SCOTTISH INDEPENDENCE REFERENDUM (FRANCHISE) BILL
NATIONAL DEAF CHILDREN’S SOCIETY

Introduction

The National Deaf Children’s Society (NDCS) is the national charity dedicated to creating a world without barriers for deaf children and young people. NDCS Scotland estimates there are 3500 deaf children and young people in Scotland, 90% of whom have hearing parents or carers.

We use the term deaf to refer to all levels of childhood deafness including hearing loss in one ear, temporary hearing loss such as glue ear and also to refer to all types of communication methods, including British Sign Language.

Context

NDCS Scotland welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to Committee regarding the Scottish Independence Referendum (Franchise) Bill and in particular is keen to discuss how to maximise both the education and participation of young deaf people in the Scottish Independence Referendum proceedings.

NDCS Scotland welcomes the Scottish Independence Referendum (Franchise) Bill which is a significant step forward in terms of the rights of young people to vote. NDCS Scotland is keen to see the Bill make explicit provision to allow all 16 and 17 year olds to exercise this right, taking into account the needs and rights of young disabled people, such as those who are deaf.

There are currently an estimated 3500 deaf children and young people living in Scotland today. A deaf young person may have a mild, moderate, severe or profound hearing loss, use British Sign Language (BSL), and/ or communicate by speech. They will come from different backgrounds and have different support networks.

Everyday, young deaf people face serious barriers which impact on how easily they can engage and participate in our society. These barriers are often as simple as a lack of understanding of the needs of young deaf people and how to communicate with them.

Bill provision

NDCS Scotland believes it is essential that the Bill outline steps to ensure that deaf young people are included in such a historic moment for Scotland, one that may be fundamental to fostering a sense of citizenship and political engagement among our youth.

NDCS Scotland recommends that the Bill take proper account of the provisions laid out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) to ensure all disabled young people are being fully engaged. In particular, NDCS Scotland highlights Article 29 in relation to the participation of disabled people in political and public life.

This Article outlines action to be taken to guarantee that disabled people enjoy their political rights on an equal basis to others. Crucially, the Article outlines that voting procedures, facilities and materials are appropriate, accessible and easy to understand and use. This point is particularly significant when we consider the communication needs of deaf young people.
In the experience of NDCS Scotland, information and communication with young deaf people is best achieved when there is a clear understanding of the varied target audience. The needs of young deaf people can vary from confident individuals with mild hearing loss to more vulnerable individuals with additional complex needs and profound deafness. It is vital to reach out to them all, and to provide information and engagement opportunities that suit their communication needs, including those who use BSL as their first or preferred language.

Similarly, it is also important to understand that average literacy levels of deaf young people in Scotland are currently lower than their peers. It is important to make any messaging accessible, without being patronising, and to communicate information clearly and simply.

NDCS Scotland would also like to see schools and colleges as places to promote engagement in the Referendum. While more than 80% of deaf children are taught in a mainstream school they usually have little opportunity to interact fully with professionals who have an in-depth knowledge of their unique learning strategies. NDCS Scotland recommends that where promotion takes place in schools, due consideration is given to how accessible this information is for deaf young people.

In addition, NDCS Scotland recommends that efforts are made to engage with all young deaf people – this includes those who attend school at a specialist unit within a mainstream school or at a special grant-aided school.

NDCS Scotland is happy to share its wealth of experience in this area and recommend further best practice with regards to communication and engagement with young deaf people.

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