

Children and Young People Select Committee

Scrutiny Review of the Cost of School Uniform

December 2020

Children and Young People Select Committee
Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council
Municipal Buildings
Church Road
Stockton-on-Tees
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Select Committee – Membership

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Acknowledgments

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Stockton Citizen's Advice Bureau
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Foreword

We are pleased to present the final report of the Children and Young People Select Committee following its review of the cost of school uniform.

Uniform is important in setting an appropriate tone and is also a means of ensuring that children living in disadvantage are not identifiable by what they are wearing. However, schools and academy trusts need to ensure that their uniform policies do not in themselves cause hardship. The Committee are concerned that too much emphasis is being placed on expensive branded items from specialist suppliers, particularly at secondary phase. Our findings locally mirror research highlighting rising costs nationally.

The current pandemic is placing financial pressures on many more of our families and it is especially important at the current time that uniforms are accessible and affordable across all our schools.

The Committee would like to acknowledge the outstanding support provided by many of our schools and one of the Select Committee recommendations is to share this best practice and strengthen links with local community organisations.

Our thanks are extended to all those who contributed to our work and to the Council Officers who supported the Select Committee during the scrutiny review.



Councillor Carol Clark
Chair



Councillor Barbara Inman
Vice Chair

Original Brief

Which of our strategic corporate objectives does this topic address?

This review is relevant to the following of the Council Policy Principle

- Protecting the vulnerable through targeted intervention

What are the main issues and overall aim of this review?

The issues raised by residents about the cost of school uniform and the opportunities locally to support parents in meeting those costs.

It is recognised that the Council has a limited role on this issue and it is largely a matter for schools. The focus of the review will therefore be on working with schools to identify the issues for them and for parents and identifying if there are options to support parents in meeting the costs of school uniform

The Committee will undertake the following key lines of enquiry:

- What are the issues around the costs of school uniform? What is the national and local picture?
- Why do we have school uniforms? What are the benefits of having a school uniform?
- What are the roles and responsibilities?
- Are uniform costs a barrier to children taking part in the full curriculum?
- What do current school policies on uniform say? Who are the suppliers?
- How is the impact of cost currently mitigated for the most vulnerable? Is there any evidence of their effectiveness?
- What are the opportunities to further mitigate costs?
- Are there any additional issues/ considerations arising from COVID-19?

Who will the Committee be trying to influence as part of its work?

Cabinet, key partners, schools

Expected duration of review and key milestones:

Six months:

Scope and Project Plan agreed – February 2020

Evidence gathering – July - September 2020

Draft Recommendations – October 2020

Final Report – November 2020

Submission to Cabinet – December 2020

What information do we need?

Existing information (background information, existing reports, legislation, central government documents, etc.):

Children’s Society report and evidence
 Evidence provided by Children North East: Poverty Proofing of schools agenda

New information:

Information from schools on costs and mitigation
 Good practice review via the Local Government Association (LGA)

Who can provide us with further relevant evidence? (Cabinet Member, officer, service user, general public, expert witness, etc.)

What specific areas do we want them to cover when they give evidence?

Stockton Borough Council (SBC)
 Children’s Services

Contextual presentation – issues and possible options

Schools

Perspective from schools on their role, approaches and support, with specific reference to schools who have commissioned the Poverty Proofing audit from Children North East

Children North East

Parents and student voice secured from the poverty proofing audits

Bright Minds Big Futures

Student perspective

Other LAs / LGA good practice

Best practice

SBC/ Citizens Advice

Support / financial inclusion

Executive Summary

The overall aim of the review was to understand the issues raised by residents about the cost of school uniform and the opportunities locally to support parents in meeting those costs.

It was recognised that the Council had a limited role in relation to this issue which was largely a matter for schools. The focus of the review was therefore on working with schools to identify the issues for them and for parents and identifying if there are options to support parents in meeting the costs of school uniform.

The Select Committee's key findings were as follows:

