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Public Bill Committee

EDUCATION (GUIDANCE ABOUT COSTS OF SCHOOL UNIFORMS) BILL

First Sitting

Wednesday 16 September 2020

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CLAUSES 1 AND 2 agreed to.
Bill to be reported, without amendment.

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the final version of the report should be clearly marked in a copy of the report—not telephoned—and must be received in the Editor’s Room, House of Commons,

not later than

Sunday 20 September 2020

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The Committee consisted of the following Members:*Chair:* CAROLINE NOKES

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| † Aiken, Nickie (<i>Cities of London and Westminster</i>)
(Con) | † Greenwood, Margaret (<i>Wirral West</i>) (Lab) |
| † Amesbury, Mike (<i>Weaver Vale</i>) (Lab) | † Johnston, David (<i>Wantage</i>) (Con) |
| † Anderson, Fleur (<i>Putney</i>) (Lab) | † Mann, Scott (<i>North Cornwall</i>) (Con) |
| † Barker, Paula (<i>Liverpool, Wavertree</i>) (Lab) | † Morrissey, Joy (<i>Beaconsfield</i>) (Con) |
| † Butler, Rob (<i>Aylesbury</i>) (Con) | † Richardson, Angela (<i>Guildford</i>) (Con) |
| † Daly, James (<i>Bury North</i>) (Con) | † Rimmer, Ms Marie (<i>St Helens South and Whiston</i>)
(Lab) |
| † Davies-Jones, Alex (<i>Pontypridd</i>) (Lab) | † Wood, Mike (<i>Dudley South</i>) (Con) |
| Eshalomi, Florence (<i>Vauxhall</i>) (Lab/Co-op) | Adam Mellows-Facer, <i>Committee Clerk</i> |
| † Gibb, Nick (<i>Minister for School Standards</i>) | |
| † Green, Chris (<i>Bolton West</i>) (Con) | † attended the Committee |

Public Bill Committee

Wednesday 16 September 2020

[CAROLINE NOKES *in the Chair*]

Education (Guidance About Costs of School Uniforms) Bill

9.25 am

The Chair: Before we begin, I have a few preliminary announcements. You will all understand the rules on social distancing. If necessary, I will intervene to remind you, but you are all sitting beautifully apart from each other—thank you for that. Note-passing should be electronic only. The *Hansard* Reporters would be most grateful if Members would send any speaking notes to them electronically via hansardnotes@parliament.uk. The selection list for today's sitting is available in the room—I am sorry that it arrived somewhat late. No amendments have been tabled, and I intend there to be a single debate on both clauses of the Bill. We shall now begin line-by-line consideration of the Bill.

Clause 1

GUIDANCE ABOUT THE COSTS OF SCHOOL UNIFORMS:
ENGLAND

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Chair: With this it will be convenient to discuss clause 2 stand part.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Nokes. It certainly seems a long time since Second Reading. The Bill passed that hurdle only 10 days before the UK went into lockdown. Even then, I could not have imagined that it would be six months before it came to Committee. The Bill has woken in a different world, but the events of recent months make it more important than ever that we get it through Parliament and that the Government bring forward the new statutory guidance.

Considering the amount of correspondence I have received from across the country, thousands of children, parents, carers and schools will be glad to hear that the Bill has made another step towards becoming law. Many families in our constituencies have faced large cuts in household budgets. Many are out of work for the first time. With the support of the Minister and members of the Committee, the Bill will provide a much-needed helping hand as we transition out of the covid-19 crisis.

I reiterate that I am decidedly pro school uniform, and so is the Bill. I went to a secondary school that did not have a uniform, and I do not believe that that was a positive thing. I believe instead in the power of the uniform to be a great leveller. A well-designed, thoughtful uniform policy can work out considerably cheaper for parents and carers than having no uniform at all. A uniform helps pupils to learn in an environment away from the pressures of the latest trends and fads in

fashion. However, some school uniform policies are failing students and undermining the very principle of having a uniform at all.

