LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

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

SUBMISSION FROM EDINBURGH STEINER SCHOOL

Dear Convener and fellow Committee members

PROPOSAL TO REMOVE ELIGIBILITY TO CLAIM CHARITABLE RELIEF FROM NON-DOMESTIC RATES FROM MAINSTREAM INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

I write in relation to the proposal at Section 10 of the Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Bill to remove eligibility for mainstream independent schools to claim charitable relief from non-domestic rates.

The Government’s rationale for this proposed measure has stressed the inequity of state-maintained schools paying full rates while independent schools receive charitable relief. We do not believe this perceived inequity is reflected in reality, given that the staffing and operation of state-maintained schools remains unaffected by rate changes and that the application of rates to state schools is a paper-based exercise with no money moving between schools and their local authorities. By contrast, the obligation to pay 100% of rates would be fully felt in significantly increased bills to be met by 56 independent schools, which have been singled out from over 24,000 Scottish registered charities.

In particular, we would like to point out the consequences which would result for our school. The Edinburgh Steiner School is a small school of around 250 pupils from age 3 to 18 operating a curriculum informed by the teachings of Rudolf Steiner. We sought for many years to join the state-maintained sector and thereby to introduce a diversity of approach in state provision but, despite a supportive dialogue with the Scottish Government, our local authority was not willing to embrace this diversity in its educational provision.

We therefore find ourselves in the independent sector. However our parents send their children to our school out of a belief in the educational approach we follow rather than through any wish to give their children an elitist advantage. We keep our fees to a minimum (they are considerably less than charged by other independent schools) and run a bursary scheme in order to make ourselves as accessible as possible to all families who aspire to educate their children in the Steiner system, whatever their financial position.

Thus, we are neither an elitist nor a wealthy school. An increase of 80% in our non-domestic rates would place a very significant extra financial burden on the school, running to over £30,000 a year. This would be a major financial blow to the school and would have to be passed on to parents through fee increases. That in turn would place
the school in jeopardy given that many of our parents already make considerable sacrifices to pay current fees and may well be forced to remove their children from the school if these were significantly increased.

We believe this would be a very sad outcome for Scotland, penalising those parents who are most financially constrained by denying them affordable access to the educational approach which they believe best suits their children and which, uniquely in Scotland, is offered by the Edinburgh Steiner School.

Just as there is no alternative in Scotland to the unique educational offering of St Mary’s Music School, which is therefore to be protected from the proposed abolition of rates relief, so there is no alternative in Scotland to the unique curriculum and ethos offered by the Edinburgh Steiner School which, for example, offers foreign languages from age 6 and a holistic range of experiential activities – such as gardening and craft work - which go considerably beyond the traditional academic subjects. Furthermore, we have recently developed a fully quality-assured teacher training course in Steiner education which will be accredited by the University of Edinburgh. This will produce registered teachers recognised by the General Teaching Council for Scotland to teach in the Steiner system, the only such service being offered in Scotland or anywhere in the UK.

We would therefore ask that the Edinburgh Steiner School also be exempted from Section 10 of the Bill, a change to the legislation which could be straightforwardly effected by adding Steiner Schools to the exemptions already afforded at Section 10(3) to schools aimed at developing musical excellence and to special schools.

We would be very happy to further explain our position and to facilitate a visit to our school for any member of the committee if that would be helpful.

Mike Palmer
Chair of Trustees
Edinburgh Steiner School