Dear Mr Crawford,

National Guidance for Political Education and Literacy

We are writing in relation the Devolution (Further Powers) Committee’s consideration of the Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill. As you will be aware, our organisations recently provided evidence to the Committee demonstrating our support for the Bill. We would like to take this opportunity to further congratulate the Scottish Government and the Committee for the speed with which this legislation has been developed thus ensuring 16 and 17 year olds will be able to vote in the Scottish Parliament elections in May 2016.

As organisations that are committed to ensuring that young people develop into confident, informed and passionate citizens, we are confident that lowering the voting age will have a positive impact on their participation in wider civic society and further enhance their right to have a say in the issues that affect them.

However, we believe that there is a need to address additional issues around creating the conditions whereby young people have the information and confidence to avail of this opportunity, and ultimately feel empowered to fully participate in the democratic process.

Our view is that the significant engagement of young people was one of the greatest achievements of the referendum process. As organisations that carried out a substantial amount of young voter engagement work, in an impartial manner, prior to the referendum, we have seen firsthand the important role schools, colleges and universities, youth work services and other formal and informal educational settings play in providing opportunities for young people to learn about, and engage with,
democratic processes. This view has been further supported by research undertaken by academics in the University of Edinburgh and dpart think tank.

In the areas of Scotland where the potential for this role was fully realised, young people had a much richer experience. However, we note that due to the wide variety of approaches adopted at individual local authority level, the level and quality of engagement with young people varied significantly across Scotland.

We believe that all young people, no matter where they live, should have equal access to high quality and well resourced political and civic education, regardless in which setting that education takes place.

We understand the concerns at a local level about the need to ensure a balanced approach, and the need to protect teachers, youth workers and other professionals who work with young people. However, we firmly believe that political and civic education, and engagement with elected representatives, can be delivered and facilitated in an impartial manner which seeks to empower young people to make an informed decision for themselves.

In addition, the research cited above has further demonstrated that there is no evidence to suggest that young people are “politicised” by the information they receive in an educational setting, and indeed reinforces the positive impact these settings have.

You will be aware that in our evidence to the Committee, we put forward the proposal to develop national guidance for political education and literacy. We believe that such guidance, developed in partnership between young people, practitioners and policy-makers, would assist local authorities, schools, youth work services and others with facilitating this type of engagement and providing this type of education.

Guidance of this nature would provide national standards and guidelines which would ensure practitioners were protected, while creating the safe space and conditions in which young people’s relationship with civic society and democratic processes is nurtured and encouraged.

By lowering the voting age, and also utilising all of the expertise and passion within the education and youth work sectors, we can create a generation of passionate, active and engaged citizens who are keen to consistently play their part in the democratic process.

As leading organisations in Scotland working with young people, we would be well placed to advise and shape this process, ensuring young people are equal partners in its development.
We would be grateful if you, or your Committee, would consider writing to the Scottish Government to establish its position on this proposal. We would also welcome the opportunity to meet with you, or the Committee, further to discuss this in more detail.

Yours sincerely,

Louise Cameron MSYP
Chair of the Scottish Youth Parliament
Scottish Youth Parliament

Louise Macdonald OBE
CEO
Young Scot

Jim Sweeney
Chief Executive
YouthLink Scotland