- There is no legal requirement for a school to have a uniform policy
- DfE Guidance recognises that uniform plays a valuable role in contributing to the ethos of the school and setting an appropriate tone
- Uniform is also beneficial as a means of ensuring those living in disadvantage are not identifiable by what they are wearing
- DfE Guidance states that the Governing Body should give the highest priority to cost considerations and that uniforms should be easily accessible and be able to be purchased cheaply
- National research highlights rising costs of uniform due in part to school policies making parents buy uniform from specialist suppliers – this is particularly an issue at secondary
- The issue has been debated in Parliament and a private members bill laid to place the current best practice guidance on a statutory footing
- National research has revealed that uniform costs impact on choice of school, children wearing incorrect, unclean or ill-fitting uniform, children being sent home from school, families cutting spending on basic essentials, getting into debt or borrowing money to pay for uniform
- Local research on school uniform policies via school websites has revealed that the majority of Stockton schools require parents to purchase items of uniform from specialist suppliers - again particularly an issue for secondary
- Locally, the requirement for badges or logos on items of uniform prevents purchase with alternative suppliers and some schools also insist that non-badged items such as shirts and trousers are also bought from specialist suppliers
- Locally, the growing use of uniform with children's initials prevents items of uniform being passed on even to children within the same family
- Covid-19 has placed even more pressure on families struggling to cope with uniform costs
- Stockton schools provide a wide range of support to help with uniform costs, however, this information is rarely publicised on school websites
- Community organisations also provide support locally and there is a case for a more co-ordinated approach to joining up support

Conclusion

School uniform plays a valuable role in contributing to the ethos of a school and setting an appropriate tone; it also is a means of ensuring that children living in disadvantage are not identifiable by what they are wearing. However, schools need to ensure that uniform is easily accessible and affordable. The Committee felt that some school policies were overly prescriptive and placed too much emphasis on expensive branded items from specialist suppliers, particularly at secondary phase.

The Committee also recognised the importance of providing support to families struggling to meet uniform costs and were impressed by the support offered by Stockton schools and local community organisations. However, the Committee felt that this support needed to be better publicised and co-ordinated.

Recommendations

1. That Academy Trusts and Governing Bodies of Stockton Schools be asked to review their school uniform policies as a matter of urgency in consultation with parents and children taking account of the DfE advice to give the highest priority to cost and, in particular:
 - Keeping items of branded uniform to a minimum
 - Avoiding the use of specified suppliers
 - Avoiding different requirements for different year groups
 - Avoiding the compulsory use of children's initials on uniform items
2. That school governing bodies and leadership teams review the support they provide to families struggling to meet uniform costs taking account of the ideas and initiatives in place across Stockton schools gathered as part of this scrutiny exercise.
3. That all support provided by schools is clearly published on school websites alongside their uniform policies.
4. That improved co-ordination/ signposting of community and school-based support is co-ordinated through the new Community Partnerships.
5. That Government is urged to pass legislation to put the DfE best practice guidance on a statutory footing and support is sought from local MPs towards this end.
6. That the findings from the scrutiny review and the best practice from the school survey be shared with all Stockton Schools and reinforced at appropriate forums.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 This report presents the outcomes of the Scrutiny Review of the Cost of School Uniform.

1.2 The overall aim of the review was to understand the issues raised by residents about the cost of school uniform and the opportunities locally to support parents in meeting those costs.

1.3 It was recognised that the Council had a limited role in relation to this issue which was largely a matter for schools. The focus of the review was therefore on working with schools to identify the issues for them and for parents and identifying if there are options to support parents in meeting the costs of school uniform.

1.4 The Committee examined the following key lines of enquiry:

- What are the issues around the costs of school uniform? What is the national and local picture?
- Why do we have school uniforms? What are the benefits of having a school uniform?
- What are the roles and responsibilities?
- Are uniform costs a barrier to children taking part in the full curriculum?
- What do current school policies on uniform say? Who are the suppliers?
- How is the impact of cost currently mitigated for the most vulnerable? Is there any evidence of their effectiveness?
- What are the opportunities to further mitigate costs?
- Are there any additional issues/ considerations arising from COVID-19?

1.5 The Committee has taken evidence from Council Officers, Children North East, schools and community-based organisations.

2.0 Evidence

Background

Department for Education (DfE) Guidance for Governing Bodies, School Leaders, School Staff and Local Authorities (2013)

2.1 There is no legislation in place requiring schools to have a uniform at all, however, the DfE strongly recommends that they do so:

*It is for the governing body of a school to decide whether there should be a school uniform policy and if so what that should be. This flows from the duties placed upon all governing bodies by statute to ensure that school policies **promote good behaviour** and **discipline** amongst the pupil body. It is also for the governing body to decide how the uniform should be sourced.*

*... it can play a valuable role in contributing to the **ethos** of a school and setting an **appropriate tone**.*

2.2 DfE Guidance also states that Governing Bodies should give high priority to cost considerations and that school uniform should be easily accessible for parents to purchase and schools should select items that could be purchased cheaply, for example, from supermarkets:

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 uniform. School governing bodies should therefore give high priority to cost considerations. The governing body should be able to demonstrate how best value has been achieved and keep the cost of supplying the uniform under review.

