Provided following oral evidence to the Referendum (Scotland) Bill Committee on 30 May 2013

Many thanks for inviting me to take part in the committee's roundtable session on the Referendum Bill, which captured the key issues around voter registration.

It was heartening to see that all the issues that we highlighted were emphasised throughout the recent parliamentary debate on the Franchise Bill. MSPs from all sides referred to the importance of increasing registration and participation, and of using this opportunity to improve turnout in future elections.

It is clear everyone recognises the need for engagement of potential voters as a good idea. The key question is what is going to be done about it and who is going to do it.

As I mentioned in my evidence, SCVO and the STUC have worked up a proposal on this matter following discussions with a range of civil society groups and political and public bodies.

I have attached the formal proposal which we will be submitting to the Scottish and UK Governments.

The aim is for a well-resourced voter registration campaign, which focuses on the people who traditionally don’t vote to make sure they are able to do so in the referendum.

We would both strongly urge the Committee to endorse it and include it within the report recommendations.

For background, the proposal came about following a round-table convened by SCVO 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 Poverty & Truth Commission, the Scottish Youth Parliament and the third sector. Unfortunately, Better Together were unable to attend but they are also aware of the proposal.

Some of the key issues raised were:

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

Driving up voter registration and participation must be a strong priority.

While many people’s view is that leading and co-ordinating awareness-raising is the role of the Electoral Commission, both the STUC and ourselves think that improving voter registration rates has to be led by well-established and trusted community groups, not a public body.

This type of engagement, especially with traditionally ‘hard-to reach’ groups needs to be run in a participatory, bottom-up manner, which will increase people’s engagement and long-term participation in the political process.

Dave Moxham from the STUC and I would be delighted to meet the Committee to discuss this matter further.

John Downie
12 June 2013
VOTER ENGAGEMENT PROPOSAL FROM SCVO AND STUC

Summary

Scottish society is clearly failing to engage politically. The last Scottish Government election registered turnout of only 50.6% in Scotland, (with just 37.7% turnout in Glasgow Shettleston for example), and just 39.7% in last year’s local elections. It is clear that something must be done now.

We believe that all communities must be given the relevant support to hold informed discussions about the referendum in a bottom-up, participatory manner. The resourcing of community groups and events that can facilitate dialogue in a neutral way is essential.

Currently some third sector organisations are organising such work with the resources available to them. This work is essential, not only to increase turn-out and engagement in the up-coming referendum and in future elections, but also to promote active citizenship. However, there is a limit to what some organisations can do given their resource.

SCVO and STUC therefore call on the UK and Scottish Governments to further fund this work. The aim would be to divert small grants quickly and efficiently to Scotland’s communities to enable them to facilitate debate and promote active participation. We understand that a number of Scottish organisations wish to assist in the delivery of this and we offer ourselves as administrative brokers in such a process.

Policy context and rationale

With low electoral turnout in Scotland (2012’s local authority elections having a turnout of just 39%), and the Electoral Commission’s research showing that young, urban, mobile and BME people regularly fail to register to vote, more needs to be done to engage the whole of Scotland in the debate and process for the upcoming referendum.

Evidence from the Electoral Commission suggests that, whilst voter registration efforts are important at all times, major electoral events provide a particular impetus to such campaigns. The referendum in 2014 provides a golden opportunity to achieve significant improvements in voter registration.

We believe it is essential that all communities are given the relevant resources to hold informed discussions about the referendum in a bottom-up, participatory manner; we feel engaging communities fully with the issues encourages them to register and then vote. The establishment, funding and resourcing of community groups and events that can facilitate dialogue in a neutral way is essential.
Such activity is not solely referendum-related – ensuring that we increase the number of registered and politically engaged people across Scotland should have a lasting effect on turnout in subsequent elections. This is particularly important given the enfranchisement of 16 and 17 year olds for the referendum vote, and the importance of creating a habit of voting amongst the youth population.

**The Proposal**

We believe that the Scottish and UK Government should act to ensure there is: a well-resourced voter registration campaign; objective information on what will happen post-referendum; and a concerted effort to engage with hard to reach groups.

In particular, we call on the UK and Scottish Government to support programmes such as Scottish Community Alliance's ‘Big Vote’ Referendum Road Show that seeks to enable debates on the referendum across Scotland through the use of local facilitators. They already have over 20 community organisations on board, and the buy-in of both Better Together and Yes Scotland. They are currently limited in the number of communities they can engage with due to funding constraints.

Work such as this, led by well-established, trusted community groups and run in a participatory, bottom-up manner, will increase people’s engagement in the most important decision that Scotland currently faces, as well as increasing interest in voting across all communities in Scotland.

The academic community should also be encouraged and supported to provide balanced and accessible information to which community organisations can be sign-posted if that is their wish.

SCVO and STUC propose that the UK and Scottish Government create a fund to support community activity around the referendum and voting. We have already spoken to representatives from various third sector organisations who would be interested in taking such work forward if resources were available.

SCVO and STUC would be happy to undertake the administration and governance of such a fund and scrutiny of project proposals. We would ensure that all money is directed to grassroots organisations. Funding would not go to support one campaign over another.

**Conclusion**

The referendum will see the people of Scotland make one of the most important political decisions in decades. However, voter turnout is low in Scotland, and there is no guarantee that there will be improved turnout at the referendum.

It is essential that people are both informed of the practicalities of voting, and feel engaged in the debate. Community-led projects, suited to local people and their
concerns, are an essential part of this, and yet communities are not being supported
to take part in this debate.

We believe that a specific fund to support grass-roots work in this area is essential. Only by doing this will we ensure that the fate of Scotland is truly decided by all who live here, and ensure that, whatever the outcome of the referendum, we have a strong, healthy democracy to move Scotland forward.