LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

CALL FOR VIEWS ON THE NON-DOMESTIC RATES (SCOTLAND) BILL

SUBMISSION FROM ST GEORGE’S SCHOOL FOR GIRLS

I would like to draw the Committee's attention to the impact that the removal of non-domestic rates relief from St George’s School for Girls, and other schools like us could have on our local community, our involvement in that community, and our ability to continue to offer means tested bursary support to fund the education of young women in Scotland.

We estimate that the cost to the school of paying non-domestic rates will be in the region of £220,000 per annum.

Use of Facilities by local community

Currently our Sports Hall is used on 4 nights a week by sports clubs and local schools, offering them a facility for badminton, football and cricket at a minimal cost to them. We carry the cost of heating, cleaning and of paying a staff member to lock up after they have left. We also host one-off sporting events such as the East of Scotland Badminton Championships on an annual basis. During the winter months our Sports Hall is used free of charge by a local junior cricket club and on Saturday mornings, also free of charge, by a local primary school for football practice.

Murrayfield DAFS Cricket Club work with more than 40 children aged between 5 and 15. They have said: ‘By allowing us the use of your hall we will be able to have sessions to improve their skills across the game and we plan to enter a team in the Lothian Youth under 11 winter indoor league as a result. Some of the youngsters have played in festivals this summer against other clubs and they are developing not only as individuals but getting a good team ethic as well.’

Every week in the autumn and spring terms our astroturf and sports pavilion are used by a local hockey club, providing a venue for junior and adult players, who rely on the use of this resource to accommodate the demand for training sessions for both adults and juniors. It is the policy of the Scottish Government to continue to support and encourage local authorities to support, affordable community based facilities that give people the chance to take part in sporting activities thus contributing to (amongst other aims around an active Scotland) the Scottish Government aim to cut physical inactivity in adults and teenagers by 15% by 2030. Despite this policy priority, no consideration has been given to the impact on independent school sports facilities and their access by the wider community.

Two evenings a week during term time we host the National Youth Choir of Scotland, which continues to be a considerable contribution to the development of the musical
education and life of Scotland’s young people. Approximately 150 children are accommodated and taught in any one session and St George’s provides parents with a café and a warm, staffed waiting area throughout these sessions.

The Edinburgh and District Burns Club Association Primary Schools’ Festival takes place at St George’s over a weekend every year. This event is attended by approximately 200 students and their parents, and again, the cost to the organisers is minimal.

The Scottish Schools Orchestra Trust is a small charity that provides high quality musical experiences for children aged 8 to 15 across Scotland and beyond. They use our music centre, main hall and dining centre for their annual Play Away day, at a minimal cost. They have said: ‘Since we do not have our own premises we are reliant on venues such as St George’s in order to continue running these events. The fact that St George’s is able to provide its facilities to us at an affordable cost ensures that we can offer musical experiences for children which will build their confidence and their love of music which will stay with them for years to come, and we are very grateful to the staff at St George’s for being so helpful and accommodating of our needs.’

These are examples of ways in which we are currently able to allow our local community use of our facilities. In order to meet the additional cost of the non-domestic rates bill on an annual basis we will undoubtedly need to adopt a much more commercial approach to the use of our school facilities, and this will in turn impact upon the activities of these worthwhile community activities.

**Means tested bursaries**

Letting our facilities on a commercial basis will not be sufficient to cover the additional costs to the school, however, and therefore it is inevitable that we will need to increase our school fees to some extent and find other ways in which to make savings. St George’s is proud to be able to offer means-tested bursary provision every year, in order to make an education here accessible to the greatest possible number of young women. In 2018/2019 we put £749,515.5, or 8.13% of our income towards bursaries. We are dependent on our fee income, however, to do this. Given the range of additional costs that the school now faces, it is highly likely that we will need to reduce the level of means tested support that we currently offer. Every child who is educated at St George’s (currently just over 780) represents a saving to the State, of approximately £6,500 per child, in the region of £5million a year. Conversely, if families are unable to afford to send their daughters to St George’s in the future, despite our best efforts to remain affordable, every child who returns to the maintained sector will be an additional cost to the taxpayer. In addition, there will be further pressure on class sizes, school buildings, school catchment areas, teacher numbers and recruitment in the state sector as a result.
Nursery

The Scottish Government accepted the Barclay proposal to extend 100% non domestic rates relief to all nurseries and early years facilities, whether not-for-profit or profit-making. This means that independent school nurseries that are not stand-alone facilities will pay 100% rates while private, profit-making facilities can receive 100% relief. St George’s currently educates children from age 2 to 18. Our award-winning Nursery is a part of our school, not free-standing, and therefore is not exempt from this charge, as private, profit-making facilities are, which seems inconsistent with the Scottish government’s wish to increase and promote nursery provision across the country.

Employment

St George’s is a significant employer. Overall, between teachers and our non-teaching support staff we employ approximately 250 people in a wide variety of roles. The combination of additional costs and potential reduction in school roll that might result from necessary fee increases is likely to affect our capacity to continue to retain this level of staff, thus negatively impacting upon the local economy and the lives of individual families.

Mrs Alex Hems