When considering how the school uniform should be sourced, governing bodies should give highest priority to the consideration of cost and value for money for parents. The school uniform should be easily available for parents to purchase and schools should seek to select items that can be purchased cheaply, for example in a supermarket or other good value shop. Schools should keep compulsory branded items to a minimum and avoid specifying expensive items of uniform e.g. expensive outdoor coats.

National Research

The Children’s Society Reports 2015 and 2018

2.3 The Children’s Commission on Poverty, supported by the Children’s Society published *The Wrong Blazer: Time for action on school uniform costs* in 2015. The report highlighted concerns about uniform costs, recommended making the DfE guidance statutory, as well as that the Government should explore a uniform cost cap.

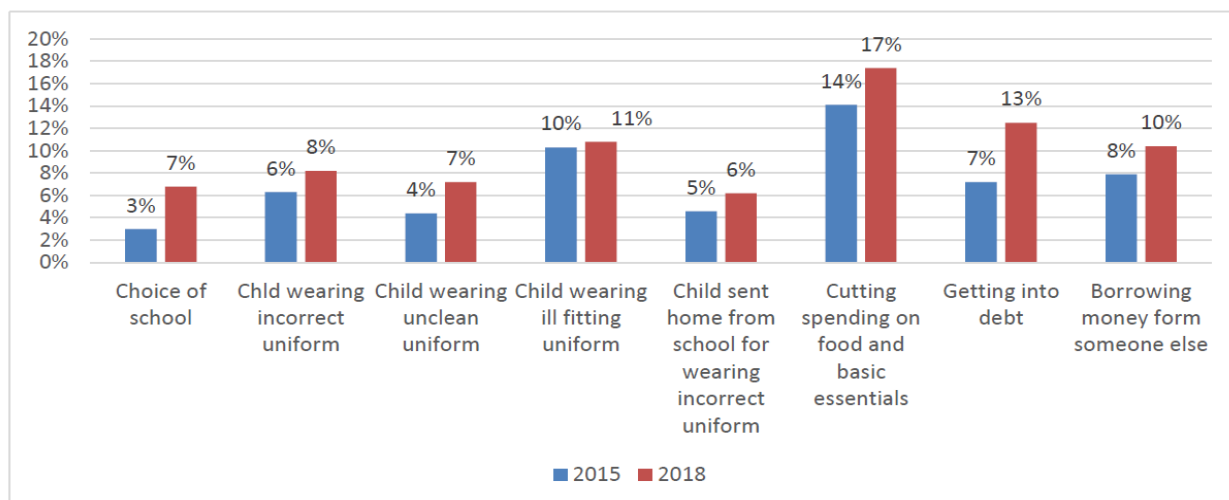
2.4 In August 2018, the Children’s Society published an update to the report based on a survey of 1,000 parents; this highlighted uniform costs and the impact on children:

The report, The Wrong Blazer 2018: Time for action on school uniform costs, an update of The Children’s Society survey from 2015, reveals families are shelling out more on school uniforms with an average of £340 per year for each child at secondary school – an increase of 7% of £24 since 2015. Parents of primary school children spent on average £255, an increase of 2% since 2015...

The high cost of uniforms can be put down in part to school policies that make parents buy clothing from specialist shops rather than giving them the choice of buying items at cheaper stores such as supermarkets and high-street chains. Where parents have to buy two or more items of school uniform from a specific supplier, spending was found to be an average of £71 per year higher for secondary school children and £77 higher for primary school children.

For children themselves, the cost of school uniform can have a serious impact. Around one in 10 parents said it had led to their children wearing uniform that didn’t fit properly, and more than one in 20 said that their child had been sent home from school for wearing the wrong clothes or shoes as a result of them struggling to afford the cost.

Cost of school uniforms: the impact on children – proportion of children affected (2015 and 2018)



N=948 in 2015, 946 in 2018

2.5 The Children's Society Report 2018 *The Wrong Blazer* highlighted national variation across key phases, schools, policies, uniform requirements, costs, student voice and parent/carer voice. The report also highlighted the impact of cost nationally.

Statutory Guidance

2.6 In November 2015, HM Treasury indicated that the Government would legislate to put current best practice guidance on a statutory footing. No legislation was subsequently put before Parliament to implement this change. In July 2019, the Schools Minister stated that the Government "intends to put the school uniform guidance on a statutory footing when a suitable legislative opportunity arises."

