

The Rt. Hon. Gavin Williamson MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
20 Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

From: The Rt. Hon. Lord Tyrie

4 September 2019

School uniforms – restrictive purchasing policies

School uniforms are a major cost to many families, particularly at this time of year. The cost is all the greater where schools require uniforms to be purchased from a single supplier. These requirements can add up to £10 to the cost of each item of uniform. Your department recently reiterated the Treasury's 2015 proposal to put your department's guidance on a statutory footing. The CMA agrees with that view. Four years have passed since this was first announced.¹ Action is needed, as soon as parliamentary time allows.

The CMA has tried to address the issue independently of legislation. In 2015, the CMA wrote an open letter to schools and school uniform suppliers (attached) advising them that less restrictive policies could improve value for money, and reminding them that competition law may prohibit certain conduct and exclusive arrangements between schools and uniform suppliers. Despite this, the CMA continues to receive a surge of complaints from parents and carers every summer about the excessive cost of uniforms where school policies prevent items being purchased from cheaper alternative suppliers.

Having considered this issue many times, the CMA has concluded that statutory guidance is needed as the simplest and most direct way of delivering change.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-better-deal-boosting-competition-to-bring-down-bills-for-families-and-firms>

As you are aware, the Welsh Government recently issued statutory guidance to school governing boards in Wales requiring that they take account of cost and affordability in their uniform policies, and avoid contracts with single suppliers, unless regular tendering competitions are run.² Families across the UK should be able to benefit from such an approach.

I am copying this letter to the Exchequer Secretary.

Andrew Tyrie

Andrew.Tyrie@cma.gov.uk

² <https://gov.wales/school-uniform-and-appearance-policy-guidance-governing-bodies>