LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

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

SUBMISSION FROM TOM RAWSON

I am writing to you to provide evidence, from my own personal experience as both a teacher and parent of the contribution made by St. Mary’s School, Melrose, an independent school in the Scottish Borders, to the local area.

As an experienced teacher and parent of three boys I know that every child is different. An independent school like St. Mary’s School offers an education that suits all of my children. In addition to paying the school’s fees for each of my children I am also happy to pay my taxes helping fund places in local authority schools that each would be eligible to take up.

I have exercised my choice to send my children to an independent school as I believe that the educational experience for my children is incomparable. I am proud to pay as much as I can afford for my children to attend St. Mary’s as I know that it is the best environment for them to be in at this stage in their lives. They may well go to a local authority senior school in future. We will make that choice for ourselves when we reach that point in their lives.

The imposition of Non-Domestic Rates will inevitably make the schooling of my children more expensive. It may well take the fees that are at present affordable beyond our means as a household. If that were to be the case, that element of choice that we have exercised in sending our children to St. Mary’s would be removed. We would, in effect, be forced to send them to the local authority school contributing to issues of overcrowding and understaffing.

The irony of this potential situation is that the children of two teachers will not be able to attend the very school where both their parents work.

This proposed action will not just affect our family but many families from across the Borders and from many schools across the country. Those hardworking households that strive to exercise their choice to send their children to a fee-paying independent school will have that choice taken from them in the middle of their children’s schooling. In addition to the benefit that the St. Mary’s environment provides to my own children there are obvious and undeniable benefits that the school provides to our local community.

Our school employs 54 staff members who all pay their taxes. The school also employs many local tradesmen or pays for the services or goods of local businesses on a day-to-day basis.
Whether that is buying bread from the local baker, a stonemason to repair our roadside wall or the services of tree surgeons to maintain our school campus, we are happy to be channelling much of the school’s income back into the local economy where our fee-paying families come from.

Our school is independent and not private. We host large-scale events such as Bang Goes the Borders (a science festival attended by over one thousand local visitors) and the Farr Out Challenge (a leadership and team-building adventure day for fourteen local primary schools). As well as these large scale events’ many smaller groups make use of the school’s facilities in different ways. Our minibuses are used for transportation by local clubs and societies. The school’s choir performs at church concerts, charity events, local nursing homes and local festival celebrations. The school’s facilities are used 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. Our Kindergarten staff host reading days for parents and toddlers. Annual performances of the senior school’s drama production are attended by members of the public and raise money for charities.

On a personal note, the local Melrose mother and toddler group now uses the Kindergarten facilities every week. Without the school’s assistance, this group, attended by my youngest son, would have been forced to close.

In recent months, the school has held fund-raising events for charities such as 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 is Doddie, Down Syndrome Awareness UK, Book Aid, McMillan Cancer Care, Chest Heart and Stroke Scotland, Clic Sargent, Borders Children’s Charity and the Royal British Legion Poppy Appeal.

Finally, I have personally driven a number of environment related initiatives. These include the planting of trees in our local community, town and river clean ups and a drive to make Melrose a single-use plastic free town. As a result of our efforts, we were the first U13 school to be accredited as a Plastic Free School and Melrose is on track to be accredited as the first Plastic Free Town in Scotland by marine conservation charity Surfers Against Sewage. I am directly assisting Scottish Borders Council with the roll-out of their new Waste Review Strategy and am producing resources to present to all Borders schools in September 2019.

In recognition of our efforts, the school has been awarded the RSPB Wild Challenge Gold Award, Woodland Trust Green Tree Schools Gold Award, Forestry Commission Scotland’s Finest Woods Award and John Muir Explorer Awards. We have planted thousands of trees, put up over 120 birdboxes in the last 18 months alone and cleared nearly 3 tons of litter from the surrounding countryside.
We are currently actively 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.

I aim to build on these environmental efforts in future and to continue to expand them on a regional and national basis to the mutual benefit of all parts of Scotland.

I am very proud of the efforts of my school and hope that my letter will make you aware of the undeniable, irrefutable and irreplaceable contribution made by my school to our local community. I hope this will add to the weight of evidence for the Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Bill to be overturned.