2.7 In February 2020, a Private Members Bill was introduced into the House of Commons by Mike Amesbury MP. The Bill will impose a duty on the Secretary of State for Education to issue statutory guidance on the cost aspects of school uniform, to which relevant schools must have regard. The guidance will apply to relevant state-funded schools in England (namely, maintained schools (including maintained special schools); academies (including special academies and alternative provision academies); non-maintained special schools; and pupil referral units). The Bill has reported to the House without amendments and is now due to have its report stage and third reading on Friday 27 November 2020.

DfE report: Cost of School Uniform (2015)

2.8 The legislative proposals were prompted by the DfE research report published in June 2015. The report stated:

The average total expenditure on school uniform for the 2014/15 school year to date (so up to the end of February 2015) was £212.88. This was less expensive for those in primary school (£192.14 for boys and £201.04 for girls) than in secondary school (£231.01 for boys and £239.93 for girls).

and with regard to PE kit costs:

The average total expenditure on PE kit to date based on the items required in 2015 was £87.67. This was less expensive for those in primary school (£66.23 for boys and £62.60 for girls) than in secondary school (£130.52 for boys and £103.63 for girls).

As with school uniform, the average total expenditure was also less expensive when items could be purchased from any shop (£63.13).

Help with Costs

2.9 Under the Education Act 1980, Local Authorities and academy trusts may choose to provide clothing grants to help with the cost of school clothing in cases of financial hardship.

2.10 The benefit is compulsory in Scotland where Local Authorities are obliged to pay qualifying families at least £100 per child. However, in England, it is not a statutory right, and many Councils including Stockton do not provide the grant due to Government funding being withdrawn.

2.11 Individual schools may run their own schemes to provide assistance.

Economic Climate

Covid-19 Implications

2.12 Research indicates that low income families have been much more adversely affected by the pandemic and therefore addressing the cost of school uniform is even more important than ever.

2.13 The impact on the Stockton-on-Tees economy is summarised below:

- The impact of Covid-19 on the economy of Stockton-on-Tees continues to be significant. Currently many of the Borough's businesses remain under restrictions brought about by the global pandemic and as a result many of the Borough's residents have been furloughed through the Government's job retention scheme; although these numbers are reducing, whilst many more residents are claiming benefits due to redundancies and a reduction in job vacancies
- Covid-19 has impacted the economy and the people of the Borough extensively in deprived wards but also in more affluent ones
- Covid-19 has required significant stimulus and social assistance packages from Government to help people and businesses that have been hit hardest by both the initial economic disruption and continued trading difficulties due to operating restrictions and health and safety measures. Over time these restrictions have been easing and the financial support has been reducing; with most ceasing by the end of October 2020
- It is still unclear the extent to which all businesses are likely to find difficulties in re-commencing trading, the scale and length of the crisis, and the implications of any future national or local lockdowns. This could impact on the future viability of businesses due to the need to have continual cash-flow to operate and capital to invest
- The Government's furlough scheme has been a lifeline for many businesses and workers, and the immediate job losses that may have taken effect as a result of business operations ceasing without the funding, are yet to be fully known. Further redundancies may occur with employers expected to contribute to the furlough scheme from 1 August, and the end of the furlough scheme in its entirety at the end of October 2020

2.14 The claimant count reveals:

- The trend seen in Stockton-on-Tees is the same as trends seen in the wider region and rest of the UK
- Between March and August 2020 the claimant count **rose by 66.2%**
- The number of residents making up the Claimant Count is at a **24-year high**
- There has been a significant rise in claimants across all age groups
- The Wards that have seen the highest rises in the number of claimants over the same time period were Mandale and Victoria, Parkfield and Oxbridge and Ingleby Barwick East
- The former two Wards were in the top three with the largest number of claimants before the pandemic, and the latter was in the lowest ten
- Mandale and Victoria Ward is now joint highest with Stockton Town Centre for the number of claimants; although the latter remains the highest for number of claimants as a proportion of the working age population

- Some of the most affluent areas of the Borough have seen the highest percentage and number of claimant rises; albeit from a low baseline position, such as Hartburn and Northern Parishes. Ingleby Barwick East and Ingleby Barwick West.

2.15 The Committee noted that as well as the initial costs of the purchase of uniform, another consideration for families is having enough uniform items to wash regularly. Where uniform is not affordable, hygiene poverty can become an issue.

Children North East: Poverty Proofing the School Day: School Uniform

2.16 The Select Committee received a presentation from Children North East, a regional charity founded on children's comments that "school was the worst place to be poor". Their aim was that:

'No activity or planned activity in schools should identify, exclude, treat differently or make assumptions about those children whose household income or resources are lower than others.'

