

PE1694/DD

Petitioner submission of 12 November 2018

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the written submissions that have been received so far, from 24 local authorities, COSLA, the EIS, the Musicians Union and the Deputy First Minister.

I have made a written submission to the Education and Skills Committee on its inquiry into music tuition in schools. I would like that Committee to take forward the work of the Public Petitions Committee in this area and therefore to consider the responses submitted to the Public Petitions Committee – that seems to be a sensible way forward.

The responses from local authorities show that there is a marked difference across Scotland in the experiences of children in relation to instrumental music education.

The most basic question for MSPs is:

Is this an issue of national importance - does this merit a national approach?

I think there is a growing acceptance that this issue is sufficiently important to merit a consistent position that puts musical instrument tuition on a footing that is better than discretionary. There is a challenge to bring about a real understanding of just how valuable a service this is. Local authorities provided this service for free to a world-class standard for decades. I don't think they did this to give some children a hobby. I think they did it because they knew how valuable an educational experience it is. So it feels strange to many of us to think that maybe the understanding isn't as secure as we thought it was.

In reading the local authority responses, it is good to see that there seems to be almost universal recognition of the value of the service. It seems unlikely that education professionals in local authorities are recommending cuts and fees for good educational reasons. It seems clear that, in spite of the good level of understanding amongst education professionals who advise Councillors, Councillors are taking these decisions to save money. We have to assume that these are reluctant decisions rather than poorly-informed ones.

Measuring the impact of fees on drop-out rates is clearly difficult. Measuring the impact on take-up is even more difficult and is a hidden problem. The exclusion of some children, whether they have to give up lessons or will miss out on the chance to take up an instrument in the first place, and the stigma arising from fees are real, even if the recorded statistics are hard to interpret.

The next question is:

Is it better for some children in a classroom to continue to benefit from specialist musical instrument lessons, and others to be priced out, than for no children to benefit, because the service is cut entirely?

The answer to that question seems to be "yes", but it is a dreadful question, and the answer is not free from difficulties.

I hope and I do believe that all local authorities would once again provide free tuition if they felt they could afford to do so, and for strong educational reasons. If the decisions are based solely on saving money, and if the case can be made for the services to become statutory, then I do not think any education professionals would object, so long as it did not come at the cost of further cuts to the numbers of specialist instrumental instructors.

The problem is, fees exclude some children and that is divisive, and leads to a two-tier system in state schools that is wrong in principle. Money is tight but principles still matter. The written submissions by teachers to the Education and Skills Committee ([see papers from meeting of 7 November](#)) are clear that fees have no place in state schools. We are not talking about parents paying for school trips: we are talking about lessons delivered in school, during the school day.

Answering the question in the affirmative also raises legal questions, given the rights of children under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. South Ayrshire Council carried out a [Children's Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment](#) (CRWIA), on the recommendation of the Children and Young People's Commissioner for Scotland, although it did so after the political decision to introduce the fees had been taken not before, which is when you would expect an impact assessment to be undertaken in a rational decision-making system. The CRWIA is an impressive piece of work that I invite MSPs to look at. It could become a national template for situations where it is politically expedient to justify fees in state schools, if that is going to be our new normal. The CRWIA answers the above question resoundingly in the affirmative, giving stated, due weight to what are described as the benefits arising from the decision to introduce fees. This is depressing.

This narrower question brings into focus what for many is the key question, that keeps coming up. It is central to the petition and surely also to the wider inquiry by the Education and Skills Committee:

Is instrumental music education worthy of statutory inclusion in the curriculum?

That is a question I hope the Scottish Government decides to answer. The petition calls on the Scottish Government to answer it.

If the answer is "yes", some existing spend will need to be protected, and some new money will need to be found. The new money would eradicate the existing fees (c£4m), replace the 500+ instrumental tutor posts that have disappeared over the last decade (c£20m?) and create new posts to meet the true level of the demand.

How many more posts would we need? The highest percentage of participation in any local authority seems to be Dundee, at 20%. If the national average is around 10% then presumably we would need to double the number of specialist musical instrument tutors over time, to meet the demand. I am not an expert but I hope MSPs take the opportunity to take evidence from those who can expertly measure the likely costs of making musical instrument tuition statutory.

If the answer is "no", with reasons, so be it.

What would happen if the answer were “no”?

In that event, the current divergence across Scotland would widen.

