

Press Statement - 14 December 2017

Response from John Edward, Director of the Scottish Council of Independent Schools, to the Scottish Government announcement to accept the proposal of the Barclay Review of Business Rates to remove mandatory non-domestic rates relief from, exclusively, independent mainstream schools:

“For mainstream schools the announcement today is, pure and simple, a backwards step by the Scottish Government – taken against advice and evidence from many quarters. Rates relief - rejected both in principle and in substance by today’s announcement - is part and parcel of a unique public benefit test that was created unanimously by the Scottish Parliament and focussed specifically at independent schools. The changes schools have made since 2006 to merit that relief amount to more than £200 million alone in means-tested fee assistance to Scottish pupils, alongside very extensive facilities, resources and staff provision for communities, public bodies, and state schools.

We will consider the proposed new arrangements, and the possible exemption of special needs and specialist schools, when they are detailed. If followed through, this proposal will weaken and narrow the widening access programme and, most importantly, it will impact on those accessing bursary assistance made possible by the rates relief. It is dispiriting to learn that the Government considers that independent schools and their parents alone are deserving of a targeted fivefold rates rise. The comparisons made with both state schools and universities do not recognise that all three groups are not-for-profit and all three have education as their core purpose.

Those who have used business rates as a proxy for their own opposition to the independent sector should take no satisfaction from this decision. There is not the slightest chance it will diminish the dedication, energy and expertise that independent schools and their staff have shown over decades, if not centuries; and there will be no stepping-back from offering choice, diversity and excellence for schools, for families and for Scotland’s young people.”

Notes for editors:

1. SCIS represents over 70 autonomous independent schools in Scotland, both mainstream and complex additional support needs. The schools educate 30,000 pupils, employing 3,500 teachers and the equivalent in support staff.
2. Independent schools that are charities registered with OSCR are not-for-profit, and subject to the strongest public benefit test anywhere in the UK – as proposed by the Scottish Parliament by 98 votes to 0 in 2005. They number 52 Scottish charities out of 24,339. More than 650 pupils receive 100% means-tested fee assistance for both day and boarding, while thousands more receive the appropriate means-tested assistance of 80%-20% of fees. Such assistance more than tripled under the OSCR public benefit test to over £30 million per annum, <https://www.oscr.org.uk/charities/managing-your-charity/reviews-of-charitable-status/#review-of-schools>
3. In June 2014, Audit Scotland estimated that expenditure per pupil in Scotland was almost £6,000. It would take less than 3% of independently-educated children in Scotland to return to the state sector to eliminate the Review’s intended overall gain of £5 million. The recent Scape Group report on the ‘Secondary School Places Challenge’ has pointed out that 527 new state school classrooms will be needed by 2020 to accommodate additional secondary pupils already in the system.
4. Since the proposals were made, the Government and elected members at all level have received numerous representations on the impact of independent schools– working with pupils, parents, state bodies, communities and wider groups - and the consequences of removing rates relief. For a full sectoral economic impact report, see <http://www.scis.org.uk/facts-and-figures/economic-impact-report/>

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