The purpose of the Bill is not to water down uniform policies or to start a slippery slope towards the end of the school uniform entirely. It is instead to ensure that uniforms are maintained as a way to help children's education. Uniforms do not do that if students are forced to wear ill-fitting uniforms, or if pupils go without meals or miss school because their parents simply cannot afford the cost of a uniform.

The Bill is very short. It would simply ensure that the Government bring in statutory guidance on the cost of uniforms. I seek from the Minister an assurance that if the Bill completes its journey through Parliament swiftly, he will aim to have the guidance in place for the next school year. That is six years after the Government originally promised statutory guidance. Because of its brevity, I also request that the Government quickly publish a draft form of the guidance.

There is a lot to like about the current guidance, which I believe will form the basis of the new guidance. Within it are several elements that I would like to see kept or in some cases strengthened. First, the importance of affordability must be centre stage. The current guidance states that schools should give high priority to cost considerations. I would like clarity on how that particular aspect will be continued once the guidance has a statutory footing.

Another important element that must be expanded on is the prevalence of excess branding on school uniforms. One parent, Lisa, contacted me about her experience of the cost of her child's uniform, which must be purchased from a single supplier. When comparing the cost of the items with very similar school items bought at a supermarket chain, she found that it was at least £180 more. Pushing up the price were custom shirts, logoed shirts, polos and pullovers, an extensive logoed PE kit and—my favourite of all favourites—branded school socks.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on getting the Bill to this stage. I was pleased to speak in support of it at Second Reading. On his point about individual suppliers, does he accept, though, that there are many responsible suppliers of school uniform who are very keen to supply affordable clothes? An example is the company in my constituency called the Print Lab. It supplies 22 schools, and its total cost for a branded uniform is £107.50, so there are people in the business who want to do the right thing.

Mike Amesbury: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention, and I concur. There is a school uniform manufacturer in my constituency called Buccaneer, which certainly provides good-quality and very competitive products for the school environment. Its frustration is the limited access that it has in the marketplace at the moment.

Compounding Lisa's case was the fact that pupils had to buy pullovers and polos with their house colours embroidered on them. That limits the ability of families and friends to use hand-me-downs. Lisa found that many parents she knew, who were often unwilling to discuss the financial difficulties, were worried about

how they would afford the school uniforms in the coming school year. That indignity, as I am sure Members across the Committee Room would agree, needs to end.

The current guidance encourages schools to keep compulsory branded items to a minimum, but the issue of excess branding has dominated my inbox since I announced my intention to introduce this Bill. I have come to strongly believe that no more than two branded items are necessary for a school to establish a sense of identity, and I would like to see that included in the guidance. Other elements could, for example, be sewn on or provided as badges. I look forward to the Minister's response on that issue, as I know that it is not straightforward.

Another key element of the guidance will be how it deals with the issue of single suppliers and the tendering process. The current Department for Education guidance stipulates that exclusive single-supplier contracts should be avoided unless regular, transparent tendering competitions are run whereby more than one supplier can compete for the contract and governing bodies can secure the best value for parents and carers. In too many cases—Members will be familiar with this—that simply is not happening. That is shutting good, competitive manufacturers such as—I will mention it again—Buccaneer in my constituency out of the marketplace. That is limiting choice and increasing costs.

One parent from Bristol emailed me to say that although several suppliers sell a brand of trousers that his son's primary school requires, the school stated just this summer that the trousers can be purchased only from one particular supplier and must now be embroidered by that supplier to prove where they were purchased. That comes alongside the need for a branded polo shirt and sweatshirt, which, again, can be purchased only from a single supplier. I do not see how this arrangement can stand up to competition laws. Indeed, the Competition and Markets Authority has contacted me regarding the Bill, having long been concerned about the practices of many schools.

Several avenues have been suggested by the Department for Education. One is to do away with single-supplier arrangements completely to ensure competition. Another option, based on the current guidance, is to ensure that regular, transparent tendering processes take place. That part of the statutory guidance should be looked at very carefully. Despite the clear guidance from the Department for Education and the warnings from the CMA, some schools continue with utterly opaque practices that do not ensure value for money or easy availability of uniform for parents. Without clear directions, these practices will simply continue.

