LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

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

SUBMISSION FROM FIONA BELL

In response to the call for evidence regarding the proposed rise in non-domestic rates for Independent schools I should like to make the following points:

It is common knowledge, and almost daily news, that the state education system in Scotland is crumbling under rising class sizes, a decline in high quality teachers, a narrowing of the curriculum due to a reduction in subjects available, and severe financial pressure.

Abolishing charitable status for independent schools in the hope of raising revenue makes no sense; independent schools will be forced to close resulting in mass movement of their pupils to state schools. The impact of this is obvious. Local Authority budgets will be further stretched to accommodate the increase in pupils, the already underfunded and under resourced state school staff will be put under more pressure than they already are, this in turn will no doubt lead to greater staff absence rate due to stress.

Independent schools take the burden off the Local Authority; parents have already paid their council tax but choose not to take their child’s allocated place. Professional people who choose the independent sector do so because the state sector does not offer the quality of education that it used to. Many of these hard working parents will not be able to afford the rise in fees, they will no longer have a choice to spend their income as they wish; only the wealthiest will be able to afford fees.

Independent schools currently educate pupils from across the social strata, thanks to inclusive Bursary provision. Again, without Bursary provision only the wealthiest in society will afford independent school fees. Some of the larger Independent schools will survive, but they will survive with fewer pupils, and thus an education in the independent sector will be truly elite.

Independent Schools offer a great deal to their local community. They allow use of facilities (sports pitches, swimming pools, drama studios, lecture theatres, Chapels), raise money for charities, employ local people and support local businesses.

The school where I work is the largest employer in Melrose. With over 50 staff and more than 100 families we support local shops and businesses on a daily basis. As many of our employees have moved with their families to the area, additional revenue has been brought to our Region. As a school we raise thousands of pounds for local, national and international charities throughout the year. Our pupils and staff are engaged in community events both within and out with school; we host Bang Goes the
Borders annually, providing a free science festival for over 1200 locals, our Farr Out Challenge sees us invite 15 local primary school on to campus and allows 8-10 year olds a variety of teamwork challenges. Pupils are asked to perform at the local hospital, nursing home and church events providing entertainment for the residents. Our school has been fully involved with local initiatives to promote sustainable living—we have led the way with planting trees in the town, cleaning up the River Tweed, distributing bird boxes and tree nurseries for local authority schools and clubs. Should clubs and teams require transport, our staff have driven local children to sporting and choral events as the alternative for the pupils was not to attend the event. Finally, we maintain our own grounds during inclement weather clearing snow and gritting paths thus diverting council resources to other areas of the town.

It is time the Scottish Government worked with, not against, independent schools.