provider that is already fulfilling its safeguarding duty would not need to make any practical changes.

I also support the Bill's intention that all providers should have regard to the statutory guidance, "Keeping children safe in education". Having one set of guidance that covers all providers will simplify safeguarding, make it more transparent and help ensure that safeguarding requirements remain relevant and up to date. As a result of this Bill, "Keeping children safe in education" will need to be amended, and we have undertaken to consult openly and widely with the sector to ensure that the guidance will be appropriate and proportionate.

In closing, let me once again thank the hon. Member for City of Durham for bringing forward this important Bill, which the Government are pleased to support.

1.54 pm

Wes Streeting: It is a pleasure to speak in support of this Bill on Third Reading. As the Minister will know from the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) in Committee, the Bill has the Opposition's wholehearted support. Of course, there are very few responsibilities as important as safeguarding and protecting the welfare of children and young people. The Bill, as we have heard, moves to level the playing field for all providers of publicly funded post-16 education and training.

All that is left for me to do is wish the Minister a very happy birthday this weekend, and I will also say something about my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy). She has been a Member of Parliament for barely 15 months. Many Members serve in this House with distinction for decades without ever managing to put their mark on the statute book in the way that she has. Her constituents ought to be very proud of their MP for how she has diligently and consistently represented their concerns and interests in these most challenging times. The passage of this Bill will be a meaningful step towards ensuring that all children and young people,

[*Wes Streeting*]

wherever they are studying, learning or training, are safe, and I think that is something of which she and the people of Durham can be immensely proud.

1.56 pm

Sir Christopher Chope: May I, too, wish the Minister a most enjoyable, productive and lazy weekend, bearing in mind that Sunday is also Mother's Day?

I support the Bill. Obviously, it is desirable that we should maintain the highest standards of looking after our children when they are in the care of others, as they are when they go on training courses, whatever institution that happens to be in. I am lucky to have in my constituency some really good providers of specialist training for apprentices, which is now so popular and effective. I have visited those organisations and met the youngsters who have been through the process and then come back to instruct those currently in training, and it works extremely well. I am sure that the particular training academy that I have in mind will have no problem complying with the provisions of the Bill.

I had not really appreciated—and this has probably not been highlighted enough—that the Bill is arguably deregulatory. Perhaps it does not fit in with their current agenda, but if the Government are still interested in deregulation, they should be putting forward this Bill as an example of deregulation, simplifying the statute book and making it easier for those affected to know which regulations apply to them and which do not. That is just an observation of mine, based on having listened to today's debate. I have no hesitation whatsoever in supporting those who believe that the Bill should receive its Third Reading.

1.58 pm

Rachel Hopkins [V]: I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) on her perseverance in moving this important Bill forward, particularly during these difficult times, when the pandemic has constrained our ability to debate and pass legislation. It has been a pleasure to be a co-sponsor of the Bill.

On Second Reading, almost exactly a year ago, drawing on my experience as a governor of Luton Sixth Form College, I made the point about how important the extension of the statutory safeguarding arrangements was to ensuring that all young people in post-16 education and training were protected by equitable safeguarding protocols. That is to ensure that they receive the support and have the best possible chance of succeeding in their studies and training. At that time, I particularly focused on the increasing level of mental health issues among our young people. I just want to reiterate the importance of that now more than ever, given the impact that the

coronavirus pandemic has had on our young people, who face such a difficult year and such disruption to their education.

Just yesterday, I picked up a poll by Network Rail and the charity Chasing the Stigma, which reported that 69% of 18 to 24-year-olds had said that the coronavirus crisis had had a negative impact on their mental health; that compares with just 28% of the over-65s. The impact on our young people's mental health will continue over the coming months, particularly with regard to dealing with assessed grades in the absence of exams and any impact that may have on progression choices for our children and young people.

My final point is that it is hugely important that all providers of post-16 education and training, including private providers, have that statutory duty for the safeguarding of our young people. I support the Bill and hope to see it pass its Third Reading today.

2.1 pm

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab) [V]: I praise my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) for the work that she and others across the House have done to bring forward this important private Member's Bill. I am happy that it has received cross-party support; keeping young people safe in further education should never be a party political issue.

It is surely common sense to ensure that the same safeguarding guidance should apply across the sector. It is also pleasing to see that the Bill simplifies safeguarding requirements for education providers. The Bill will bring 16-to-19, academies, specialist post-16 institutes and independent learning providers in scope of the duty to follow the statutory guidance note, which will ensure that our legislation goes further to keep children safe in education.

As the parent of a child who has been through further education and of another who will be entering it in the near future, I am pleased that the Bill will reassure parents that, no matter how their child's education is being delivered, their child is being kept safe to the highest standards. Any improvements to the safety of our young people need to be welcomed. For that reason, I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham on bringing the Bill, which I fully support, to the House.

