Summary

- SCVO believes that the Referendum debate ought to be an opportunity to open out discussion about the kind of country, economy and society people want to see. We are disappointed with the tone of the debate so far.

- Everyone ought to have a role in considering Scotland’s future; particular emphasis ought to be placed on engaging with and listening to the voices of people who are most marginalised in our communities.

- Participation in our democracy is at an all-time low reflecting an alienation from party politics and political decision making. The referendum ought to be an opportunity to revitalise public participation.

- Driving up voter registration and participation must be a strong priority. In particular, clear lines of responsibility and resourcing need to be established and agreed by parties, returning officers and the Electoral Commission.

- Lessons can be learned from elsewhere, particularly from Ireland, about community development campaigns on voter registration and participation, including initiatives for new citizens. There is still time to undertake this work so that everyone can be encouraged to take part.

Our briefing

SCVO welcomes the opportunity to input into the Bill and would like to contribute the following for members’ consideration:

This is an opportunity to move the debate beyond technical issues to a wider discussion about how we can encourage people to get involved in the debate, and ensure that the widest possible cross-section of Scottish society are registered and turn out to vote.

The debate so far

However, before we begin, we would like to take this opportunity to comment on the nature of the debate itself so far. SCVO has been disappointed with the tone of the debate up until now. The campaigns have tended to polarise the debate and have failed to give clear answers to important issues, leading to a perception of campaign dishonesty in the eyes of many ordinary people. There has also been a pressure on people engaging in the debate publically to declare which ‘side’ they are on, which has led to a lack of nuanced debate that is worthy of such a momentous decision as
deciding on the constitutional future of Scotland. The campaigns and parties must work harder to engage ordinary people. SCVO hopes that all involved in the debate find a way to open up the space for nuanced, thought-provoking, honest campaigning.

**Voter turnout and registration issues**

Moving on, SCVO believes that voting in elections is a crucial part of a healthy democracy. However, Electoral Commission research shows that levels of non-registration are higher among younger age groups and among some members of black and minority ethnic communities than in other groups. Voter turnout in recent times in Scotland has been lower than 50%, leading to serious questions about representation and legitimacy. Turnout in less affluent, more deprived, socio-economic areas is also far lower than that in affluent, white middle-class areas.

This is frankly unacceptable. SCVO strongly believes we have a duty to ensure this situation does not continue: we must ensure that 100% of eligible voters are aware of how to register and why they might wish to, and that those who are registered are inspired to vote. ‘Hard-to-reach’ potential voters must be targeted to ensure that the Referendum vote is undertaken by all. Driving up voter participation ought to be a national priority; even if a quarter or a third of our population decide not to vote, is that acceptable?

**Proven ways to improve voter engagement – lesson from Ireland**

Ireland has had some success in increasing voter turnout. Voting trends in Ireland declined from the 76% in 1969 to 62% in 2002. However they have risen in the two elections since and turnout was 70% in 2011. While there was a Government-led Active Citizenship programme in the late 2000s, some of their most successful initiatives seem to have been at the grassroots level. The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice, Active Citizenship programme involved a three-step process exploring with people the reasons to vote, how to register and how to vote; considered ways in which to take an informed stance on important issues; and presented an approach to choosing candidates on an informed basis. Based on 400 workshops in 24 of the 26 counties and 150 'trainers trained' in 15 years, voting trends increased between 12% and 31% in 6 selected areas.

**Suggested solutions to improve voter engagement in Scotland**

SCVO recently convened a round-table to consider voter participation in Scotland, chaired by Professor Charlie Jeffery from the University of Edinburgh, with representatives from the Electoral Commission, the STUC, the Electoral Reform Society, the Yes campaign, the Scottish Youth Parliament, and the third sector. Participants recognised that someone must be responsible for voter engagement and registration, and highlighted a range of engagement issues.

To achieve real improvement in registration, engagement and turnout in Scotland, those who attended the roundtable suggested that all communities be given the relevant resources to hold informed discussions about the Referendum in a participatory manner. The establishment, funding and resourcing of local groups of
people who can facilitate dialogue and learning in a neutral way – as in the Ireland example given above – is essential. Many community groups and local organisations are already starting to do this, something SCVO welcomes and is supporting. Moreover, academics also require the space to facilitate the sharing of evidence-based knowledge across Scotland for all, and media – especially local media – must be properly resourced to enable an informed debate to take place.

Traditionally, voter participation has been left to political parties but as we can see above, the issue is multi-faceted and needs community capacity building at various levels (locally as well as in different communities of interest). SCVO therefore recommends that communities be supported to undertake engagement activity, and that the Scottish and UK Governments set up a fund to support this.

**Future democracy**

SCVO would also like to take this opportunity to emphasise that the Referendum provides a chance to engage the population of Scotland with the political debate for future elections. Much like with the Olympics and increased sporting participation, SCVO believes the Referendum can leave a positive legacy of improved voter engagement for the future.

The Referendum will see the people of Scotland make one of the most important decisions that Scotland has seen in recent years. We all have a moral duty to ensure that as many people as possible participate in it in an informed way – building democracy for now and the future, and ensuring that the fate of Scotland is truly decided by all who live here.

SCVO
22 May 2013