

## **Response to a ‘call for evidence’, from the Public Bill Committee, on the Childrens’ Wellbeing & Schools Bill 2024.**

(Author: Citizens Advice working in Partnership across Warwickshire)

### **Introduction.**

The following brief submission is based on evidence collated from three local Citizens Advice offices across Warwickshire - Citizens Advice South Warwickshire (CASW), Bedworth Rugby and Nuneaton Citizens Advice (Brancab), and North Warwickshire Citizens Advice (NWCA) - in addition to preliminary survey results of Warwickshire parents with regards specifically to the school uniforms issue.

The survey referenced above, on the ‘costs of a school day’, was shared in September 2024 and included questions on the nature of schools costs in general and expectations around the costs of school uniforms in particular. Though the number of survey respondents was relatively low - 50 parents responded - the findings were clear and form the basis for the third response below.

Responses to the first and second proposals emerge from case data combined with discussions with frontline advice staff.

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### **Feedback on Clauses 7 and 8 - ‘Support for Care Leavers’ and extending the ‘local offer’.**

Our advisers fully support Clauses 7 and 8 of this Bill and support the reasoning described within pages 40-45 of the document itself. We support “Staying Close” being put on a statutory footing and it being extended to relevant individuals<sup>1</sup> up to the age of 23. We are disappointed that implementation would be delayed for 3 years after legislation is passed but understand the context behind this decision.

While agreeing with the assertion that Care Leavers over 16 suffer disproportionately worse outcomes than others in several areas of life, notably in obtaining and sustaining secure affordable housing, we would like to add one area where support for Care Leavers is vital but is not included in the list given.

We see numerous cases where Care Leavers, especially when forming couples, are woefully and detrimentally ignorant of their own welfare rights entitlements; what they could be, how to access them, or even where to get independent advice from. This ignorance directly leads to unnecessary poverty and relationship breakdown, and indirectly drives the homelessness mentioned above.

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<sup>1</sup> We understand an assessment process is required to identify ‘relevant individuals’ but we plead that this decision should be open to a formal challenge (if it is not already).

Submitted to [scrutiny@parliament.uk](mailto:scrutiny@parliament.uk) on 28.01.25.

We ask that access (preferably through a dedicated referral) to independent welfare rights information, advice and guidance be added in the list of services local authorities must provide for Care Leavers, as outlined in section 5.2 of the Bill (pg 43).

This is fundamental to Care Leavers being given the tools to equip them to cope with the complexities of independent living. The absence of such a vital preparation for independent living is akin to releasing prisoners into society without any thought about where they are going to live or work or how they are going to afford food.

Regarding Clause 8, we strongly support local authority publication of services designed to assist “Care Leavers in their transition to adulthood”. We further implore legislation to include an emphasis on making this publication transparent and easy to access for Care Leavers.

Most local authority ‘information, advice and guidance’ comes primarily in digital form; i.e. buried somewhere within their websites. This is not easy for Care Leavers with either limited education or limited access to digital devices (or both) to access, navigate or understand. Consequently, we ask that the need to provide easily accessible, easily understandable and regularly updated information, preferably not just in digital formats, is written into the legislation.

### **Feedback on Clauses 21 and 22 - Breakfast Clubs and School Food Standards.**

Our advisers fully support clauses 21 and 22 and support the reasoning described within pages 76-81 of the document itself. We especially welcome this recognition of the need to acknowledge and support the ‘wider social determinants of health’.

Food poverty remains a problem for families with school children. Across Warwickshire, between October and December 2024, 40% of enquiries about food banks and other emergency food support came from families with children; 28% from single parents.

We know the lack of regular and sufficient nutrition for school children affects attendance, performance, and social inclusion as well as health and wellbeing. Guaranteeing a regular nutritional breakfast to **all** those that need it could be a ‘game-changer’ for those affected.

We agree that all children in state-funded primary schools eligible for Free School Meals should be entitled to breakfast club access at no cost, and recognise that this means all children from Reception to Year 6.

To those who might argue that making Breakfast Clubs available in all state-funded primary schools with potentially eligible children represents too onerous a responsibility for some schools and will be redundant in others (because of the perceived affluence of the catchment areas) we note, firstly, that the Bill includes the right to apply for an exemption in certain circumstances for some schools and, secondly, pockets of hidden food poverty can be found even in affluent areas; Warwickshire being one example.

On the issue of extending school food standards applicable in state-funded schools to ‘academies’ our advisers believe it would be simply illogical and unreasonable not to.

Submitted to [scrutiny@parliament.uk](mailto:scrutiny@parliament.uk) on 28.01.25.

## **Feedback on Clause 23 - School Uniforms Policy.**

Our advisers fully support the proposal within clause 23, to place statutory limits on the number of branded items of uniform state-funded schools can require, and support the reasoning described within pages 82-85 of the document itself.

Our advisers believe 3 branded items is more than enough to satisfy any schools' insistence on the need for 'visible uniformity' but **don't agree** that a tie should count as an additional allowable item.

Our advisers agree that current guidance which suggests the number of branded items a school may require in its uniform to be "kept to a minimum" is not working. And neither is the exhortation not to limit access to such items to single (effectively monopoly) suppliers.

Findings from our own recent local 'costs of a school day' survey suggest the situation, despite recent government efforts to limit expenditures on school uniforms, is not improving:

1. 100% of survey respondents had spent money on school uniforms leading into September 2024-25.
2. 70% of respondents told us they had spent £400 or more last year (2023-24).
3. 62% of respondents told us they expected to spend 'more' or 'much more' this year (2024-25).
4. 85% of respondents said they didn't know where to get help with school costs in general (including school uniform costs).
5. 77% felt their school wasn't doing enough to support low income families with school costs (including school uniform costs).
6. 85% felt their local authority wasn't doing enough to support low income families with school costs (including school uniform costs).

All elements of a school uniform costs significant amounts of money, whether branded or not. Branded items cost considerably more than non-branded items. School costs are not limited to the price of school uniforms. Low income families should not be burdened with school costs which have no bearing on a pupil's ability to learn. Value given to 'corporate identity', which overwhelmingly reflects the preferences of School leadership rather than parents or pupils, should not override what's in the best interests of the pupils. Pupils do not learn more effectively or efficiently if they are wearing the same clothes as their fellow pupils; however nice it may look in the school photo!

This Bill is a tremendous opportunity to set new standards in 'childrens' wellbeing', defined broadly. Though we have only been able to focus on three specific issues, reflecting key concerns we have over food poverty among school children and the treatment of Care Leavers, our advisers fully support good faith efforts to treat the wellbeing of the young more systematically and more seriously than previously.

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