2.2 pm

Mary Kelly Foy: With the leave of the House, I would like to make some brief final remarks. I pay tribute to every Member who has set aside party politics to speak in favour of the Bill in the interest of strengthening safeguarding for further education. The Bill is a fantastic example of that and I hope that Baroness Blower receives as much support for the Bill in the Lords as I have here.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Forensic Science Regulator Bill

*Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee, considered.
Third Reading*

2.3 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I am grateful to the Leader of the House for granting time to debate private Members' Bills today. Following a full debate on Second Reading and a useful and substantive debate in Committee, the Bill is now in a very fine form to hopefully conclude its passage through this House before going to the other place.

2.4 pm

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) for bringing the Bill forward and for his constructive attitude, which has meant that this piece of legislation has had a smooth passage through the House over the last few months; I am grateful to him. I am also grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green), who was his John the Baptist, if you like, in introducing the Bill previously, unfortunately falling foul of the timetable.

This is an important Bill that will put forensics across the UK on a much better footing and increase standards across the board for forensic evidence that is offered in court—something that has been in all our minds, sadly, over the last 24 hours. I am grateful to the Home Office team, who have worked so hard, along with the team of the hon. Member for Bristol North West, to get the Bill in good shape.

In particular, I am grateful for the gimlet eye of my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), which was passed over the Bill extensively on Second Reading. He quite rightly challenged me on the difference between the cost of the Bill introduced in the previous Session, which was £100,000, and of the Bill before us, which was estimated to be £400,000. He will be pleased to know that his challenge to me resulted in some more robust analysis, which has reduced the annual cost to £220,000. I hope he believes that he has paid for himself, at least over the last 12 months and into the future. On that note, I commend the Bill to the House.

2.6 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) on progressing his Bill to Third Reading, and I thank the Minister for his support on behalf of the Government for the Bill's passage.

The Bill puts the regulator on a statutory footing, to ensure that the standards set by the regulator are met, and if they are not met, the Bill allows for enforcement action to follow. These measures are long overdue and should enhance the integrity of our criminal justice. The Bill is exactly in line with the Government's forensic science strategy of 2016, which recommended giving the regulator these powers, and the Opposition very much support that. I want to end by putting on record my thanks to Dr Gillian Tully, whose term as the

Forensic Science Regulator came to an end recently, for her years of service in the post, her wise counsel and leaving the role in good shape for her successor. We very much support the Bill.

2.7 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I support the Bill as well. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Minister for reminding me of the scrutiny that I gave the Bill on Second Reading, and I am delighted that it empowered him to analyse the cost on a fresh basis. As somebody who has practised in our criminal justice system as a barrister for many years, I do not think there is anything more important in our system than that we should be able to have absolute trust in the integrity and quality of the forensic science service and that the evidence it provides, which is so often crucial in court, should be beyond reproach. To that end, I am sure that the Bill, which was discussed and significantly amended in Committee, is all for the good.

This is another example of why it was common sense for the Leader of the House to enable the Bills that have been considered in Committee to come back for consideration on Report in this special Friday sitting. That is good. I am sure that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, as the Chairman of Ways and Means, were much involved in facilitating this; if I am wrong, you will not need to say that, because I am sure that even if you did not do it directly, your influence has been there all along, trying to encourage our ability to constructively bring forward legislation that has already been discussed and steer it to fruition. I understand that their lordships will consider the Bills that have passed in this House today and, as a result, they will hopefully get on to the statute book. That would not have been possible but for the House authorities facilitating what we have done today.

2.9 pm

Darren Jones: While my name is on this Bill, I should take this opportunity to thank the many people involved in bringing it to this stage: to the right hon. and hon. Members for taking part in the debate, both in this House and in Committee; to the Minister, the shadow Minister and their respective teams for their support; to Finn McMahon in my parliamentary office for his help in guiding the passage of this Bill; to the Whips on both the Government and Opposition Benches, as well as the Clerks of this House, for their wise counsel; to the work of many Select Committees both in this House and in the other place over many years; and lastly, as has already been mentioned by the shadow Minister, to Dr Gillian Tully, the outgoing forensics regulator, who has consistently lobbied for this change over many years.

As has been said, the standards that will be put in force for forensic services in this country will do justice to the victims of crime and will add confidence in the criminal justice system. Now more than ever, with all this on our minds, I look forward to the Bill taking a smooth passage through the House of Lords and becoming law in due course.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Botulinum Toxin and Cosmetic Fillers (Children) Bill

Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee

Clause 5

POWER TO MAKE CONSEQUENTIAL PROVISION

2.11 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I beg to move amendment 1, page 3, line 29, leave out clause 5.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment 2, in clause 6, page 3, line 38, leave out from “force” to end of subsection and insert “on 1 October 2021”.

This amendment will incorporate into the Bill the guidance for policy makers issued in August 2010 that there should be two common commencement dates each year, one of which is 1st October, for the introduction of changes to regulations affecting businesses.

Sir Christopher Chope: Amendment 1 stands in my name and the names of my hon. Friends the Members for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) and for Shipley (Philip Davies).

