

## TFN COMMENT

## A sea change in the political relationship

**THE Prime Minister's response to a question raised in parliament on how to save charities from the VAT increase next year, is very welcome to the voluntary sector.**

While members of the public believe that charities don't pay any tax, the reality is that they are footing a £1bn annual VAT bill. There are many problems with this, not least that it stops them competing with the public sector on public service contracts.

The battle to demonstrate that the third sector is ideally placed to deliver more public services has largely been won. Just last week in TFN, Scottish Secretary Michael Moore said: "The coalition programme spelt out that charities and social enterprises should have a much greater involvement in the running of public services."

Cameron has clearly realised that in order to do this, charities must be put on an equal footing with public services and this means providing a mechanism for them to claim back VAT.

This is a battle that many, not least the Charity Tax Group, have been fighting for years. During the last government it felt like the

sector was hitting its head against a brick wall, as the Treasury continually refused to consider VAT reform.

The voluntary sector will therefore be looking to the new government to come up with serious proposals on VAT reform as soon as possible. The looming reality of the hike in VAT to 20 per cent in January will mean an extra £150m burden on voluntary organisations. This is an extra cost that organisations can ill afford right now and it will certainly do little to move forward Cameron's Big Society vision.

Responding to the same question, Cameron described the term "third sector" as condescending instead referring, rather unctuously, to the "first sector". Whether or not this unlikely name change catches on, at least it shows that the new government is seeing the sector as a solution rather than a burden.

Whatever the results of the Big Society agenda and public spending cuts (and the impact of these on the sector), this shift in attitude heralds a permanent sea change in political approaches to the sector.

## The heat is on fuel poverty

**IT'S been a surprisingly warm summer in Scotland this year. Despite the odd rainy day, compared to last year, we've not got much to complain about. And after the bleakest winter in decades, it has come as a bit of a relief.**

For many of us though the relief is not just about being able to venture out of the house without a coat but in the respite it gives us from the burden of constantly growing energy bills. Even those who don't spend 10 per cent of their income on energy have struggled to budget over the last few years as prices have rocketed. To the 26 per cent of people who are classed as fuel poor, this burden can be overwhelming.

The Scottish Fuel Forum's annual report was very positive about the impact the government's Energy Assistance Package is having on people in Scotland, however it makes it very clear that current measures will not eliminate fuel poverty by 2016.

The government's line is that it is doing all it can, but that it isn't responsible for energy prices or benefits levels.

This is a fair point and with all the pulls on the public purse

right now, it is understandable that the government is not keen to commit to increasing spending in any area.

However, the problem is that it created legislation nine years ago that committed it to eliminate fuel poverty by 2016. Admittedly it was the former Scottish Executive rather than the SNP led current government that introduced this, but politicians must have believed they had the power to fulfill it at the time.

This agenda is also directly linked into the last year's Scottish Climate Change Act, which holds the government to reducing carbon emissions by 42 per cent by 2020 and 80 per cent by 2050. As more than a third of all carbon emissions in Scotland come from energy use in the home, unless the government tackles home energy waste, it is also unlikely to meet these targets.

In truth, the Scottish Government could do more to tackle fuel poverty, as the forum has outlined in its report. The clock is ticking now to both the 2016 target and the 2020 target, so, despite of, and even because of, the recession, the government needs to invest more time and money in tackling this now.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## SPPA encouraged by support for play based learning

SPPA is delighted to hear that Mike Russell, secretary for education and lifelong learning, stated during a visit to a nursery that the play based approach to learning is showing benefits in the crucial early years of children's lives, as the Curriculum for Excellence framework is embraced, and becomes embedded in practice in early years settings.

SPPA has long recognised and promoted the powerful contribution play makes to young children's all round learning and development. Community

based playgroups, toddler groups and under fives settings use play based learning, and provide rich play environments to stimulate and interest children to explore, experiment, practise and acquire skills, knowledge and understanding, and attributes which prepare them for learning throughout life.

Underpinning our work with community based early years services is the belief that play engages children in their own learning, enabling them to express their level of knowledge and understand-

ing, their ideas and feelings, in many different ways and it helps them to come to terms with the world in which they live. Our experience, over 40 years, has shown that children have a natural inclination to play and that through play they are encouraged to grow and develop at their own pace and gain the confidence to try things out and cope with new challenges.

IAN MCLAUGHLAN  
Chief executive  
Scottish Pre-school Play Association

## Jobless increase – "people must not be left behind"

CITIZENS Advice Scotland believes the government must make sure that vulnerable Scots are not left behind after it announced an increase in unemployment in Scotland.