Finally, one aspect of the guidance that I know the Minister believes in very strongly is around sustainability. We should encourage people to reuse uniforms and suppliers to make lasting, sustainable clothing. However, I do not want that approach to become an alternative to making sure that school uniforms are affordable first hand to pupils. I have been contacted by many volunteers across the country who run excellent uniform banks in their local areas. I respect their work hugely, but they themselves will say that parents should not have to rely on charity to afford school uniforms, and they strongly support the measures outlined in the Bill. None the less, schools should be required to provide parents with regularly updated information about second-hand suppliers,

school swap shops and clothing banks, as well as information on locally available grants. I would like to see that requirement included in the statutory guidance.

I look forward to hearing the Minister's reply and other Members' contributions, and to working with everyone here and the Department over the coming months.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): I agree with every word that the hon. Member for Weaver Vale said. However, I am afraid that the lawyer in me is coming out with respect to some parts of what has been said.

One is affordability. From what I understand, although the guidance will be provided by the Government, affordability will still be decided by the governing body. If, for example, a parent or whoever it may be believes that the governing body is not acting in line with Government guidance regarding affordability, in that the uniform is still too expensive for many parents, I would be interested to hear how they could challenge the decision of the governing body.

I welcome the hon. Member's comments regarding affordability, but how do we define it? How does a governing body define it? Is it in respect of the mean income of the parents in the school? Is it in respect of the lowest income of parents in the school? A lot of my constituents and a lot of his constituents are on state benefits, so affordability for them is very different from what it is for parents on higher incomes.

However, those are just questions. I congratulate the hon. Member on the Bill, which is excellent, and I was glad, like my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury, to be there on Second Reading.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): Diolch, Ms Nokes. It is an honour to serve under your chairship. It is also an honour to be on this Bill Committee, and I pay tribute to the fantastic work that my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale has done on an issue that he has advocated for passionately for a long time.

The cost of school uniforms is a huge issue for many families across the UK, and it is vital that the UK Government are committed to producing statutory guidance for families in England, which will allow them greater choice about where they can buy their children's uniform.

Members may wonder why I, as a Welsh MP, would want to be involved in a Bill Committee on a topic that is so clearly devolved to our fantastic Welsh Labour Government. As you will know, Ms Nokes, I am nothing if not persistent in my ambition to shamelessly support the work of the Welsh Labour Government at any opportunity. Members may have heard the tried and tested phrase, "Where Wales leads, England follows." The Welsh Government published statutory guidance to make school uniforms more affordable, accessible and gender-neutral more than a year ago, which is a prime example of that very accurate phrase in action.

Governing bodies of schools in Wales are now expected to consider ways of keeping down the cost of uniforms. The Welsh Government's pupil deprivation grant, plus additional school uniform guidance, are designed to help reduce the burden on families so that children can focus on fulfilling their potential at school. The guidelines include stipulating the basic items and colours, but not styles, which allows parents to buy items of uniform

[*Alex Davies-Jones*]

from more than one outlet. The Department for Education must afford parents in England the same flexibility, and affordability must be a top priority when setting uniform policy.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Nokes. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale on securing the Bill and on his long advocacy on this issue.

The Bill will make affordability the priority consideration in statutory guidance, which will go a long way towards levelling up our treatment of uniforms, which has been slipping in many ways. My eldest child went to school in 2001, a long time ago; my youngest is in school for four more years—four more years of buying uniform. That has been a lot of uniform along the way. In that time, I have seen the creeping number and cost of additional items that need to be bought for uniform, inconsistency between schools and the incremental use of “My uniform costs more than yours” as a proxy for better school standards, in order to attract students to academies.

When my youngest child went into year 7, his uniform bill was an eye-watering £468.50. It could only be bought from one school uniform shop. I had to top it up recently—he has unfortunately grown a lot—and that cost another £200. Those figures are unsustainable for many families. I support school uniform guidance that ensures that there is less branded, expensive uniform, which drives many families into debt; that provides for not so many exclusive suppliers, who do not put affordability at the top of the list; and that ensures that good-quality, own-brand supermarket choices can be made and that clothes swaps are easy.