What is Poverty Proofing?

2.17 The Charity worked with schools to conduct a Poverty Proofing Audit which gathers the voice of every child in school in order to understand their experience of school and explore solutions unique to the setting. It is an inclusive, supportive, non-judgemental process that results in a written report and action plan. Training for governors and teachers on poverty and its impact on education is also undertaken with a follow-up review and potential accreditation.

2.18 The Charity has worked with 11 schools (9 Primary / 2 Secondary) in Stockton and spoken to 5,433 children. In addition, six schools underwent staff training (225 staff).

2.19 When uniforms are accessible, they are a means of ensuring that those living in disadvantage are not identifiable by what they are wearing. However, the cost of school uniform can be a barrier to children taking part in the full curriculum. Cost can become inflated due to a number of factors:

- Being obliged to buy specific items from specific suppliers
- Transport / delivery costs also to be taken into consideration
- Quantity of items required
- VAT on adult sizes
- Branding of shoes and bags

2.20 In order to reduce costs and make uniform more accessible and affordable, schools can consider a wide range of measures including:

- Keep uniform and logos to a minimum
- Avoid specifying suppliers
- Pay attention to what is required for PE uniform (indoor/outdoor)
- Avoid different requirements for different year groups
- Provision for used uniform
- Sew-on badges
- Payment plans
- Consider how spare uniform is administered
- Avoid sanctions
- Consider providing uniforms to those unable to afford them and arrangements for washing them
- Continue to identify and eradicate barriers and to raise awareness of the issues involved
- Poverty proof all schools

- Undertake reviews in those that have been audited
- Training for all staff and those in initial teacher training

Stockton-on-Tees Primary and Secondary School Uniform Policies

2.21 As part of the scrutiny investigation, a desk top review of uniform policies across all school websites was carried out in March/ April 2020. A summary of the findings is set out below:

- There are 60 primary schools and 13 secondary schools in the Borough of Stockton-on-Tees. Most of these schools operate a full school uniform policy
- The main uniform suppliers are Elizabeth's Embroidery, Motif8 and Rawcliffes
- Other suppliers listed are Uniformity, Lollipops, Ross's, School Colours Direct, Tesco and Trutex

Primary Schools

- In eight primary schools, uniform can be purchased from any supplier. If parents/carers would like the school logo to be embroidered on uniform, it can be purchased from listed suppliers
- In one primary school, a specific school uniform supplier is not listed in the uniform policy
- In one primary school, uniform is not 'obligatory' but the school 'encourage' pupils to wear uniform
- In one primary school, it is noted that a 'large supply' of second and clothing is available for free from the school
- In two primary schools, the P.E. kit is provided by the school

(5 schools did not have policies on their websites so statistics are out of 55 schools instead of 60)

Jumper/sweatshirt/cardigan

School 12 - one sweatshirt/jumper provided free of charge by school

School 10 - jumper can be purchased direct from school or supplier

Jumper/sweatshirt/cardigan can be purchased **from school office: 8/55 = 15%**

Percentage of schools that require parents/carers to purchase jumper/sweatshirt/cardigan from **suppliers: 35/55 = 64%**

Blazer

Blazer compulsory item of uniform to be purchased **from suppliers: 2/55 = 4%**

1/55 (year 6 only) = 2%

School polo shirt

School polo shirt can be purchased from the **school office: 4/55 = 7%**

Percentage of schools that require parents/carers to purchase school polo shirt **from suppliers: 13/55 = 24%**

Skirt

Percentage of schools that require parents/carers to purchase **skirt from supplier: 6/55 = 11%**

1/55 (year 6 only) = 2%

Tie

Percentage of schools that require parents/carers to purchase **tie from supplier: 15/55 = 27%**

P.E. top

Percentage of schools that require parents/carers to purchase **P.E. top from supplier: 18/55= 33%**

P.E. top can be purchased from the school office: **4/55= 7%**

Secondary Schools

- In one secondary school, three suppliers can provide school uniform items. Of these, one supplier donates a percentage of their sales to the Daisy Chain charity.
- In one secondary school, two suppliers can provide school uniform items. Of these, one supplier provides a 5% donation to the school for every item of clothing which is purchased.