Unemployment can have a disastrous impact on people's lives. Evidence from CABs across the country shows that unemployment can escalate existing problems for people, e.g. forcing many to fall into debt, suffer fuel poverty and lose their home.

Of course we need to see measures to get people into work. But our concern is what happens to those affected in the meantime. Every family in Scotland will know some-

one who is affected by unemployment. These people don't just need the promise of jobs tomorrow – they need help today. And that means continued support for the voluntary sector, which many see as their only lifeline in these difficult times.

Scotland's 83 Citizen Advice Bureaux dealt with just under a million issues last year and – due the fallout from the recession – are facing more demand than ever for financial advice.

The recession might technically be over, but its clear that its impact on vulnerable people in Scotland will continue for some time to come.

Many of these people have nowhere else

to turn. They must not be left behind.

KEITH DRYBURGH  
Citizens Advice Scotland

## Shetland is in Scotland too

SHETLAND is part of our country, so why was it missing from the map of Scotland shown in connection with an article on SCVO (Third Force News, 9 July)? Not acceptable!

R M ATKINSON  
Edinburgh

## PODIUM

ALEX MEIKLE

CONTRACTS DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY LINKS  
ROSEMOUNT LIFELONG LEARNING

## Funding for childcare and early intervention: neglected but essential for our future

**ONE of the striking anomalies in Britain, at least in terms of social welfare and social policy generally, is our effectively schizophrenic approach to childcare. Everyone agrees that providing good-quality childcare is vital in ensuring that children are vibrant, healthy, active and grow up to be good communicators and citizens. This is especially so for children who live in vulnerable families. Yet, no-one wants to pay for it.**

In the late 1990s, the National Treatment Outcome Research Study (NTORS) in England and Wales produced a comprehensive analysis of the effects of treatment and intervention in relation to addictions. NTORS found that every £1 spent on treatment and care saved the country £3 in the costs of law enforcement and imprisoning people. That's a good deal and proves how both cost-effective treatment and care is in relation to addiction, but also the importance of early intervention in dealing with substance misuse.

I know of no comparable figures for childcare, but it is self-evident that good-quality childcare within a stimulating environment allied to structured learning programmes such as Curriculum for Excellence will pay for themselves many times over.

For example, Rosemount Lifelong Learning located in the Royston area of North Glasgow runs a service, Family Links, which works with children and families affected by substance misuse (both drugs and alcohol). In partnership with other agencies, the service works towards healthy parent/children relationships, encouraging stable family life and providing a positive supporting environment for children as well as contributing to the prevention of relapse back into alcohol or drug use.

One of the most distinctive features of the service is to offer childcare facilities and activities that integrates vulnerable children, aged 5-12, from families with addictions within Rosemount's wider nursery, afterschool and holiday care programmes. The service has developed an innovative way of integrating vulnerable children from families with addictions where the children benefit from participation in a non stigmatising "normal" environment. The result has been improvements in parent and child relationships following participation in afterschool and holiday care which is a major factor preventing relapse into addiction and boosts self-esteem and self-confidence.

And this is the vital point which can be replicated elsewhere in relation to children from vulnerable families. Childcare is a cost-effective form of early intervention which can prevent problems developing later in life in terms of health costs, social work intervention, processing through the criminal justice system, the costs of keeping someone in prison etc. In terms of the Family Links service the benefits for the future are immense. Not only does the service help to bring a routine and normalcy back into what have been hitherto chaotic lives but by providing good, structured childcare along with parenting work, it can help to break the cycle of dependency and addiction across the generations.

But this important work and similar projects like it throughout Scotland are dependent on precarious and uncertain funding. Apart from a vital contribution from Fairer Scotland Funding, Family Links is entirely dependent on funding from grant-making trusts, which of course are time limited. The fact is that childcare services such as this play a vital and indispensable role which can benefit other services such as social work but who either don't have a budget for it or simply can't afford it.

If we are serious about early intervention as a means of preventing serious social problems arising later then we have to consider funding childcare as one of the main tools to help achieve this. To take one example, if every agency or childcare service in Scotland providing an after-school service were funded to provide a minimum of three places for vulnerable children, this could have a significant impact on the lives of children, families and communities.

At a time of serious spending cuts and threats to services, the danger is that childcare and early intervention fall off the radar even further and opportunities for effective early intervention are lost forever.

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