The Bill is for that mum who, when I was looking round the local comprehensive for my children, sat down in front of me, picked up the uniform bill, looked at her son, shook her head and walked away from the school. He was not able to go to that school because of the cost. There are many families who face those choices.

The Bill is for those families who I took on trips last summer when I was running a youth group. I sat down and talked with the mums. They said that they had not been able to afford any other trips with their children because they were saving the money and that they were eating less during the summer because they knew the uniform bill was coming—that dreaded moment in September was coming, when they would have to go to the uniform shop.

The Bill is for governors and parents. It will put them back in the driving seat, able to challenge the school uniform bill. It is for our comprehensive education system; it will strengthen uniform policy so that all children feel equal—so that there is less difference between children, for which they can be bullied and because of which they often miss school.

I seek assurance from the Minister that he will work with the Children’s Society, which has talked with many parents and strongly represents them, on the guidance. I seek assurances that the guidance will include details on how parents and governors can use it to challenge the system in their school—it must give them that ability—and will clearly state how they can do so. I seek assurance that it will provide more choice for parents, so that they are able to put affordability at the top of the list, and

that there will transparency for single-supplier tenders, focused on best value, through either regular reporting to governors or looking at the system overall. One primary school in my constituency insists that uniform can be bought only from a department store in Sloane Square, for example.

Minimising branded items is an absolutely fundamental part of the guidance, as is the need to promote school uniform banks and grants, so that even before a parent comes to a school, they can see in the guidance where help is available if they know that this will be a difficult issue for them. Finally, I hope that the guidance will come out soon, in good time for schools to readjust their policies for the next school year.

9.45 am

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I would like to add my support to the Bill, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Weaver Vale for bringing it forward, which is important. As a mum of two schoolchildren, I have lived the school uniform life. I am delighted that my daughter has now gone into the sixth form, where they do not have a uniform policy—I enjoy the morning fashion shows.

However, my son is still in school uniform. Yes, we need to make it cost-effective and allow families of all shapes and sizes and from all walks of life and social and economic backgrounds to be able to afford it, but this is about quality as well. My experience is that a blazer for my daughter lasted five years, and that my son’s blazer lasted one year. It is about quality; we have to ensure that, although these things are cheap, they last. It is important to ensure that school uniform providers provide quality, as well as ensuring that uniforms are sold at a reasonable price.

Many school sixth forms now insist on some type of school uniform, which might be suits, particularly for boys. Again, that is a big added cost for families. In my constituency, a group of parents from Pimlico Academy has been campaigning on this issue. I understand that the school changed its policy recently and gave parents only about two weeks’ notice. The parents are concerned that this is an added financial burden for them at this moment, particularly for many who are on furlough or who have lost their jobs.

I absolutely support the ethos of the Bill, and I welcome the fact that the Government can, hopefully, ensure that families can afford decent, high-quality school uniform for their children throughout their school years.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Nokes. I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale for his work on the Bill, and I congratulate him on the success he has had with it thus far. The Bill had its First reading on 5 March and passed its Second Reading on 13 March without a Division. Current guidance on school uniform for governing bodies, school leaders, school staff and local authorities was published in September 2013 and is non-statutory. Consequently, there are currently no binding rules on school uniforms in England.

The Bill would impose a statutory duty on the Secretary of State to issue guidance to the appropriate authorities of relevant schools in England on the costs aspects of

school uniform policies. It would ensure that the appropriate authority of a relevant school must have regard to guidance issued by the Secretary of State when developing and implementing a school uniform policy for a school.

The Opposition support the Bill and have long talked about poverty-proofing schools. Indeed, tackling the cost of school uniforms is one of the ways we feel that that can be achieved. It is pleasing, too, that the Government support the Bill, and I am encouraged that the schools Minister has talked about how the Bill

“will positively improve the lives of families across this country.”—*[Official Report, 13 March 2020; Vol. 673, c. 584.]*

Research shows not only the high cost of school uniforms, but the vastly increased cost of school uniforms over the past few years. For example, research by the Department for Education in 2015 showed that the average total expenditure on school uniform for the 2014-15 school year up to the end of February 2015 was £212.88. Parents responding to a Children’s Society survey in March this year said that they spent an average of around £337 on secondary school uniform each year. Parents of primary school children say that they are now paying as much as £315 a child per year. With that in mind, families with three children could be paying around £1,000 a year just to send them to school in the right uniform.