The purpose of amendments 1 and 2 is to try to address the quality of the legislation that we produce in this House. Using clauses as a means of giving the power to change a whole mass of other legislation has long been a bugbear of mine and is exactly what clause 5 does, which is why the Bill would be better without it. I know that, inevitably, the response from the Government on these issues is always, “Oh, well, this is belt and braces and it will save time in the future because we won’t have to bring forward fresh legislation or statutory instruments in order to cover scenarios that we have not yet thought about.” It seems to me that the case has not been made, which is why I have moved amendment 1.

Amendment 2 is a similar provision to the one on which I was briefly trying to engage the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), when we were discussing the Education and Training (Welfare of Children) Bill. The Minister would not engage with me because she felt that that Bill was a deregulatory Bill—she was probably right—and that, therefore, this provision did not really apply. None the less, the purpose of this is to try to ensure that there should be two common commencement dates each year for regulations that impact on businesses, and that one of those should be 1 October, because that seems to be closest to the time when this Bill will be implemented, so that is the date that I have chosen. Perhaps the Minister will be able to give me an assurance that it is indeed the Government’s policy to deregulate and reduce the regulatory burden on businesses and individuals, and to reassert that the Government accept the virtue of having two days each year that might be described as regulatory days, because that will not only facilitate the effectiveness of our legislative process, but make it much easier for those who are impacted on by our legislation to respond and prepare for it. That is why I moved amendment 1 and have spoken to amendment 2.

2.15 pm

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con) [V]: I am very grateful to have reached this point today. This is an important Bill that will protect young people. We are short on time, so I will cover the substance of the amendments quickly. On amendment 1, consequential provisions are essential to ensure consistency with other legislation. On amendment 2, six months will enable the necessary changes to be made to the human medicines regulations under the consequential provisions that were just discussed.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I have been reassured by the answers given to the promoter of the Bill, the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), so I do not intend to support either amendment or delay proceedings any further.

The Minister for Patient Safety, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health (Ms Nadine Dorries) [V]: I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) on the outstanding work that she has done in introducing the Bill, and I reiterate the Government’s support for the legislation. I believe that everyone has the right to make informed decisions about their bodies, but our role in Government is to support young people in making safe, informed choices where necessary to protect them from the potential harm that cosmetic procedures can do to their health. The increasing popularity of cosmetic procedures and the pressures on our young people to achieve this aesthetic ideal are well documented, and I believe that the Bill is an important step in putting those necessary safeguards in place.

I acknowledge the intentions behind the amendment tabled in the Public Bill Committee by the hon. Members for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) to introduce a medical necessity test on the face of the Bill, and I hope that they have taken assurances from the explanation by my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks of the work that she has done to explore this. The standards set by the General Medical Council already require doctors to consider the best interests of the patient to cover the ethical treatment of under-18s.

It has been an absolute pleasure to work with my hon. Friend to take this step towards greater regulation of the cosmetic procedure industry. I look forward to the Bill’s successful passage through the Lords.

Sir Christopher Chope: Because time is running short, I thank those who have contributed to this short debate, and so that we can move on to Third Reading, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Third Reading

2.18 pm

Laura Trott [V]: As discussed, time is short, so I will keep my remarks to a minimum. I thank everyone who has been involved in this Bill. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa), the hon. Members for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), and the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), all of whom have raised the profile of this very important issue over a number of years. I also pay tribute to the work of Save Face, a campaigning organisation that has done brilliant work to safeguard many, many young

people over many years. Lastly, I also thank the Minister, whose support throughout this has been absolute, and I am very grateful.

2.19 pm

Ms Dorries [V]: I have nothing further to say due to the shortage of time. I just reiterate that it has been an absolute pleasure to work with my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) to take these steps forward to the conclusion of the Bill, and I commend it to the House.

Alex Norris [V]: I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott). I know that this has been no mean feat, especially during the current challenging times, and there has had to be a lot of patience, but it has been rewarded today. It is important that we act to protect our young people, especially with the pressures that they face. This is one of those great bits of legislation where I think if we stopped our constituents in the street and asked them about it, they would think it was already like this. This is a common-sense, practical and proportionate way to protect our young people, and we give it our full support.

Sir Christopher Chope: I, too, support this Bill. I notice that it was first canvassed as a possibility in the 2017 Conservative manifesto, which contained a commitment to ensure the

“effective registration and regulation of those performing cosmetic interventions.”

I had not realised the extent to which children had been able to access botulinum toxin and cosmetic filler procedures without a medical or psychological assessment; nor had I realised that practitioners did not need to be medically qualified to perform the procedures and that there are no mandatory competency or qualification frameworks related to their administration. Obviously, this Bill will help to avoid the potential health risks of such procedures, which include blindness, tissue necrosis, infection, scarring and psychological impacts.

It seems to me that my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), so early on in her obviously very promising political career, has been able to identify an issue on which there is a lot of enthusiastic support. I congratulate and thank her for bringing the Bill forward, and I hope that it makes successful progress in the other place after its passage here.

2.21 pm

Laura Trott [V]: I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) for his remarks, and to the Opposition and the Government for their support.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Prisons (Substance Testing) Bill

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 1

ASSESSMENT OF THE EFFECTIVENESS AND VALUE FOR MONEY OF THIS ACT

“(1) The Secretary of State must prepare an assessment of the effectiveness and value for money of the provisions of this Act in achieving their objectives.