(One school did not have a policy on the website, so statistics are out of 12 schools instead of 13)

Jumper/sweatshirt

Percentage of schools that require parents/carers to purchase jumper/sweatshirt from **suppliers: 3/12 = 25%**

3/12 = 25%

1/12 (Year 11 only) = 8%

1/12 (jumper or blazer) = 8%

Blazer

Percentage of schools that require parents/carers to purchase blazer from **suppliers: 9/12 = 75%**

1/12 (jumper or blazer) = 8%

1/12 (Years 10-11 only) = 8%

School shirt/blouse

Percentage of schools that require parents/carers to purchase school shirt/blouse from **suppliers: 3/12 = 25%**

3/12 = 25%

Trousers

Percentage of schools that require parents/carers to purchase trousers from **suppliers: 4/12 = 33%**

33%

1/12 (Years 10-11 only) = 8%

Skirt

Percentage of schools that require parents/carers to purchase skirt from **suppliers: 7/12 = 58%**

Tie

Percentage of schools that require parents/carers to purchase tie from **suppliers: 9/12 = 75%**

P.E. top

Percentage of schools that require parents/carers to purchase P.E. top from **suppliers: 12/12 = 100%**

100%

Rugby shirt/Games top

Percentage of schools that require parents/carers to purchase Rugby shirt/ Games top from **suppliers: 5/12 = 42%**

suppliers: 5/12 = 42%

2.22 The majority of schools in the Borough require parents/carers to purchase uniform from specialist suppliers. This is more of an issue at Secondary. Several schools require uniform to be purchased from a specific supplier or two/three suppliers. This places further restrictions on uniform choices.

2.23 In Primary schools, the cheapest sweatshirt available from a supplier is priced at £6.25 for a 'budget crew neck sweatshirt'. The most expensive is priced at £16.50 for an 'adult size knitted jumper'. Alternatively, one supermarket offers a set of two jumpers from £4.

2.24 In Secondary schools, the cheapest blazer available from a supplier is priced at £23. The most expensive is priced at £44.04 for a 'larger size jacket'. Alternatively, one supermarket offers a school blazer from £10.

2.25 Information has been obtained about uniform recycling schemes and the availability of second hand uniform in schools. However, in general it has been very difficult to find this information on school websites.

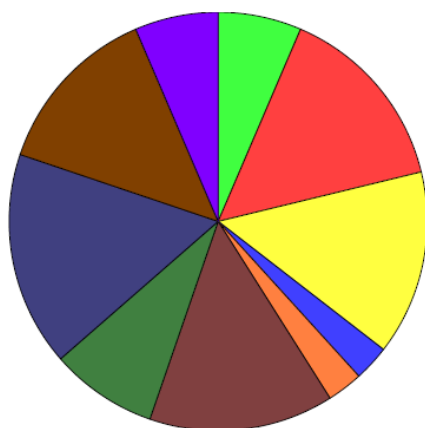
Feedback from Stockton Schools

2.26 In order to understand the type of support provided by schools with uniform costs, a short online survey was conducted. The results highlight the vast range of school support provided:

Provided by school

Question responses: 46 (100.00%)

Please tick if any of the following are provided by your school (tick all that apply)



	% Total	% Answer	Frequency	Count
Uniform Exchange Schemes	6.45%	6.45%	30.43%	14
Uniform Recycling	14.75%	14.75%	69.57%	32
Washing and recycling lost property	14.29%	14.29%	67.39%	31
Flexible payment options	2.76%	2.76%	13.04%	6
Bulk discount passed on to parents when uniform purchased through school office	2.76%	2.76%	13.04%	6
Free uniform to those most in need	14.29%	14.29%	67.39%	31
Some items of uniform provided free to all children	8.29%	8.29%	39.13%	18
Uniform can be purchased from supermarkets	16.59%	16.59%	78.26%	36
Uniform can be purchased from a range of suppliers	13.36%	13.36%	63.04%	29
Help is provided with shoes and winter coats	6.45%	6.45%	30.43%	14

2.27 In addition to the key initiatives above, schools indicated the following additional support as being provided:

Free Items

- Buying uniform for those most in need
- Items provided free using pupil premium funding
- PE kit kept and washed in school
- Free bookbag and water bottle when starting
- Free uniform for year 7 pupils
- Items donated by staff

Re-use

- Y11s wear gold ties and donate their blue ties
- Uniform swapping stall promoted through eco team
- Pre-loved uniform shop at heavily discounted prices
- Winter coat rack for recycled winter coats

Financial Assistance

- Hardship Fund
- Teesside Family Fund support
- Vouchers towards the cost of the uniform at the start of the academic year

Working with other organisations

- Signposting and donating uniform to local foodbanks
- Co-ordination of second-hand uniform through local charity shops
- Greggs Foundation funding for families – up to £50 per child towards uniform

Uniform Policies

- Flexibility within uniform - e.g. trainers permitted
- Accept supermarket/ high street alternatives
- Reducing branded uniform to a minimum

Wider Community Support

2.28 As well as support provided directly from schools, the Select Committee received information about wider community support available. Based on the written comments provided by some of the organisations below, it was clear that many families were struggling with uniform costs and that there was significant demand for uniform recycling schemes and other support. Comments locally mirror the national research findings citing the increase of branded uniform items from specialist providers inflating costs. The feedback also highlights the importance of delivering support in a sensitive way to reduce stigma. The Select Committee noted that emphasising the environmental benefits of re-cycling uniform was one way to achieve this.