It is deeply concerning that high uniform costs are putting additional strain on family finances. The Children’s Society says that 13% of families reported that they had cut back on food and other essentials because of the cost of uniforms. The impact is even greater for low-income families, with 23% saying that they had to cut back. That is a wholly unacceptable state of affairs.

The Children’s Society further noted that children had been bullied, felt left out or even been excluded from schools for wearing incorrect uniform.

On Second Reading, the Minister said that the Government will be producing statutory guidance on the cost aspect of school uniforms that makes it clear to both parents and schools that uniforms must be affordable and value for money. Can the Minister set out what specifically he considers to be the cost aspect of uniform policy? Will he ensure that parents are able to exercise choice when it comes to deciding where to buy uniforms for their children? Will it address the issue of transparency of single-supplier arrangements?

The non-statutory guidance states:

“Exclusive single supplier contracts should be avoided unless regular tendering competitions are run where more than one supplier can compete for the contract and where best value for parents is secured.”

How will that issue be dealt with in the new guidance?

Will the guidance address the issue of branding and school logos? The current non-statutory guidance states:

“Schools should keep compulsory branded items to a minimum and avoid specifying expensive items of uniform.”

Does the Minister believe that goes far enough?

The Minister said on Second Reading that the Government

“will be engaging...with key stakeholders to understand their views as statutory guidance on uniform costs is drafted.”—*[Official Report, 13 March 2020; Vol. 673, c. 586.]*

Which key stakeholders will the Government engage with and when will this engagement take place? Will draft guidance be developed and published before the Bill

completes its passage through the House of Commons? What will happen if schools do not comply with the new statutory guidance once it has been published? Can the Minister assure the Committee that guidance will be specific and clear, so that those that it applies to are left in no doubt about their obligations?

Schools play a vital part in local communities, and many already provide help and support to families to signpost them to agencies where they can get financial and practical support. Will the Minister ensure that the new guidance contains the requirement for schools to regularly make information available on local grants and other schemes available to help families with the cost of uniform?

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve for the first time under your careful chairing of the Committee, Ms Nokes. I congratulate the hon. Member for Weaver Vale on introducing the Bill and on its progression to this stage. It is not a small achievement to get a private Member’s Bill to Committee, and I look forward to continuing to work with him on this important issue.

School uniforms are important. Since 2013 we have published guidance encouraging schools to have a uniform because it plays a valuable role in the ethos of the school, instilling a sense of a belonging and setting an appropriate tone for education. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) has said elsewhere, uniform is a leveller between pupils, ensuring that families do not face pressures to buy expensive clothing—the morning fashion show, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster so aptly put it. Uniform helps to deliver routine and structure. As the hon. Member for Weaver Vale said, it moves away from an obsession with the latest trends and fads in fashion. These are all good points about why we believe school uniform is important.

The Government are committed to making uniform affordable. The existing school uniform guidance covers a wide range of issues, one of which is cost. It makes it clear that no school uniform should be so expensive as to leave pupils or their families feeling unable to apply to or attend a school of their choice due to the cost of the uniform. I was taken by the point made by the hon. Member for Putney about the parent she met who was not applying to a school because of concerns over the cost of the uniform.

We welcome the opportunity, through the Bill, to put the cost aspects of the guidance on to a statutory footing. This is a simple Bill that is wholly supportive of school uniform and the many positive benefits that it brings to a school community. As the hon. Member for Weaver Vale said, he is “decidedly pro school uniform” and so is this Bill. It places a duty on the Secretary of State to issue statutory guidance on the cost aspects of school uniform to which the appropriate authorities of relevant schools in England must have regard when developing and implementing their school uniform policy, and it allows the Secretary of State to revise this guidance from time to time. This is absolutely the right way to establish a statutory underpinning to the guidance, which emphasises the vital importance of cost considerations while empowering schools to make decisions that work for their parents and pupils, with the flexibility for schools to respond to local issues as needed. It

[Nick Gibb]

underlines that school-level decisions should be taken by school leaders and school governing bodies, informed by a dialogue with parents and pupils.

