LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE
CALL FOR VIEWS ON THE NON-DOMESTIC RATES (SCOTLAND) BILL
SUBMISSION FROM LIAM HARVEY, ST MARY’S SCHOOL MELROSE

I write to provide evidence of the contribution made by St. Mary’s Prep School, to the local community and to a much wider area covering the South of Scotland and North Northumberland.

Removal of rates reduction for independent schools, such as St. Mary’s, will inevitably deprive many hard-working, dedicated parents of the choice to educate their offspring in an environment that provides their children with a better chance of fulfilling potential. This cannot be good for young people, let alone the future of the country, and it certainly will not alleviate the pressures on our already underfunded, overcrowded local authority schools from which so many of our pupils arrive.

As an independent prep school, we strive to provide a quality of learning to young people of school age up to thirteen years that in an ideal world would be accessible to all. In order to provide an average academic class size of fourteen pupils, and an average adult to pupil ratio of 1:7, we operate independently from Scottish Government.

St. Mary’s class sizes, level and quality of support, both in and out of the class lessons, provide young people with a much stronger chance of fulfilling their potential. This in particular applies to young people who have found it impossible to cope in local authority schools’ composite classes of over thirty pupils, with intermittent and ever decreasing Additional Needs Auxiliary support, despite the most outstanding teaching provided by so many of our colleagues in their schools under these extremely difficult circumstances.

St Mary’s School employs 54 staff, and educates 200 pupils whose parents have chosen to forego the local authority education for their children, already paid for through the taxation system. A significant majority of St. Mary’s parents are striving to afford the independent education they have chosen for their children, whether they are paying 5%, 50% or 100% of the termly fees we charge to provide an education that every young person deserves.

My own philosophy, formed when teaching in the local authority sector for the first twelve years of a thirty-year career so far, is based on first hand ‘coal face’ experience teaching across both the secondary, and primary age ranges in inner-city and rural locations. Parents who recognise the value of appropriate class sizes and levels of support, are welcome to come and discuss the possibility of a St. Mary’s education for their children, irrespective of their total household income. Any parent willing to invest a third or more of their disposable income whilst foregoing the state education for which their taxes already pay, demonstrates to me that they too believe in the educational provision we offer, and the school’s Bursary Committee strives to help me develop educational possibilities for their children.
Here in the Scottish Borders, many local businesses benefit from the school, the pupils, their parents, and countless visitors we invite to attend school related functions that run throughout the year.

We provide a catering service that prepares all meals on campus made from fresh, local produce. A three course lunch is provided to all pupils, staff and guests five days a week and our boarding pupils receive a cooked breakfast twice a week and a continental breakfast twice a week. We have strong and positive relationships with our local suppliers who are equally accommodating when working with us to meet individual pupils’ dietary needs.

In the winter months at the school’s expense, our estates manager treats the roads, paths and play areas we have on campus, whilst within metres of our school gates, employees of Scottish Borders Council strive to do the same on all paths and surfaces used by Melrose Primary School. SBC operate to make paths, playgrounds and roads safe for children at school, but not if they attend St. Mary’s School. This is another small but important example of hidden expense not considered by those who believe rate relief should not be afforded to independent schools, despite them having already passed the Charities Test.

Our curricular and extra-curricular activities include the hiring of local facilities such as Tweedbank Astroturf, Galashiels Swimming Pool, Melrose Tennis courts and The Queens Centre indoor sports area. When paying for the use of these facilities, the school is contributing to the running costs and upkeep of these local authority amenities.

On campus here at Abbey Park, the school hosts our annual science festival ‘Bang Goes the Borders’. We welcome over one thousand visitors from the Scottish Borders and further afield take part in science workshops run by science related businesses, science research centres, universities, colleges, senior schools from both the local authority and independent sector and science enthusiasts. Entry is free of charge and a goodie bag is provided for all children who come along. This September will see the ninth event the school has put on and its popularity is anticipated to be as strong as ever.

An annual Teamwork and Leadership challenge is also organised and hosted by the school in May. Participants include up to twelve local primary schools, with invitations sent out to more than sixteen each year. Like the ‘Bang Goes the Borders’ science festival, this free event is extremely popular. The day involves companies who provide activity stations such as AR Entertainments who provide a climbing wall with qualified instructors and iZorbs who run a fun zorb racing station. All other activities; drama, sports, art, treasure hunt and teamwork activities are run by St. Mary’s teaching and support staff.

These on-going initiatives demonstrate our strong relationship with the local community as do the many small but significant gestures detailed in the following list;

- Minibus use for transportation of local clubs and societies.
- Choir performances at church concerts, charity events, local nursing homes and local festival celebrations.
• School facility use for local athletics clubs, parking for disabled visitors to The Borders Book Festival, classroom use for Operations HQ at Melrose 7s, extra catering space for Melrose 7s and extra parking for players and officials of Melrose RFC on match days.
• Kindergarten staff host reading days for parents and toddlers.
• Scottish Borders Council senior school pupils join us for work experience.
• Borders College students join us for work experience and practical elements to courses being undertaken.
• Annual charity performance of senior school production.

The school promotes charity fund raising endeavours and in recent months, the St. Mary’s community has raised funds for the following;

• The Rowan Bowland Trust
• Hazel’s Footprints
• Galashiels Foodbank
• Cash for Kids
• The Margaret Kerr Cancer Care Unit
• The Children’s Ward at the Borders General Hospital
• My Name i5 Doddie
• Down Syndrome Awareness UK
• Book Aid
• McMillan Cancer Care
• Chest Heart and Stroke Scotland
• Clic Sargent
• Borders Children’s Charity

Finally, the school has taken a proactive role in a number of environment related initiatives. These include the planting of trees, town and river clean ups, a drive to make Melrose a single use plastic free town, participation and success in RSPB Wild Challenge Award, Woodland Trust Green Tree Schools Award, Forestry Commission Scotland’s Finest Woods Award and John Muir Explorer Awards.

As part of the above theme the school is currently working with the following organisations; RSPB, Woodland Trust, Tweed Forum, Borders Forest Trust, Surfers Against Sewage, A Greener Melrose, Plastic Free Borders, South of Scotland Eagle Project, The Royal Highland Educational Trust and Scottish Borders Council.

This letter is by no means a comprehensive account of St. Mary’s School’s contribution to Melrose and the wider community, but it covers the main points. The school aims to provide extra facilities for community use in the future and St. Mary’s will continue to embrace its place in the town, as part of this close community. Arguably, St. Mary’s is contributing more to the community than it has ever done before in the school’s 124-year history. I for one am very proud of that and hope that this letter highlights the very strong case for the Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Bill to be overturned.