(2) That assessment must consider—

- (a) the extent to which the Act is achieving its objectives;
- (b) the number of tests conducted;
- (c) the number of positive test results;
- (d) the number of novel psychoactive substances found;
- (e) the number of prescription-only substances found;
- (f) the amount spent on testing;
- (g) the net effects on expenditure on the treatment of substance misuse;
- (h) the effects of this Act on value for money in substance testing in prisons.

(3) A report on the assessment must be laid before Parliament no later than two years after the day on which this Act comes into force.”—(*Sir Christopher Chope.*)

Brought up, and read the First time.

2.22 pm

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

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to discuss new clause 2—*Expiry*—

“This Act expires at the end of a period of 3 years beginning with the day on which it is passed.”

Sir Christopher Chope: New clause 1, in my name and those of my hon. Friends the Members for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) and for Shipley (Philip Davies), replicates, almost exactly, a new clause that was moved in Committee to try to ensure that there is a proper assessment of the Bill.

The new—temporary; perhaps permanent—prisons Minister had the courtesy to phone me yesterday to discuss the reasons why he believed the new clause was unnecessary. I was able to exchange with him an actual case in my constituency that is causing me concern, which he said he would take away and act upon. I will summarise that case, which shows how important the issue of drugs in prisons is.

The case concerns a constituent whose husband was convicted of murder and sentenced to 13 years' imprisonment. Within a short time of his arrival in prison, never having taken drugs before, he became addicted to drugs, and he was then trying to get off those drugs. Ultimately, it resulted in him and his family being subject to payments of extortion amounting to no less than £60,000. Despite him and his parents and family reporting the matter, none of the people to whom the £60,000 was paid have been brought to justice. Fortunately, my hon. Friend the new Minister has assured me that he is going to investigate the matter and take care of other issues relating to the welfare of my constituent's husband.

[*Sir Christopher Chope*]

I tabled the new clause in order to raise that issue. I am not very familiar with procedures in the House, as you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, but as we need to resolve this Report stage so that the Bill can be given its Third Reading, would it be in order for me not to speak any longer about new clauses 1 or 2 but to seek the leave of the House to withdraw them both?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I take it that the hon. Gentleman does not wish to press his new clauses, for which the House will be grateful.

Sir Christopher Chope: Yes, Madam Deputy Speaker. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the clause.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Third Reading

2.25 pm

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): I do not wish to comment on the Bill any further. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) for withdrawing his new clauses and pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) for bring the Bill forward—I am delighted to have supported her.

2.26 pm

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): I express my gratitude to my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan), and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) for his constructive attitude in helping us to get the Bill on to the statute book.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab) [V]: I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) and the hon. Member for North

West Durham (Mr Holden), and on behalf of the Opposition Front-Bench team I thoroughly welcome the Bill.

Sir Christopher Chope: I support the Bill—indeed, I was present in the Chamber when we discussed the initial concern about my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) not being able to deal with the Bill herself physically. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) came in and helped to fill the breach, so I thank him for and congratulate him on what has been achieved.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham for her foresight in choosing this topic for the Bill that she wanted to promote. Few things are more important for our constituents who are sadly in prison than to ensure that although they are in prison for punishment—the deprivation of liberty—they are not there to become drug addicts or to be subjected to extortion or other illegal behaviour. If, by facilitating our keeping on top of new substances, the Bill leads to fewer people getting addicted and leaving prison fully addicted, that would be great. I have challenged my hon. Friend the new Minister to be the first prisons Minister to create a truly drugs-free prison in the United Kingdom—a dream that I very much hope will be realised.

2.28 pm

Mr Holden: I have nothing further to add.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I just want to say to the House that it is very sad that the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) is not here in the Chamber today, but it will mean a very great deal to her to know that the whole House has supported her Bill and that it has now gone through all its stages. I am quite sure that everyone here today will join me in sending the right hon. Lady our very best wishes.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Registers of Births and Deaths Bill

Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee.

Clause 1

FORM IN WHICH REGISTERS ARE TO BE KEPT

2.29 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I beg to move amendment 1, page 1, line 6, leave out from beginning of line 6 to end of line 4 on page 2 and insert—

“(1) Registers of live births, still births and deaths must be kept in paper form and must be retained in hard copy by local registrars.

(2) Copies of information in registers kept under subsection (1) must be transferred to the Registrar General in electronic form on a regular basis and no less frequently than every three months.”

This amendment requires that registers are retained in paper form in hard copy by local registrars but with provision that electronic copies of such information can be transferred on a regular basis to the Registrar General.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 2, page 2, line 5, leave out “also”.

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 1.

Amendment 3, page 2, leave out line 12.

This amendment removes from the Bill the repeal of section 28 of the Births and Deaths Registration Act 1953, which makes provision about the custody of registers.

Amendment 4, page 2, line 27, leave out clause 3.

Amendment 5, page 3, line 13, leave out clause 4.

Amendment 6, page 4, line 22, leave out clause 5.

Amendment 7, page 4, line 25, leave out clause 6.