I know that some members of the Committee are keen to know the Government's intentions for the statutory guidance that will be issued under the provisions of the Bill. Our non-statutory guidance is clear on three points: first, school uniform should be easily available for parents to purchase; secondly, schools should keep compulsory branded items to a minimum; and thirdly, exclusive single-supplier contracts should be avoided unless regular tendering competitions are run where more than one supplier can compete for the contract and where best value for parents can be secured. The starting point for the statutory guidance on the cost aspects of school uniform will therefore be the cost elements of the existing non-statutory guidance.

The hon. Member for Weaver Vale advocated applying a set limit to the number of branded items that a school may include in its policy. The current guidance is clear that schools should keep the number of branded items to a minimum. The Government believe that that sets a clear expectation that allows schools to take sensible decisions in their own contexts, but I do not consider setting a specific limit to be the best approach.

Mike Amesbury: I said on Second Reading and today that I welcome the fact that the current voluntary guidance talks about a "minimum" amount of branding, but what is a minimum? How do we define it, given some of the practices that are happening up and down the country as we speak?

Nick Gibb: The hon. Member makes a very good point. I will come to enforcement in a moment, and to the concerns that parents might have if they feel that the school has not implemented the guidance, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North mentioned, but I wish also to refer to the argument about setting a figure. My hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) wrote in the *Daily Express* in June that setting such inflexible limits on branded items might

"force schools to cut back...on distinctive, branded items such as striped blazers and house colours etc.",

which are an important part of the ethos of a school. He fears that setting a specific number of items might well drive out school uniform altogether.

There are many views about what constitutes a branded item, from a garment with an emblem printed or embroidered on it or a plain garment on which a badge can be sewn, to a bespoke garment without any school emblem but where the style or design is nevertheless distinct to that school. As one headteacher said to me, it can also be important for maintaining behaviour standards in schools. The costs associated with different types of branded or bespoke items are very different, which is exactly what I want schools to take into account when they agree school uniform policies, rather than simply conforming to a limit on the number of branded items and potentially ignoring the impact of more expensive bespoke items.

I do not think it is the role of Government to set a numerical limit on the number of branded items in any school uniform. The principle should be that it is the role of Government and Parliament to set a framework

and then to respect the autonomy of decision making at a local level. On a practical level, I do not think that such a limit would work. Would it apply to everyday wear for pupils or would there be separate limits for day wear and PE kit, for instance? What about bespoke items that do not include a school logo? How could they be sensibly and clearly defined for a hard numerical limit? For those reasons, a numerical limit is less practical and less likely to have the intended effect than a requirement to keep the number of branded and bespoke items to a minimum.

I do not believe that we should ban single-supplier arrangements for the supply of school uniform, but they should be transparent and competitive, securing best value for parents. On Second Reading, Members on both sides of the House provided a number of examples of such arrangements working for the benefit of both the school and parents. The Government are clear on the role of single suppliers. Often those are small and medium-sized businesses that play an important role in supporting schools and parents. They are the familiar face of school uniform on our high streets and should not be undervalued in that role.

10 am

Properly tendered single-supplier contracts can ensure a year-round supply of a full range of sizes, and secure economies of scale, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury pointed out. Suppliers can be given fairer access to markets. Costs can be made fairer for parents, and schools can be sure their uniforms represent the best value for money, including on the issue of quality, as pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster.

Mike Amesbury: I think that that is key, really, in ensuring that there is competition and tenders are dealt with in a transparent, organised way. At the moment in far too many areas there has been a historical arrangement based on a nudge and a wink, which has driven up costs. Where there is a single-supplier arrangement, it is key that it should be subject to a tender arrangement.

