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Attainment and achievement of school-aged children experiencing poverty

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Clare,

Thank you for your letter of 25th January 2019 relating to the Education and Skills Committee's enquiry into the attainment and achievement of school aged children experiencing poverty. The Committee was seeking further clarification on the Government's response to the Committee's cost of the school day recommendations. Namely: the recommendation that all education authorities should be surveyed to establish which authorities sanction charging for in-school activities and the level of these charges; and the recommendation that a review is undertaken into which elements of the experiences offered by schools may attract a charge and the cumulative impact of these charges

My officials have engaged with COSLA on these issues to better understand the wider context. With respect to the recommendation that the Government surveys all education authorities to develop an understanding of which authorities sanction charging for in-school activities and the level of those charges, I do not feel that such a survey would be practical. Policies governing charging for in-school activities are generally devolved to individual school level and therefore any survey would necessitate inclusion of all schools in Scotland, and even then approaches may vary from department to department within schools. Attempting such a survey would be bureaucratic and unlikely to produce robust, useable data due to the variation between and within schools.

However, I recognise the concerns raised by the Committee regarding these potential barriers to participation. There should be no charges for children and young people to participate in activities which are part of the core curricular offer, though I understand that in some cases schools may choose to ask for a contribution towards to the costs of articles or materials that pupils might take home with them, for example items of art or cooking. Where this happens, schools must not exclude children and young people from experiences at school due to any ancillary costs. Section 3B of the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000, which was inserted by the Education (Scotland) Act 2016, requires an education authority, in making a decision of a strategic nature about the carrying out of its functions relating to school education

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and decisions about their implementation, to have due regard to the need to reduce inequalities of outcome arising from socio-economic disadvantage. The statutory guidance issued under section 13 of the Act provides an explanation of what a strategic decision might be, along with a non-exhaustive list of matters which includes:

“The content of any guidance issued by an education authority to schools in their area on, for example, school excursions, activities and clubs, school dress codes, charging/non-charging for course materials and music or other tuition;”

Both the Scottish Government and COSLA support the work of the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), and others, to help ensure that schools clearly take into consideration the cost of the school day in developing their curriculum and school policies, so that cost is not a barrier to participation for any child or young person. The Government provides some financial support to CPAG to facilitate extending the reach of their cost of the school day project and schools are able to use their Pupil Equity funding to reduce or remove costs, where they feel it is appropriate. Local authorities have also contributed financially to the CPAG Cost of the School Day project.

Nevertheless, given the evidence heard by the Committee, I recognise that more needs to be done in this area. I believe that schools should make sure that there are clear, and clearly communicated, policies both on the provision of activities which may attract any form of charges and on the potential support available to families to help meet them. I have asked my officials to work with representatives from local authorities to explore how greater consistency in communication and approach from schools might best be achieved and I will provide further information to the Committee once these discussions have progressed.

I hope you find this information helpful.

JOHN SWINNEY

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