

## Scrutiny Review of the Cost of School Uniform

### 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.