Nick Gibb: I agree. To achieve best value the contracts need to be subject to effective competitive and transparent tendering. Indeed, that is why the current non-statutory guidance already recommends that schools avoid exclusive single-supplier contracts unless a regular competitive tendering process is run to secure best value for parents. There is an argument for considering whether more could be done to make it clearer for schools what effective competitive tendering means in practice.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North raised the issue of enforcement, and I want to address that. Where parents have concerns about a school's uniform policy they should raise them with the school in the first instance, via its complaints procedures, which must be published on its website. If their concerns have not been addressed effectively through that process the parents can then raise them with the Department. We would seek to take a proportionate approach to any intervention, depending, of course, on the circumstances of the case.

Fleur Anderson: Would it be possible for the tendering process to have to be reported to the school governors? Many parents do not feel that they can make an internal complaint, because they feel it would come back on their children for some reason. Would the Minister consider

a process enabling the parents to be kept out of it, but where it was necessary to report to the governors? That would enable the governors to look at the tendering process whenever it took place.

Nick Gibb: My understanding of schools' complaints procedures is that they involve the chair of the governing body. I think that is the right approach in addressing cases where any school falls short of proper regard to the guidance.

Many schools offer a second-hand uniform shop to support parents, and a number of commendable local schemes were mentioned on Second Reading. Such schemes are excellent, both for affordability and in reducing clothes waste. I would like every school to find a way to make second-hand uniforms available. Of course, all such arrangements would need to be covid-secure. My parents certainly used a second-hand shop to buy my school rugby shirt, particularly as they knew it was unlikely to get much use.

The hon. Member for Wirral West, who spoke for the Opposition, raised the issue of engagement and consultation on the guidance. I want to make it clear that we will commit to engaging with representatives of schools and with parents and other interested parties when drafting the statutory guidance. That includes the request by the hon. Member for Putney, who raised the question of the Children's Society. We will of course commit to talk to the Children's Society.

The hon. Member for Weaver Vale called for the guidance to be implemented by September 2021. I can give him the assurance that the intention is to issue it as soon as practically possible after the Bill comes into force, notwithstanding the need to engage with the sector. We all want to see savings for families as soon as possible, but we need to make sure that we implement it in a way that does not have unintended consequences. No one wants hundreds of school uniform policies to change overnight with parents suddenly and unexpectedly required to buy whole new sets of uniform and uniform suppliers struggling to keep up. I do not therefore believe it would be helpful to include a fixed date by which the guidance will come into force, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that we will seek to consult on the statutory guidance informally with interested parties and publish it as soon as possible.

Uniform makes an important contribution to school life and should continue to do so. Providing schools with a balanced, pragmatic and flexible framework on cost considerations through the statutory guidance is the best way to achieve the changes we all want to see while protecting schools' local decision-making. I welcome all hon. Members' views expressed today, and I am confident from our discussions that we have the right foundations on which to progress the Bill. I commend the Bill to the Committee.

Mike Amesbury: I thank all members of the Committee. This morning shows Parliament at its best, with hon. Members working together constructively as we have throughout the Bill's passage. I thank the Minister and his departmental officials for ensuring that I have had the support—in fact, that we have all had the support—to progress so far.

We are all change makers in the passage to ensure that the Bill becomes law, not just as legislators or MPs, or to put out on social media and all the rest of it, but for the people we represent, regardless of political party, in particular those hard-pressed children, families and carers. This simple and short Bill can make a significant difference.

I thank the Mirror Group and the *Sunday People*, which have been campaigning a damn sight longer than I have on this issue and others. I also thank the Children's Society, which hon. Members have mentioned.

There have been some brilliant contributions to the debate. Wales has led the way, but I hope that we will go one step further. We will learn from the Welsh, but let us have even more informed legislation that will benefit children, families and schools.

Finally, I thank the children, families, schools, unions and the Schoolwear Association for their voices in shaping the Bill so far and ultimately in shaping the guidance. May that continue until the guidance comes to fruition.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Bill to be reported, without amendment.

10.8 am

Committee rose.

