1 Introduction

1.1 Inclusion Scotland (IS) is a Scottish-wide network of self-organised groups of disabled people and disabled individuals. Currently over 70 organisations of disabled people and over five hundred individual disabled people are members. Inclusion Scotland’s main aim is to draw attention to the physical, social, economic, cultural and attitudinal barriers that affect disabled people’s everyday lives and to encourage a wider understanding of these issues throughout Scotland.

1.2 Disabled people, like all other citizens, wish to play their full part in shaping the political future of our nation. Therefore Inclusion Scotland welcomes the Committee’s invitation to provide evidence as the Referendum will provide a unique opportunity for disabled people to play an equal part in a “once in a lifetime” piece of decision-making.

1.3 It should also be recognised that the Scottish Government and Parliament have a duty, under the UN Convention on the Rights of Disabled People, to ensure that disabled people are enabled to participate equally in political life. Article 29 (Participation in political and public life) of the Convention states –

“States Parties shall guarantee to persons with disabilities political rights and the opportunity to enjoy them on an equal basis with others, and shall undertake to:

a. Ensure that persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in political and public life on an equal basis with others, directly or through freely chosen representatives, including the right and opportunity for persons with disabilities to vote and be elected, inter alia, by:

i. Ensuring that voting procedures, facilities and materials are appropriate, accessible and easy to understand and use; …” (our emphasis)

2 Barriers to Participation

2.1 Between 2007 and 2010 Inclusion Scotland worked in partnership with Leonard Cheshire Disability’s Citizenship Academy and the Electoral Reform Society to
promote voter registration amongst disabled people and to identify barriers to electoral participation¹.

2.2 We also brought together disabled people with Electoral Registration Officers’ staff from a number of local authorities at an event in Stirling to identify practical proposals aimed at increasing disabled people’s participation in future Scottish elections.

2.3 Several major obstacles to full and effective participation in elections have been identified by ourselves and in an earlier survey by Capability Scotland²:
   (i) the physical accessibility of polling stations
   (ii) the difficulties that those with visual impairments have in casting their ballots.
   (iii) the difficulties that some people with learning difficulties had in understanding electoral information
   (iv) the failure to provide electoral information in British Sign Language.

3 Physical Access to Polling Stations

3.1 As late as 2010 disabled people were still reporting difficulties in accessing some polling stations. Though there have been great improvements in reducing barriers, local authority staff (at our Stirling event) admitted that some polling stations were still not fully accessible to wheelchair users. We believe that only fully accessible buildings should be used as polling stations for the Referendum, noting that anything less than full accessibility could be in breach of Article 29 of the UNCRDP.

4 Visual Impairments & Ballot Papers

4.1 The UK Parliament’s Working Party on Electoral Procedures recommended in 1999 that election rules should be changed to allow the provision of large print posters of the ballot paper and ballot paper templates or polling aids in polling stations. However disabled people with visual impairments reported that this change had not really assisted them in casting their ballots.

4.2 This is because whilst the large print facsimile of the ballot paper can be read by many of those with limited vision it cannot itself be used as a ballot paper. This means that the disabled person, on many occasions, still cannot identify where they should be placing their cross. Moreover, polling station staff are under instructions not to assist those who ask for help in casting their vote.

² Polls apart 5: Disabled voters’ experiences in the 2007 Scottish election, (Capability Scotland, June 2007).
4.3 This has created an anomaly because those with physical impairments which prevent them from voting can be assisted in casting their ballot by a named individual whereas those with a visual impairment cannot.

4.4 Inclusion Scotland would urge the Committee and Scottish Government to address this anomaly as it cannot be fair that one group of disabled people are deemed worthy of assistance whereas another group are denied that self-same assistance. We would recommend that anyone reporting that they cannot cast their ballot because of an impairment or condition should be allowed to nominate a named individual to assist them regardless of the type of impairment that limits their ability in this area.

5 Easy Read Information

5.1 As Members of the Committee will recall there were particular issues surrounding the 2007 Scottish Parliament elections that were identified as being related to a lack of understanding of balloting procedures by those with learning disabilities. As such Capability recommended that more information on voting procedures should be provided in an ‘easy read’ format. Organisations of and for learning-disabled people have repeatedly called for this since then and we would concur with their pleas.

5.2 Easy Read not only renders information in a more accessible format for learning-disabled people but in fact assists everyone, but particularly those with literacy issues, to more fully understand information. Thus the provision of information in Easy Read on both the Referendum itself and balloting procedures will increase informed voter choice, surely something that those on both sides of the debate would welcome.

6 BSL Information

6.1 As Members of the Committee will also be aware members of the deaf community who use BSL consider themselves a cultural group within wider Scottish and UK society. As such they, rightly, demand that information should be provided to them in their own language.

6.2 In addition, the Electoral Commission have reported that they received representations from members of the deaf community regarding the lack of election information provided in British Sign Language. The Electoral Commission concluded that for future Scottish elections more needed to be done to ensure that electoral information was accessible to the BSL community. Inclusion Scotland would therefore recommend that information regarding the election and

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3 Polls apart 5: Disabled voters’ experiences in the 2007 Scottish election, (Capability Scotland, June 2007).

balloting procedures is produced in a variety of formats including Easy Read and BSL.

7 Conclusion

7.1 Disabled people are as passionately divided on the issue of Scotland’s future within the Union as any other section of Scottish society and as such Inclusion Scotland has no settled policy on independence. However disabled people are as one in demanding that they participate as equals in the Referendum debate and in balloting on Scotland’s future and they are supported in this by the UN Convention. Inclusion Scotland hope, and believe, that the Parliament and Government of Scotland will do all in their power to ensure that disabled people are thus enabled to participate as full citizens.

Inclusion Scotland
22 May 2013