I detect that some local authorities would continue to provide lessons for free, and to endeavour to increase provision, as they truly value the service and understand its benefits to children, the money it saves elsewhere in the system and the contribution it makes to the economy (and thus tax receipts).

Some local authorities might cut the service completely, and be done with it.

Still others might target the service at the very well off on a “total cost recovery” basis - £800 per year per child for small group lessons? (Ask the experts.) There are affluent parents who would pay even that, particularly if there is no access to private tuition in their area. However – a note of caution is necessary here. I believe Clackmannanshire is now undertaking a supply and demand analysis as it appears it may have scuppered its own income generation target by setting the fees too high.

Given the submission of “a few” parents to the Education and Skills Committee (see papers from 7 November – [third page of submission from Connect](#)), some local authorities might be able to secure a mandate to require parents to pay even more than the total cost of their child’s tuition in order to subsidise lessons for the poorest children, so that there is no cost to the public purse. I imagine this would be quite an unlikely scenario.

Please remember - if the service is subsidised by the public purse, with fees making up the balance (the subsidy in North Lanarkshire is stated to be 85% of the cost of the service, for example), a large proportion of the subsidy will end up in the hands of families who have more than families who are priced out of the subsidy, with the rest going to families from the poorest families in our communities because of the exemptions that apply.

The reason the subsidy is skewed to the well-off rather than the poorest, or rather than split equally between the well-off and the poorest, is that children from well-off backgrounds tend to take up the service in higher numbers, and stick with it, while the poorest children are left behind.

There are many reasons why take up amongst poorer children is low, but one that struck me for the first time recently was pointed out by [Paul Wood in his submission](#) to the Education and Skills Committee (see papers for meeting on 7 November) where he explains that there are households where the necessary forms that now need to be submitted to claim the exemption from fees (and thus access the service) are a barrier, due to social factors.

On the topic of subsidies, it was interesting to see Highland Council’s suggestion that any new money should first be allocated to families in the “squeezed middle” group, if I am interpreting that submission correctly. Arguably, given Paul Wood’s submission, any additional funding should first be focused on removing social barriers that prevent the poorest children from accessing this brilliant educational opportunity – including the new barriers (eg form-filling) that arise from the fact that an exemption exists in the first place because of fees!

On the statutory question, the Deputy First Minister clearly recognises the powerful contribution of musical instrument tuition to a child's education, but he appears unwilling to recommend the statutory route for fear of offending local authorities. Or perhaps it is simply for want of money.

Strikingly, COSLA's main objective seems to be to ensure that local authorities succeed in holding on to their power (that the Deputy First Minister respects) even though local authorities are only wielding the power to make cuts and introduce fees because of financial pressures. The statutory argument is not about cutting back on local powers. It is about advancing the interests of children.

There is a wonderful opportunity for the Scottish Government to show leadership on this issue – musical instrument tuition is not a luxury for the well off, it is a right of all children. It is also a wise use of public money. It should become statutory.

When times are hard, public money needs to work even harder. Education is always worth the investment. And, looking to the costs of dealing with any number of other challenges facing society, and the ability of musical instrument tuition to improve people's lives, it is clear that prevention is better than cure, and more cost-effective. The list includes: keeping children out of trouble; improving the physical and mental health of children into adulthood and throughout their lives; boosting the attainment of children who then go on to study music, or other subjects, and succeed in improving themselves; the need to strengthen communities so that people can look after each other; and let's not forget that music provides careers for many people – the creative industries are a major employer of people.

These wider perspectives come across very clearly in the submissions from the EIS and the Musicians Union. Even if MSPs cannot be persuaded that learning to play a musical instrument deserves a full place in the curriculum because, for example, they think the music curriculum is fine as it is, MSPs could find many other good reasons to invest in musical instrument tuition.

An argument is often made that other art forms do not attract the same kind of one to one or small group tuition that musical instrument tuition has attracted / still attracts (see submission from Argyll & Bute Council). I don't think this point is intended to justify taking the service away from some children; I think it is more in the nature of an invitation to look at arts education in the round. If this inquiry triggers a wider look at arts education, that would be welcome. The position in England should serve as a warning (again, see meeting papers for 7 November). However, musical instrument tuition in Scotland cannot wait a few years for a wider reform of arts education, or even for a wider reform of music education, and so I am pleased to see there are discussion underway to try and find a short term solution to at least stop the situation getting any worse in the meantime.

In considering the issues, please review the 824 comments in favour of the petition.