Billingham Foodbank

2.29 Members received information on Stockton and Billingham Foodbank Uniform Recycling Scheme. The main issues were as follows:

- Over 100 families have been provided with school uniform during August 2020 and lots of supplies are still available
- Families do not need a voucher to collect uniform from the collection point in Billingham Precinct
- Uniforms can be collected by parents, grandparents or carers
- The usual days for uniform collection are Tuesdays and Thursdays but extra days have been added during August to provide families with more opportunities to collect uniforms
- The uniform is separated into different boxes according to item of clothing. For example, short sleeved girls' blouses
- The foodbank also holds items of 'logoed' uniform from a number of secondary schools in the area

- Lots of families especially with senior school children find the uniform expensive because of the requirement for logo's. Some uniforms require a logo on every item of uniform so cheaper alternatives cannot be bought
- The foodbank has encouraged primary schools not to have logos on all uniform and also to have their own recycling schemes

Castlegate Shopping Centre

2.30 A representative from Castlegate Shopping Centre had sent a written statement for the Select Committee to consider about the Uniform Exchange that had operated in 2019. The key points were as follows:

- The uniform exchange had received plenty of positive press and were donated enormous amounts of pre-loved uniform with plenty of praise from businesses and shoppers. However, there was some negativity on social media from people who felt that the scheme should be open to everyone
- A grant of £2,000 had been received from Thirteen to buy new uniform which was sold for £1 a piece and the high-quality donated uniform was sold for 50p a piece
- When the shop was opened it was clear that there was a lot of people who didn't want to be seen to be buying discounted uniform. This was quite a significant problem and new ways to promote the shop to the target audience were needed. To do this the shop was made more of a place where children could do crafts, get their faces painted and read books. When the parents brought their children into the shop for the activities, the discounted uniform for sale was brought to their attention
- Low income families were targeted through Facebook and word of mouth and staff knew the right people to talk to
- At first shoppers were asked to prove that they were on low-income e.g. JSA booklet or letter but over time staff built up a rapport with shoppers and this wasn't felt necessary
- To start with, the exchange was selling uniform basics – i.e.: polo necks, trousers, summer dresses etc. However, more requests were received for branded uniform so a rail for local schools was introduced. This led to a lot of phone call for bespoke items for local schools
- The uniform exchange was a success and raised £750 for charity, helped 500 families and sold 1000 pieces of uniform
- In 2020 the scheme could not run due to the pandemic. A new venue to run the scheme might be needed due to plans to demolish the Castlegate Centre in 2022

Stockton Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB)

2.31 The Select Committee received evidence from representatives of Stockton Citizens Advice Bureau. The main issues from their presentation were as follows:

- CAB had published a national report highlighting the impact of school uniform costs on families. This was particularly a problem for secondary in cases where purchase was compulsory from a limited number of suppliers for bespoke items of uniform
- Badged items were much more expensive. Where schools used branded items, it was especially important that they offered recycling schemes
- There was a vast difference in cost between items from specialist suppliers and items which could be bought in supermarkets or value stores
- For many families, the cost was a headache that they worried about all summer
- Foodbank recycling did not go far enough and a more co-ordinated approach was urgently needed with more input from schools who were best placed to identify those families most in need
- For the first time, CAB had been approached by a local school to provide advice to families. It

was felt that this showed a worsening of the situation

- The debt team worked with families who were struggling to buy the basic essentials. They were aware of two cases where doorstep money lenders had been used to source the money specifically to buy school uniform
- Predictions were that there was going to be a 60% increase by the end of 2021 in people that could not afford to buy the basic essentials
- Uniform exchange was inconsistent across the Borough with some school uniform being harder to source than others
- Any schemes needed to find ways of getting over the stigma or parents collecting second-hand uniform

Stockton Community Engagement Team

2.32 Stockton's Community Engagement Team highlighted the work of the Tees Credit Union and arranged to send a video clip to Members about the support they offered. The team had worked with a wide range of organisations, agencies and charities (including CAB, Tees Credit Union and foodbanks) on collections and recycling boxes and a "Pay as you Prom" scheme. Although, these support schemes had not been specifically aimed at school uniform, similar approaches to help with school uniform costs could be an option.

