

PE1486/D

Learning Directorate

People and Infrastructure Division

T: 0131-244 0155 F: 0131-244 0957
E: rachel.sunderland@scotland.gsi.gov.uk



Stuart Todd
Assistant Clerk
Public Petitions Committee
T3.40
Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP



13 November 2013

Dear Stuart

CONSIDERATION OF PETITION PE1486

I refer to your letter of 7 October addressed to the Scottish Government and others, and would respond as follows to the questions that the committee has addressed to the Scottish Government:

What are your views on the issues raised in the petition?

In relation to the opening phrase of the petition - "*Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to improve national quality in the primary one academic year ...*" - I would stress that the Scottish Government has a far broader ambition: to improve quality and raise attainment across the whole of the Scottish education system - not just in P1.

As for the four approaches by which the petitioner suggests this should be achieved I would comment as follows:

by reducing class sizes to 18 with an upper limit of 20;

The Scottish Government is committed to maintaining the recent improvements before continuing with progressive reductions in class sizes and improved pupil-teacher ratios. The Government took a significant step in 2010 by making regulations to limit P1 classes to a maximum of 25 with effect from August 2011. There are now 97% fewer P1 pupils in classes of more than 25 than in 2006 before we came into office. The Government is determined to make further progress.

direct additional funding to resource the measures taken with appropriate staff, accommodation and physical resources;

The Scottish Government acknowledges the continuing challenging financial circumstances and recognises that further progress may not be as quick as it would like. The Government's financial settlement package for local government for 2014-15 and 2015-16 is, however, the strongest possible outcome achievable in the circumstances. The Government has also secured a shared commitment with local authorities that teacher numbers will be maintained in line with pupil numbers in 2014-15. This should ensure a period of consolidation, and the Government proposes to consult on options and/or proposals for making further progress towards its class size ambitions within the lifetime of this Parliament.

protect the family unit through amendment to current policy to ensure that siblings are not refused placing requests to be schooled alongside family members;

The policies relating to school enrolment/admissions are local authority policies rather than Scottish Government policies. It is for each local authority to adopt criteria relating to school admissions, both in relation to children from within the catchment area of each of their schools and in relation to out-of-catchment placing requests. A local authority's admissions policy usually sets out that first, places at a school are given to children living within the catchment area of that school. Then, subsequent places will be offered to those who have made a placing request. The policy will refer to a number of criteria including, for example, siblings, distance from the school, denominational status if applicable, and any other relevant matters. The policy will assign a priority order to the range of criteria referred to. In exceptional circumstances a ballot may be used to determine placements.

I should note in passing that there appears to be a certain contradiction between the petitioner's wish to see class sizes reduced at the same time as seeing fewer placing requests turned down. I appreciate that that can be achieved by creating more classes - although that is not always possible due to the limited physical capacity of our schools - and/or by putting a second teacher into existing classes. However, adopting these two approaches simultaneously would lead to additional increases in costs.

proactively prepare for future upsurges in the population to avoid displacement of siblings in primary schools;

Local authorities do use pupil projection data to plan their educational provision. But projections are just that, projections. There are a number of unknowns which mean that it is not possible to be definitive in the planning process. For example, families move between catchments and between local authorities continually which makes it difficult to predict demand for places from year to year, let alone years in advance as is necessary when planning school extensions or new schools. It is, therefore, not possible to make provision for future pupil numbers in such a way that guarantees that siblings can always attend the same school.

To what extent do you agree that parents should have a statutory right to place siblings together in their chosen school?

The Scottish Government understands entirely the petitioner's stance on sibling placing requests; a stance that is probably shared by the vast majority of parents the length and breadth of Scotland, and fully appreciates the desirability of parents being able to have their children taught at the school of their choice. The fact that there are legislative provisions

relating to placing requests demonstrates that successive governments have recognised that parents need to have a mechanism by which they can make a request to the relevant local authority as to which school they would like their child(ren) to attend.

However, it is not possible to give an unconditional undertaking that every placing request can be accepted. To do so would be to assume that any particular school could accommodate however many children parents requested places for - theoretically, without limit. It would be impracticable to give such an undertaking either on capacity or financial grounds. As I have already said, admissions/enrolment policy is a matter for local authorities and I am sure they have clear and transparent placing policies and do not turn down sibling placing requests lightly.

When do you expect to consult on class sizes?

I plan to do so early in 2014.

What consideration will be given to pupil population projections as part of the consultation?

The main purpose of the consultation will be to explore, and invite views on, options for further class size reductions, particularly in the early years of primary schooling, with a view to bring forward regulations relating to class sizes which will contribute to our over-riding objective of raising attainment.

The Scottish Government makes full use of national pupil population projections in its annual teacher workforce planning exercise whereby decisions are taken about how many new teachers need to be trained to meet the anticipated requirements of all 32 local authorities. It is for local authorities to make appropriate use of authority-level projections to plan their local provision both in terms of school capacity and teacher recruitment.

The Scottish Government will take into account all responses to the consultation paper, which may include references to pupil population projections, before deciding how to proceed.

Yours sincerely

RACHEL SUNDERLAND