Amendment 8, in clause 7, page 5, line 7, leave out subsection (1) and insert—

“(1) This Act extends to England and Wales only.”

Amendment 9, page 5, line 8, leave out subsections (2) to (4).

Amendment 10, page 5, line 19, leave out subsection (6).

Sir Christopher Chope: Amendment 1 is designed to ensure that we still have physical, hard copy registers alongside e-registers, so that we do not facilitate fraud and corruption in our registration service. I will not have time to go into detail—

2.30 pm

The Deputy Speaker interrupted the business (Standing Order No. 11(2)).

Bill to be further considered on Friday 19 March.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am now going to suspend the House for a few minutes in order that preparations can be made for the next stages of proceedings.

2.30 pm

Sitting suspended.

2.36 pm

On resuming—

Business without Debate

ANIMAL WELFARE (SENTENCING) BILL

Bill, not amended in Public Bill Committee, considered.

Bill read the Third time and passed.

National Carers Strategy

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

2.38 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) [V]: There are some 13.6 million unpaid carers across the country, including 4.5 million people who first started caring during the pandemic and 800,000 young carers. Each of these carers provides vital support to a family member or friend, often at considerable personal cost.

Over the past year, the role of unpaid carers has become more important than ever. With many people shielding or unwilling to go out, unpaid carers have stepped up to provide additional support and keep people safe throughout the pandemic, but the reality is that these carers do not feel that their role is being recognised. One unpaid carer, Rachel Mewes, says:

“I wish I could say that the pandemic has shone a light on the situation that so many of us live in, as unpaid carers. Instead, it has driven us further into the dark. It has truly demonstrated how we are not even recognised as an entity in the British population. Personally, I feel that at no point during the past year, have the government recognised that people like me exist.”

I know the Minister will want to join me in thanking all unpaid carers, but the reality is that they deserve more than our thanks—they deserve our support.

Under the last Labour Government, this support was brought together into the national carers strategy. This was an ambitious, long-term plan built around the voices and experiences of carers, and it was first published in January 1999. In 2008, the strategy brought together seven Secretaries of State and the then Prime Minister to support an ambition that by 2018:

“Carers will be universally recognised and valued as being fundamental to strong families and stable communities. Support will be tailored to meet individuals’ needs, enabling carers to maintain a balance between their caring responsibilities and a life outside caring, while enabling the person they support to be a full and equal citizen.”

A decade of Conservative cuts and neglect of this policy area meant that this ambition for carers was never realised, and since the Government announced a consultation for a new carers strategy in March 2016, carers have been left waiting.

Carers were invited to contribute to that consultation to inform the new carers strategy. Over 6,500 carers, carers support organisations and charities submitted contributions. Thousands of unpaid carers gave up what little time they had and invested their energies in providing details of their day-to-day caring roles. Katy Styles, a carer and a campaigner for the Motor Neurone Disease Association, contributed to that consultation and hoped that her voice would be heard alongside others. She told me:

“Not publishing the National Carers Strategy has made me extremely angry. It sends a message that carers’ lives are unimportant. It sends a message that Government thinks we can carry on as we are. It sends a message that my own time is of little worth.”

Katy Styles went on to found the We Care Campaign to bring together unpaid carers to campaign, make their voices heard and get decision makers to value their unpaid care. A key ask of the campaign is a national carers strategy.

The Government have so far declined to publish a national carers strategy, instead bringing in a carers action plan. This flimsy document offers few substantial

commitments to improve support to carers and lacks the funding needed to transform services. To give just one example of how this action plan fell short, a major issue facing many carers is that their GP or other NHS staff treating the person they care for know nothing about their caring role, and this means that they struggle to access support.

In 2012, I brought in a private Member’s Bill on the identification of carers. This would have created a new duty on the NHS to identify carers and promote their health and wellbeing. The then care Minister did not support my Bill, and when the carers action plan came along, it was not so ambitious. It merely proposed a system of quality markers so that GPs could demonstrate if they were good at identifying carers. However, carers organisations know that with proper identification of carers by the NHS we can support carers much more effectively.

The carers action plan expired at the end of 2020. While we are currently stuck in limbo on this policy, I hope the Minister will be able to confirm today that officials are working on a new strategy to give carers the support they need. There are a number of areas the Government should be considering as a priority in both the short and longer terms. The first is the issue of covid-19 vaccinations. This is a short-term priority, but many carers still have not been told when they can expect to receive their vaccinations. The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation has recommended that carers be prioritised alongside working-age adults with underlying health conditions, but we know there are still barriers to uptake.

I have heard from a full-time carer in receipt of carer’s allowance who booked a vaccination after being asked to do so by her GP, only to be turned away on the day because she could not prove her status as a carer. She was asked to provide a letter proving she was a carer, but her GP did not issue such letters to carers and she had no proof with her that she received carer’s allowance. Carers who are eligible should not be denied the vaccine on the basis of paperwork, so can the Minister set out what the Government are doing to ensure that carers are not wrongly turned away?

