Dear Convener Dornan

I write to you in my capacity as Chair of the Heads of Instrumental Teaching Scotland network known as HITS. As a body we represent the managers of Instrumental Music Services in the country with our constitutionally stated objectives being:

1. To represent the views and interests of Instrumental Services throughout Scotland
2. To promote instrumental education in Scottish Schools and the wider community
3. To develop and support quality instrumental teaching in Scotland through the identification of good practice

As well as representing local authority music services HITS also comprises of a host of national organisation representatives as associate members. These include: Drake Music Scotland, National Youth Choir of Scotland, Trinity College London, Youth Music Initiative, Creative Scotland, ABRSM, Traditional Music Forum, the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland to name but a few.

In my time as Chair of this network as it comes into it’s 21st year it would be fair to say that never before has the concern and fear for the future of instrumental music education been so profound. With local authorities facing such challenging financial situations some have proposed or have now adopted policies which threaten the future of access to instrumental music education for children and young people in Scotland for a generation. As service managers working in education in Scotland we understand the absolute commitment of the Scottish Government to work to eradicate over time the poverty related attainment gap and also to ensure that every child and young person in our country is afforded equal and equitable access to educational opportunities. We firmly believe that a high quality, excellent educational experience includes the opportunity to access learning in and through the arts and culture. We believe that all children should have the same level of access to enjoy an education in music with all of the enriching, cognitive, social and well-being benefits this can bring. However, the current landscape regarding the future of access to instrumental music education in a fast changing and highly concerning one. In some local authority areas such as Glasgow, Renfrewshire or Dundee a child can access free musical tuition and enjoy this all the way through their school based education. Other areas levy a tuition fee for access to exactly the same provision. Although this disparity has long been acknowledged across the country with individual local authorities retaining the autonomy to design and implement their own charging policies some of these policies now sit in direct conflict with the Scottish Government’s own drive to towards achieving equity and equality for all. Again, though some local authorities maintain a fees policy whilst some have long removed this those charging families for access to this service have been increasing fees in the past year with costs now varying between local authorities from free access to £240 to £800 per annum. Some local authorities have also now committed to raising fees on a year on year basis during the next 5 year period
stating to parents and carers that a service they currently engage in will rise in costs by as much as 60% in the next few years a situation surely grossly unfair to parents wanting these experiences for their children.

Sadly other local authority areas have taken the decision to cut services by removing Instrumental Music Instructor posts and therefore subsequently reducing access to the number of children and young people that can access musical tuition. Cases such as this can be demonstrated in the recent high profile example of West Lothian Council. As a network representing the Heads of Instrumental Teaching managers and the talented and highly valued (650 approx) Instrumental Music Instructors working across schools in Scotland we express genuine concern for the future of the sector and for the legacy that such a reduction in services and access will have in years to come.

Recently a number of profiled musicians and educators have been highlighting this current situation in a series of national articles. Composer James Macmillan and internationally renowned percussionist Dame Evelyn Glennie have all tried to shine a light on the growing silence of music in some of our schools in the country. Unfortunately, each time this situation is raised within the press it seems to be the response of the Scottish Government to point to the ongoing investment in the Youth Music Initiative from the Culture Directorate administered by Creative Scotland followed by a stock press release also recognising the ongoing financial contribution to the Sistema Big Noise programme by Scottish Ministers. These have quite simply and categorically no relationship to the current plight facing Instrumental Music Services in Scotland and should not be confused with them. Although very heavily profiled the Sistema programme works with a relatively small number of children in a national context receiving a substantial amount of direct Scottish Government support to do so. The leaders of this programme themselves state that their programme is not about music but about social transformation. The annual Youth Music Initiative programme has provided wonderful opportunities over 15 years in Scotland but is not the same as, should not be confused with nor replace instrumental music teaching. Indeed, after 15 years with the advent of a new curriculum and many changes in education and social policy it would be advantageous to take the opportunity to review the future of this programme to ensure that it does properly align with national policy and perhaps help to promote a wider access to sustainable music making for all of Scotland’s children in the future. The Youth Music Initiative currently continues with it’s stated mission of providing “all children with a year of free music tuition pre P6”. Although admirable in it’s ambition it is then fair to say after a year – ‘now you have to pay up to £800 to continue’ or worse still ‘there is no future provision after your one year free experience due to staffing cuts and reductions’. Where else within the education system in Scotland do we provide one free year of something as a national policy, encourage children and parents to get involved only to then withdraw it or implement a substantial fee?

Although we recognise the very real financial challenges facing local authorities and public services across Scotland we also fundamentally believe in the transformative power that engagement in the arts, music, sport and all cultural activities can have upon the lives of our children and their families. Substantial research is available demonstrating the significant contribution that learning to play a musical instrument
can have on a child’s cognitive development but also in areas such as confidence, self-discipline, in the development of fine motor skills and in enjoying a happy healthy lifestyle.

On behalf of Heads of Instrumental Music Teaching Scotland and with the very significant challenges presently being faced by the music education system we would greatly appreciate the opportunity for members of our very well informed network to meet with members of the Education and Skills Committee of the Scottish Parliament to share our concerns with you, present you with the current facts regarding reducing access in areas but also and positively to explore ways in which we can look to a future when all of Scotland’s children and young people can enjoy the same equitable access to all of the benefits that a wonderful music education can bring being something that we can say is of the highest quality and uniquely Scottish.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

KENNY CHRISTIE
CHAIRMAN, HEADS OF INSTRUMENTAL TEACHING SCOTLAND