Inclusion Scotland Written Evidence: Extending the Vote to 16/17 Year Olds

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 on extending the right to vote to 16/17 years olds.

2 Past work on Electoral Engagement

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 participation.

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

2.3 Some of the disabled people attending our engagement events had never voted before and many were not even registered to vote. There were a variety of reasons for this including disengagement from the political process. However some learning disabled people had reached their fifties without ever having voted. This was because they had been actively discouraged from doing so by “professional” workers. This is, unfortunately, a reflection on past and continuing attitudes to disabled people which has resulted in them being treated as incapable of making their own choices and being somewhat less than “citizens”.

Referendum and Smith Commission Process

3.1 The Referendum Campaign resulted in an unprecedented level of public engagement with, and participation in, the political process. Inclusion Scotland were very heartened to see information materials from both the “Yes” and “No” campaigns produced in a variety of accessible formats. This greatly assisted in stirring disabled people’s interest in the Referendum and then making informed decisions on how to vote.

3.2 There were also voter registration drives by both campaigns, local authorities, the media and press (such as the Daily Record), Third Sector organisations (such as Inclusion Scotland and SCVO) and others. Perhaps particular tribute should be paid to the schools, teachers, educational support workers, youth workers parents and others who made such great efforts to ensure that 16 and 17 year olds did not lose out on their historic opportunity to participate for the first time in the electoral process.

3.3 Research evidence from Norway and Austria suggests that 16 and 17 year-old first-time voters are more likely to vote than older first-time voters, and people that vote in the first election they are eligible to vote in are more likely to vote in the future. Post Referendum polling also indicates that 16 and 17 year olds were more likely to have voted than 18-24 year olds.

3.4 Large scale and numerous public meetings and debates in communities throughout Scotland also helped to generate interest, participation and registration to vote. For example Glasgow Disability Alliance staged a Referendum debate where over 350 disabled people attended and participated. All of this activity resulted in 95% of the Scottish electorate being registered and nearly 85% of those eligible actually voting.

3.5 This coincidentally means that the Referendum also saw the highest proportion of Scots disabled people being registered and voting also. We think this is of enormous importance for the future as, for once, at least, disabled people felt fully included in the electoral process with their opinions and choices valued as highly as any other citizen’s.

3.6 Inclusion Scotland also engaged with disabled people in the aftermath of the Referendum on the issue of the devolution of further powers as part of the Smith Commission process. Young disabled people participated in both of our engagement events in Glasgow and Inverness and also by responding to an online survey that we conducted. Our partner organisations in these events - the Scottish Disability Equality Forum and Values Into Action Scotland – should be commended

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3 Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies Since 1945, Mark N. Franklin, Cambridge Uni. Press, 2004
4 Seventy-five percent of 16-17 year olds voted compared to just 54% of 18-24 year olds, ICM phone survey, of 1852 people, Sept/Oct 2014, [http://blog.whatscotlandthinks.org/2014/12/many-16-17-year-olds-voted/](http://blog.whatscotlandthinks.org/2014/12/many-16-17-year-olds-voted/)
for the work that they did to support young disabled adults to attend and fully participate in these events.

3.7 A number of Cantaybridge College staff and students journeyed by mini-bus to our engagement event in Inverness and we had the opportunity to speak to them in greater depth about what having the right to vote at 16 & 17 years old had meant to them.

3.8 The feedback that we received was that it had been enormously important to them to be treated as adults and given the right to vote. Every single young person we asked said that it had built their confidence about making the transition from school to adulthood and given them increased hope about their own future prospects of being treated equally in society.

3.9 All of them also spoke about their exhilaration in being allowed to vote and their eagerness to do it again. In fact some 16 year olds were depressed and somewhat despondent when they found that although they had voted in the Referendum they would not be permitted to do so at this year's General Election.

4 Conclusion

4.1 It is important that the confidence that young disabled people gained from being given the right to vote is built upon. The ages of 16 and 17 years are a time when the majority of young disabled people leave school. Unfortunately the majority do not then make the transition to work. Given this it is important to them to make other transitions into adult life as this increases their confidence and sense of self-worth. Therefore Inclusion Scotland welcomes the proposal to extend voting rights to 16 and 17 year olds for future elections for the Scottish Parliament.

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