This could have been dealt with if the Government had set out a clear plan to ensure that all carers are identified either by their GP or by a hospital dealing with the person needing care. As they have not, we have millions of people carrying out invaluable caring work completely unacknowledged. It is also now likely that the covid vaccines will not be one-off, but an annual requirement much as flu shots are. Can the Minister tell us if the Minister for Care has had conversations with the Minister for Covid Vaccine Deployment about ensuring carers are included as a priority in all future rounds of vaccination?

Throughout this crisis, unpaid carers have taken on considerable extra costs. These range from additional spending on energy bills as people are stuck at home to having to purchase personal protective equipment and hand sanitiser. I have heard from carers who have seen their food bill double because they are having to shop online rather than going into stores. All these costs add up and are tough for carers, many of whom are retired or on fixed incomes. Despite these additional costs, carer’s allowance is one of the few benefits that has not had an uplift during the pandemic. Although people

receiving universal credit have rightly been given an extra £20 a week, carers have not seen a penny more from the Government. Carer's allowance was already pitifully low, so it is unconscionable that it should not have had an uplift during the pandemic, leaving many unpaid carers with months of financial worry. On top of that, many carers do not get even this inadequate level of support. Research from the Motor Neurone Disease Association found that even before the pandemic, one in three carers were providing more than 100 hours of support a week, and nearly half of that group receive no benefits. That is part of a broader problem which means that carers do not get the recognition they need. Three quarters of carers have not had a carer's assessment, which means they are not getting the support they need.

Carers who worked before the pandemic have struggled more than ever, often without their employers realising they have had to take on extra caring. As formal services such as day centres closed their doors, unpaid carers were asked to take on more responsibility than ever before. Half of unpaid carers are in work, and more are of working age but unable to work, often because of their caring responsibilities. That means that one in four workers in the country are juggling jobs and caring responsibilities. Despite that, carers have little legal protection in the workplace. Working carers tell us that they are concerned that balancing their responsibilities affects how well they do their job, which is a particular concern during the economic downturn.

Carers have no right to take leave to carry out their caring role, and during the pandemic we have seen that they have no right to be placed on furlough if they need to be. This means they may have faced a choice between quitting a job and not being able to care for a family member or friend. That is not a choice anyone should be facing. The Government have talked about encouraging employers to be supportive of carers on their staff, but encouragement is no substitute for enforceable employment rights. Although the Government consulted last year on introducing a right to carer's leave, we are still awaiting the outcome of that consultation. Will the Minister update the House on whether a right to carer's leave will be taken forward?

Financial support is not available to the 800,000 young carers providing support to a parent or a sibling. Due to the support they offer, young carers often miss school and are more likely to get poor exam results than their peers. They face mental health problems as a result of balancing caring with the normal challenges of growing up, and that is often made worse by the fact that nobody knows they are a carer. Only one in 200 young carers receive any support through their local authority, and more than one in three say that nobody at their school knows they are a carer. That lack of support has worsened during the pandemic, with schools closed to many children and the additional caring responsibilities facing all carers. It is no surprise that young carers say they have got more stressed and more isolated over the past year. That will have a huge impact on their future, and we need to act to avoid that. Next week is Young Carers Action Day. Ahead of that, will the Minister say what targeted support is being put in place specifically to support young carers?

Looking beyond the current pandemic, we should be doing much more to support unpaid carers. Perhaps the biggest thing we could do is reduce the burden on them by ensuring that more people are able to access publicly

funded social care services. One of the most damaging impacts of the current underfunding of social care is that people have to rely on friends and family members for help with basic tasks such as washing, bathing, using the toilet or having meals. Undertaking that personal care can leave carers without the time or energy to spend quality time with their family member or friend, whether by helping them get out into the community or engaging with their hobbies and leisure.

Carers are unable to take breaks, because there is no alternative care. Funding for respite care has dried up, as local authority budgets come under more pressure. We are now in a situation where 44% of carers say that they would use a respite care break to attend a medical appointment. None of us would consider going to the doctor to be a break, but for many carers, even getting time for a medical appointment for themselves is a luxury. Expanding eligibility for social care and providing comprehensive care packages will not replace unpaid carers, but it will free up time for them to do the things that only they can do—providing support and companionship to the person they care for.

Evidence from Scotland, where a Labour Government introduced free personal care in 2002, shows the impact that expanding social care services had on unpaid carers. Research has shown that having state-funded personal care meant that unpaid carers increasingly focused on emotional and social support.

In 2018, carers were told the reason they were getting only the flimsy carers action plan was that the social care Green Paper would go further and set out more ambitious plans. More than two years later, there has been no Green Paper, so I am sure the Minister will understand that carers are not happy with the continued promise of jam tomorrow. Even if the Government were to bring forward their plans for social care this year, which could be another broken promise, it may be years until those plans are enacted. Carers cannot wait that long. They need support now.

A national strategy would be based on carers' voices and aim to start meeting their needs rather than ignoring them. As Katy Styles told me:

“The recent budget told unpaid carers and those they care for how much of a priority they are. When the Chancellor of the Exchequer gives carers 35p a week extra and carers work out that they would need two weeks of this increase to buy a can of the Chancellor's favourite soft drink it tells you everything you need to know.”

