SCOTTISH INDEPENDENCE REFERENDUM (FRANCHISE) BILL
NATIONAL UNION OF STUDENTS (NUS) SCOTLAND

Introduction
NUS Scotland welcomes the opportunity to discuss how to ensure high participation levels of young people in the upcoming referendum. We have long campaigned for extending the vote to 16 and 17 year olds, and believe the inclusion of the franchise within the Edinburgh Agreement is a significant step towards achieving voting rights for 16 and 17 year olds in all elections in the UK.

It is very welcome to see this committee investigating how participation rates can be maximised among 16 and 17 year olds. We strongly hold the view that 16 and 17 year olds today are ready to engage and participate in both the referendum and democracy in full, having learnt the principles in compulsory citizenship education. We already know that young people are engaging in significant numbers, through being a local youth councillor, a member of the Scottish Youth Parliament or involvement with their students’ association.

Not only are 16 and 17 year olds by law able to make complex decisions and take on wide-ranging responsibilities, they are also showing in practice that they want to make a positive difference. By having the vote, 16 and 17 year olds will be able to raise issues that are persistently affecting young people in their area, and have a democratic say in the policies and candidates they believe would best serve them.

NUS Scotland has maintained support for all 16 and 17 year olds to have the vote in this referendum, and welcomes the committee’s steps towards extending the franchise in such a way that no 16 year old in Scotland at the time of referendum will be disenfranchised. We hope that the committee will put forward legislation on extending the franchise that leaves no room for confusion as to who can and cannot vote.

We also believe it is important that comprehensive efforts are made to educate young people who will be eligible to vote at the time of the referendum about how to register, and ensure they have the information and tools needed to take part in this historic vote with an unprecedented franchise.

In order to help make this possible, we support the extension of the duty on the Society of Local Authority Lawyers and Administrators in Scotland to promote the referendum to young people.

NUS Scotland also supports the unbiased promotion of referendum participation in schools and colleges, and would like to see polling places open on college and university campuses for the referendum.

We would also hope to see legislation help clarify for schools the importance of removing barriers to organisations that wish to provide unbiased information to young people.
Finally, we would urge the committee to work with Westminster colleagues to delay any implementation of changes to voting registration methods (specifically individual voter registration) until after the referendum, in order to make the registration process less confusing in the run up to the vote.

**Concern over partial extension of the franchise**
Sections 10 and 11 of the Memorandum of Agreement specifically refer to the issue of the franchise and how the vote could be extended to 16 and 17 year olds.

10. *The Scottish Government’s consultation on the referendum also set out a proposal for extending the franchise to allow 16 and 17 year-olds to vote in the referendum. It will be for the Scottish Government to decide whether to propose extending the franchise for this referendum and how that should be done. It will be for the Scottish Parliament to approve the referendum franchise, as it would be for any referendum on devolved matters.*

11. *The Scottish Government’s decision on what to propose to the Scottish Parliament will be informed by the analysis of responses to its consultation exercise and by practical considerations. The Order does not restrict the extension of the franchise in the case of this referendum.*

NUS Scotland, in its consultation response to the Scottish and Westminster Governments, expressed our support for extending the franchise for 16 and 17 year olds. In those responses, we outlined our concerns over a partial extension of the franchise.

NUS Scotland believes that only allowing some 16 and 17 year olds to vote would lead to confusion and disillusionment by young people, just as they are engaging in civic debate for the first time, and on a topic that will have great consequences for their future.

Methods that could allow all 16 and 17 year olds to vote, and which address child protection issues, have been discussed in pre-evidence provided to this committee, and we would welcome the implementation of procedures that would ensure a clean and clear extension of the vote.

We would therefore hope the Committee are able to ensure that the Electoral Commission be given the power to change its procedures in order to ensure votes at 16 is genuine votes at 16.

**A well-resourced registration and information campaign**
NUS Scotland has long believed that the extension of the franchise for all 16 and 17 year olds, for all elections in the UK, would be a huge step forward for democracy. Given the historic nature of the vote, and the worldwide stage it will place Scotland on, it is crucial that 16 and 17 year olds are encouraged, and enabled, to participate in high numbers.
NUS Scotland believes that young people who do not have the opportunity to vote could easily become disheartened, at a crucial time in their civic development. Equally, this vote presents a unique opportunity to involve young people in a democratic process that few around the world will ever experience. To make this a reality, NUS Scotland believes there needs to be sufficient time and resources devoted to educating and registering young people as far ahead of the referendum as possible.

NUS Scotland welcomes the decision to advance legislation extending the franchise long before the referendum vote takes place. However, we also believe that efforts to secure turnout must be well-organised and well-funded.

A first step towards ensuring that as many young people are reached as possible is by extending a duty on the Society of Local Authority Lawyers and Administrators in Scotland to promote the referendum to 16 and 17 year olds. By extending the duty of this organisation to promote not only elections but the referendum as well, we believe we will see even more young people reached out to and supported in exercising their newly extended democratic rights.

NUS Scotland would also like to see unbiased promotion of the referendum in schools and colleges. As the committee heard in pre-evidence, Guernsey was particularly successful in securing high turnout of 16 and 17 year olds. Despite the smaller sample size, this demonstrates that with adequate resources and innovative methods, high turnout can be achieved.

Although we would not support campaigning in schools, we do hope that legislation extending the franchise will also help clarify for schools the need to remove potential barriers to participation of young people, and ensure organisations that wish to provide unbiased information to young people have the ability to do so. As part of this effort, we would also like to see polling places opened on college and university campuses, in order that as many students as possible will find it as easy as possible to take part in this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Finally, we would call upon the committee to do everything in its power to urge Westminster to delay the implementation of legislation which would alter voter registration procedures until after the referendum. We believe changes to voter registration procedures this close to the referendum would not only divert resources elsewhere at a time it needs to be focused on the upcoming vote, but additionally it could cause confusion among potential voters and result in reduced turnout.

**Conclusion**

NUS Scotland welcomes the agreement forged by the Scottish and UK Government that will allow the franchise to be potentially expanded to allow 16 and 17 year olds the vote in the referendum.

We are keen to now see how the Scottish Government proposes to do this. Extending the franchise would empower young people to better engage in society and influence decisions that will define their future.
We now look for the committee to propose legislation that will overcome any hurdles to the allowing all 16 and 17 year olds the vote, and ensure the effort to register and inform young people ahead of the vote will well resourced, comprehensive and result in high turnout.

Mike Heffron
Press and Policy Officer
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