2.33 The new Community Partnerships which were about to be launched and could also be involved with work on this issue.

2.34 From their previous work in this area, the team commented that where second-hand uniform was provided, this needed to be in good condition and packaged appropriately. The growing use of children's initials on uniform items was a particular problem as this prevented perfectly serviceable uniform being passed on to other children even within the same family.

Comments from Billingham Town Council

2.35 The Town Council agrees with the principle of a school uniform however, comments that some school policies on uniforms are very prescriptive about where uniforms can be bought from (monopoly suppliers), making this very expensive for parents/carers.

Comments from Thrive

2.36 One of the areas of work of the Stockton Poverty Truth Commission is "the additional costs of the school day" and the group meet to discuss the issues of sending one or more child to school, especially those families on a low income. The cost of a school uniform is unaffordable to many families and costs just keeps rising, especially when schools change colours, logos etc. without any consultation or input from those with lived experience of poverty but also those families who are just over the threshold of free school meals.

2.37 It is very important from the feedback of the community that children, parents and carers are part of the solution and to be sat around the table when decisions are made that have a huge impact on their finances.

3.0 Key Findings

- There is no legal requirement for a school to have a uniform policy
- DfE Guidance recognises that uniform plays a valuable role in contributing to the ethos of the school and setting an appropriate tone
- Uniform is also beneficial as a means of ensuring those living in disadvantage are not identifiable by what they are wearing
- DfE Guidance states that the Governing Body should give the highest priority to cost considerations and that uniforms should be easily accessible and be able to be purchased cheaply
- National research highlights rising costs of uniform due in part to school policies making parents buy uniform from specialist suppliers – this is particularly an issue at secondary
- The issue has been debated in Parliament and a private members bill laid to place the current best practice guidance on a statutory footing
- National research has revealed that uniform costs impact on choice of school, children wearing incorrect, unclean or ill-fitting uniform, children being sent home from school, families cutting spending on basic essentials, getting into debt or borrowing money to pay for uniform
- Local research on school uniform policies via school websites has revealed that the majority of Stockton schools require parents to purchase items of uniform from specialist suppliers - again particularly an issue for secondary
- Locally, the requirement for badges or logos on items of uniform prevents purchase with alternative suppliers and some schools also insist that non-badged items such as shirts and trousers are also bought from specialist suppliers
- Locally, the growing use of uniform with children's initials prevents items of uniform being passed on even to children within the same family
- Covid-19 has placed even more pressure on families struggling to cope with uniform costs
- Stockton schools provide a wide range of support to help with uniform costs, however, this information is rarely publicised on school websites
- Community organisations also provide support locally
- There is a case for a more co-ordinated approach to joining up support

Conclusion

3.1 School uniform plays a valuable role in contributing to the ethos of a school and setting an appropriate tone; it also is a means of ensuring that children living in disadvantage are not identifiable by what they are wearing. However, schools need to ensure that uniform is easily accessible and affordable. The Committee felt that some school policies were overly prescriptive and placed too much emphasis on expensive branded items from specialist suppliers, particularly at secondary phase.

3.2 The Committee also recognised the importance of providing support to families struggling to meet uniform costs and were impressed by the support offered by Stockton schools and local community organisations. However, the Committee felt that this support needed to be better publicised and co-ordinated.

Recommendations

1. That Academy Trusts and Governing Bodies of Stockton Schools be asked to review their school uniform policies as a matter of urgency in consultation with parents and children taking account of the DfE advice to give the highest priority to cost and, in particular:
 - Keeping items of branded uniform to a minimum
 - Avoiding the use of specified suppliers
 - Avoiding different requirements for different year groups
 - Avoiding the compulsory use of children's initials on uniform items
2. That school governing bodies and leadership teams review the support they provide to families struggling to meet uniform costs taking account of the ideas and initiatives in place across Stockton schools gathered as part of this scrutiny exercise.
3. That all support provided by schools is clearly published on school websites alongside their uniform policies.
4. That improved co-ordination/ signposting of community and school-based support is co-ordinated through the new Community Partnerships.
5. That Government is urged to pass legislation to put the DfE best practice guidance on a statutory footing and support is sought from local MPs towards this end.
6. That the findings from the scrutiny review and the best practice from the school survey be shared with all Stockton Schools and reinforced at appropriate forums.