As unpaid carer Bart Mekking said:

“My wish is that unpaid carers like me and my wife are noticed. No kind words for they are always empty. At this point, saying that the ‘heroic efforts of carers are appreciated’ sounds more like a snipe. Meaningful actions are needed.”

I wanted to lead this debate today because it is time for meaningful action for carers like Bart and his wife and because it is time we listened to the voices of carers like Katy and recognised the contribution of carers like Rachel. Meaningful action would be ensuring that every unpaid carer is able to access the covid-19 vaccine as a priority, rather than being turned away because they lack the appropriate paperwork; introducing a right for carers to be furloughed from work so that they do not have to choose between working and caring; and a right to carer's leave. Meaningful action would be increasing financial support to carers, including increasing carer's allowance; bringing forward the long-awaited reform of

[Barbara Keeley]

social care, so that unpaid carers get the help they need from formal care services; introducing a duty on the NHS to have regard to carers in the upcoming health and care Bill; and publishing a full national carers strategy that is ambitious and long-lasting in order to guarantee that carers remain a priority after this pandemic is over. Anything less than this is letting carers down again and allowing them to bear the cost not just of the covid-19 pandemic but of the Government's failure to support the social care system.

2.52 pm

The Minister for Patient Safety, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health (Ms Nadine Dorries) [V]: I congratulate the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) on securing this debate on the important issue of unpaid carers. I am aware—I am sure everyone is—of her long-term campaigning on this issue. The Government recognise the vital role that unpaid carers play, especially given the difficulties that the coronavirus pandemic has placed on those caring for relatives and loved ones.

At the very beginning of her speech, the hon. Lady raised the support that carers have received during the pandemic. It has included funding through a number of charities to support carers and provide guidance tailored to them to help them self-identify and gain access to the support that they need. She also raised the issue of vaccines. We are aware of the issue she raised about GPs, but she may not be aware that this week we announced that carers are now in Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation table 6 and will be called this week to go for their vaccinations. I take on board the issue with her constituent and the GP, and I will take that back to the Department to have a further look at it, but it is covered under the standard operating procedure and all carers should be receiving their vaccine now.

We are focused on supporting carers during the pandemic. As well as the measures I have just mentioned, our response has included free personal protective equipment for unpaid carers living separately from the people they care for, priority for vaccines in line with JCVI advice, as I have mentioned, funding through the charities for guidance, and £500,000 to the Carers Trust to provide support to unpaid carers experiencing loneliness during the pandemic. We have also provided £122,000 to Carers UK to extend its helpline opening hours and have funded the See, Hear, Respond service to provide support to children, young people and families who are affected by the coronavirus crisis, which includes a dedicated young carers hub.

Funding has also been made available through the infection control fund, some of which can be used by local authorities to reopen or reconfigure day care centres, which provide vital respite to carers and allow those they care for to meet others. We are helping to ensure the safe continuation and restarting of day services, and have worked with the Social Care Institute for Excellence to publish guidance to day care centres. We have also undertaken work with the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services and local authorities to understand the barriers to opening and reopening day centres.

On social care funding, which can be used to provide services for unpaid carers, as well as those with eligible needs, we are providing local authorities with access to more than £1 billion of additional funding for social care in 2021-22. That includes £300 million of new grant funding for social care, on top of the £1 billion social care grant announced in 2019, which is being maintained, in line with our manifesto commitment. The Government are also enabling local authorities to access up to £790 million of new funding for adult social care through a 3% adult social care precept. We are also providing local authorities with further packages of support worth an estimated £3 billion in 2021-22 to help manage the impact of covid-19 across their services and on income. Some £1.55 billion of the £3 billion is being provided as un-ring-fenced grant funding to directly address spending pressures on local authority services, including adult social care.

In 2019-20, more than 375,000 carers in England were supported by local authorities, with more than 315,000 carers receiving direct support, including information, advice and other services. In addition, in excess of 45,000 carers have received respite or other carer support delivered to the person they care for. Our funding continues to support local authorities in maintaining care services, while keeping up with the rising demand and the recovery from the impact of covid-19.

Let me turn to the two-year carers action plan, which was published in June 2018. The plan set out a cross-Government programme of targeted work to support all carers in England until the end of 2020. The action plan put a focus on practical actions to support carers, recognising and supporting unpaid carers to provide care in a way that protects their own health and wellbeing, employment and other life chances.

Good progress has been made towards fulfilling the commitments set out in the plan. In July 2019 we published the carers action plan one-year progress review, which showcases some of the key commitments we made within the action plan—for example, the Carer Confident benchmarking scheme, launched in January 2019, which aims to encourage workplaces to have policies to enable carers to stay in employment, and the carer passport scheme, which increases recognition of the carer's role by connecting them to local support to make their lives a little easier.

In June 2019, the Social Care Institute for Excellence and Carers UK published new guidance to improve the provision of carers' breaks. The Government are committed to the improvement of the adult social care system and will bring forward proposals in 2021. Our objectives for reform are to enable an affordable, high-quality and sustainable social care system that meets people's needs, while supporting health and care to join up services around people. We want to ensure that every person receives the care they need and is provided with the dignity they deserve.

