



**Devolution (Further Powers) Committee
Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill**

Written evidence from YouthLink Scotland

April 2015

Introduction

YouthLink Scotland welcomes the opportunity to submit written evidence to the Devolution (Further Powers) Committee to have our say on the Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill. In our response we express our support to the Bill as introduced, and welcome this commitment to positive change in Scotland's electoral future.

Background to YouthLink Scotland

YouthLink Scotland is the national agency for youth work. It is a membership organisation and is in the unique position of representing the interests and aspirations of youth work in both the voluntary and statutory sectors.

YouthLink Scotland champions the role and value of youth work, challenging government at national and local levels to invest in the development of the sector for the benefit of our young people. Our vision is of a youth work sector for Scotland that offers sustainable, dynamic and accessible youth work opportunities that support young people to become successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors, and responsible citizens.

Our Position on Votes at 16

As per our previous response to the Scottish Government on Scotland's Electoral Future, YouthLink Scotland continues to support the extension of the franchise to those aged 16 and 17 years old.

Our view is that young people should be involved in making decisions that directly affect them, and that one of the best ways of getting involved in decision-making is through voting. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) requires State Parties to support the rights of children to express their views freely in all matters that affect them. Since political decisions affect all members of society, including children and young people, this should be taken into account when considering the extension of the franchise. Article 12 also requires that the views of children are given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity, and Article 5 recognises the evolving capacities of children when exercising the rights enshrined in the UNCRC. Both Article 12 and 5 should be respected, protected and fulfilled in any decision on the voting age.

We believe that this Bill addresses the inequality that young people aged 16 and 17 years old have historically faced: the discrepancy between their democratic rights and responsibilities - 16 and 17 year olds

can join the armed forces, enter employment and be subject to taxation, get married and drive a car, yet they were deemed too immature to cast a vote in an election.

We know that this Bill is a commitment to Scotland's young people and by extending the franchise this is an additional way which will encourage active citizenship among young people. This engagement is vitally important for the health of our democracy. As outlined in General Comment no.9 to the UNCRC, if the participation of children and young people is to be effective and meaningful, it needs to be understood as a process and not as an individual event. This process should be ongoing and involve feedback and continuous dialogue, thus ensuring that young people feel respected and listened to and that engagement is truly meaningful.

The Bill and Policy Memorandum

General Comments

YouthLink Scotland extends its support to the Bill and Policy Memorandum as they have been introduced. In particular we welcome the following:

- The consideration that has been given to the protection of young people's personal information
- The speed at which this Bill has been developed to ensure it can commence as outlined on the 5 April 2016
- The development of a single register of voters which gives young voters equality of esteem as a permanent addition to Scotland's electoral future
- That young people can act as a Proxy voter – we think this is particularly empowering for young people who are young carers
- The decision not to penalise 14 and 15 year old attainers who have not responded to the canvass request
- The ability of the ERO to verify the identity of young voters using education records and a variety of other means in the absence of the National Insurance number.

Looked After Children

We are delighted with the inclusion of Section 15 of the Bill with regard to Looked After Children. It is very welcome to see this specific duty placed on each Local Authority in their role as corporate parents to promote awareness and take any other necessary action with regards to voter registration. We would however request that all Corporate Parents, as established in the Children and Young People's Act (2014), also consider what appropriate support or action they could take on this matter.

Other Considerations: Young Voter Education and Support

YouthLink Scotland would like to draw the attention of the committee to the need for Guidance for local education authorities with regards to young voter education during any given pre-election period. The experience of the Scottish Independence Referendum was a mixed one – with young people in different areas of Scotland being engaged in young voter education in different ways. We are aware of the work of the Committee to consider all the guidance which was issued by local authorities in advance of the referendum. We would urge for the development of a clear position of what local authority employees, in particular youth workers and teachers, can and cannot say or do during that period with regard to young voter education, support and political literacy activities.

We know that within the population of young people aged 16 and 17, there are those who need additional support and consideration– and we believe that youth worker, teachers, and other trusted professionals to be best placed to meet that need. We wish for those professionals to be able to do so safely and with the authority of their employers. Examples may include:

- Discussing and/or providing travel arrangement for young people to get to the polling place
- Supporting young people to attend a polling station within the school day
- Empowering young carers to be proxy voters for a parent if this is their wish
- Identifying young people who may wish to register anonymously due to issues of child protection or domestic violence and support them to do so
- Identifying young people and providing support to young people who may need additional support to participate in voting – for example to appoint a proxy, to act as a proxy, to discuss access to polling places, to discuss adaptations for young voters who are blind or partially sighted, to arrange postal votes for young people who feel unable to attend the polling place for any reason.

We welcome the committee’s direct engagement with young people and the publication of findings of this survey of 16 and 17 year olds about their experience of the Scottish Independence Referendum. In addition we would draw to the attention of the committee the research conducted by Jan Eichhorn at the University of Edinburgh which explored the question: “Who influences the formation of political attitudes in young people? Evidence from the Referendum on Scottish Independence¹.” The work concludes:

“While young persons’ confidence in political knowledge and understanding is enhanced by discussions in school, normatively based orientations, such as turning out to vote, appear to be influenced by parents. Most crucially, young people do not seem to simply take one single actor as information source when deciding on their orientation in political matters” (Eichhorn, 2014)

It is for this reason and those outlined above that YouthLink Scotland would request the Committee give consideration for the need for national Guidance on Young Voter Education and Political Literacy.

*For further information please contact Susan Hunter, Senior Policy and Research Officer.
shunter@youthlinkscotland.org or 0131 313 6815.*

¹ Eichhorn J et al (2014), [Who influences the formation of political attitudes and decisions in young people? Evidence from the referendum on Scottish independence](#). D|part – Think Tank for Political Participation