We recognise unpaid carers as a key part of our health and social care system and as part of ensuring the best outcomes for those they care for. That includes a wide range of people with different conditions and circumstances. We look forward to continuing to work with carer organisations and stakeholders across the

public sector to help unpaid carers to gain access to the support that they are entitled to but often do not claim, and to build on the pandemic response.

Ensuring support for carers does not rely on one Department or on Government alone. We will continue to work with the public sector and carer organisations and across Government to understand the needs of unpaid carers and how best to support them to care as they would wish to care, balancing their caring role with their own health and wellbeing.

I conclude by extending my thanks on behalf of the country to unpaid carers for their invaluable support, and to those providing support to them for everything they do.

Question put and agreed to.

3 pm

House adjourned.

Petition

Friday 12 March 2021

OBSERVATIONS

HOME DEPARTMENT

Independent review of Dyfed-Powys Police

The petition of Julia and Robin Burn,

Declares that, in 2010, in conducting their investigations into allegations made against the petitioners, Dyfed-Powys Police did not proceed in accordance with the appropriate National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA) guidance; further declares that these allegations were later found to be groundless and without merit; further that this resulted in the petitioners' mute autistic daughter being taken into local authority care for six months; and further that, after no further action was taken, no attempt was made to return her.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to instigate an independent review of Dyfed-Powys Police's handling of this case.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Nia Griffith, *Official Report*, 2 December 2020; Vol. 685, c. 378.]

[P002633]

Observations from The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse):

The petitioners have raised concerns about the role of Dyfed-Powys Police and its involvement and interaction with them since 2010 following allegations of a serious and sensitive nature concerning their daughter.

Subsequent criminal allegations made against and by the petitioners have been investigated and, as appropriate, reviewed by the Crown Prosecution Service; complaints against the force have been investigated at a local level and externally by the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC); subsequent directions by the IOPC have been implemented; and civil claim proceedings between the petitioners and the force settled.¹

Further requests to revisit this matter have been rejected by the Dyfed-Powys Police as it is of the view that due process has been followed and there is no new or fresh evidence to justify doing so.

Taking all these factors into account, the Government are of the view that there are no grounds for establishing an independent review of Dyfed-Powys Police's handling of this case.

1. [Official Report, 19 May 2021, Vol. 695, c. 6MC.]

Ministerial Corrections

Friday 12 March 2021

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Women's Health Strategy

The following are extracts from the statement on women's health strategy on 8 March 2021.

Ms Dorries: I reiterate that what we are announcing today is a call for evidence from women everywhere in the UK: from every organisation and every friend, every partner, every family of every woman.

[Official Report, 8 March 2021, Vol. 690, c. 539.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Patient Safety, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health, the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries).

An error has been identified in my response to a question arising from the statement.

The correct response should have been:

Ms Dorries: I reiterate that what we are announcing today is a call for evidence from women everywhere in **England**: from every organisation and every friend, every partner, every family of every woman.

Ms Dorries: I hope that, as we do on all issues related to health, we and the devolved nations will share data and the methods of collecting it, experience and the evidence to develop a women's health strategy, which will one day be rolled out across the UK.

[Official Report, 8 March 2021, Vol. 690, c. 540.]

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Ms Dorries: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that working with charities, organisations, the third sector and all women, and their families and friends, across the UK is really important.

[Official Report, 8 March 2021, Vol. 690, c. 547.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Patient Safety, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health, the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries).

An error has been identified in my response to a question arising from the statement.

The correct response should have been:

Ms Dorries: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that working with charities, organisations, the third sector and all women, and their families and friends, across **England** is really important.

Ms Dorries: It is really important that BAME women understand that we want to hear their stories and birth experiences. BAME women are five times more likely to die in childbirth than white women. We need to know what those issues are, and it is important to get that message out to those women.

[Official Report, 8 March 2021, Vol. 690, c. 548.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Patient Safety, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health, the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries).

An error has been identified in my response to a question arising from the statement.

The correct response should have been:

Ms Dorries: It is really important that BAME women understand that we want to hear their stories and birth experiences. BAME women are **just over four times** more likely to die **from causes associated with their pregnancy and childbirth** than white women. We need to know what those issues are, and it is important to get that message out to those women.

Ms Dorries: It is really important to us that as many women from as many backgrounds and as many geographical locations as possible across the UK respond to this call for evidence.

[Official Report, 8 March 2021, Vol. 690, c. 548.]

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PETITION

Friday 12 March 2021

	<i>Col. No.</i>
HOME DEPARTMENT	1P
Independent review of Dyfed-Powys Police.....	1P

Col. No.

MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Friday 12 March 2021

	<i>Col. No.</i>
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	5MC
Women's Health Strategy.....	5MC

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**not later than
Friday 19 March 2021**

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Education and Training (Welfare of Children) Bill [Col. 1190]
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Botulinum Toxin and Cosmetic Fillers (Children) Bill [Col. 1199]
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