Devolution (Further Powers) Committee  
Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill  
Young Scot Written Statement

1. Background

Young Scot is the national youth information and citizenship charity. We provide young people, aged 11-26, with a mixture of information, ideas and incentives to help them become confident, informed and active citizens.

Our impact is achieved through a variety of activities, including provision of relevant and accessible high quality online and offline information, online and face-to-face engagement and outreach, plus Scotland’s Youth Smartcard – the Young Scot National Entitlement Card – to access services and opportunities. There are over 580,000 Young Scot cardholders across Scotland.

As a universal service, Young Scot works towards a vision where Scotland’s young people can:

- **INFORM**: Make informed decisions to support transitions
- **ACCESS**: Enjoy healthy, active positive lifestyles and opportunities
- **ENGAGE**: Contribute as assets to their communities
- **PROGRESS**: Reach positive destinations that give them the opportunity to maximise their aspirations
- **CELEBRATE**: Be celebrated as citizens – locally, nationally and globally

2. Our position on the reduction of the voting age

In line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), we believe that young people should be involved in making decisions that directly affect them, and that one of the best ways of getting involved in decision-making is through voting. Therefore, Young Scot strongly supports the extension of the franchise for all elections to those aged 16 and 17.

Following the Scottish Independence Referendum, Young Scot joined together with 14 other national charities working with children and young people across Scotland to call on the
Smith Commission to recommend the extension of the franchise for all future elections. Published in October 2014, that joint statement said:

“Scotland will be viewed as a world leader by fully engaging and empowering its 16 and 17 year olds as fully franchised citizens active in the political life of the country.

The past few months have clearly marked a new era of democratic engagement. The Independence Referendum engaged young people in the political landscape in an unprecedented way. Over 100,000 16 and 17 years olds registered to vote. Evidence shows they were amongst the most informed, engaged and questioning voters, carrying out their own research and using multiple sources in order to come to their own personal decision. Many young individuals dedicated countless hours to campaign for both sides. On September 18th 2014, queues of young people entered polling stations for the first time in order to have their say on Scotland’s future, valuing that responsibility and casting their vote.

We, as an alliance of Scottish Youth Charities, representing 1.1 million young people, are united in our belief that we cannot let young people down and must continue to fully engage them in the democratic process. We as a country need to capture this emergent enthusiasm for the democratic process. We need to stimulate their ongoing involvement and we need to value their contribution.

We are therefore calling on Lord Smith to recommend a mechanism for the franchise for all future elections in Scotland to be extended to 16 and 17 year olds.

The Smith Commission should build in enfranchisement of our young people as a key principle and a core value in a fully engaged and effective devolved administration.

This ground-breaking enfranchisement of young people will ensure their voices are heard now and for generations to come.

We, as national third sector organisations working with young people in communities across Scotland, stand ready to support them.”

The organisations which were part of the alliance were: Aberlour Child Care Trust, Barnardo’s Scotland, The Boys’ Brigade Scotland, Children in Scotland, Children’s Parliament, Girlguiding Scotland, Girls’ Brigade Scotland, LGBT Youth Scotland, NUS Scotland, Scottish Youth Parliament, Scouts Scotland, Who Cares? Scotland, Youth Scotland, Young Scot and YouthLink Scotland. The statement was also supported by the Electoral Reform Society and Scotland’s Commissioner for Children and Young People.
3. Specific comments on the Bill and Policy Memorandum

The introduction of the Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill is a significant step forward in electoral reform, supporting greater involvement of young people in the democratic process. Young Scot supports the Bill and Policy Memorandum as introduced and in particular we welcome:

- The speed at which this Bill has been developed to ensure young people can vote in the 2016 Scottish Parliament Elections;
- That appropriate consideration has been given to the protection of young people’s personal information;
- The decision not to penalise those aged under 16 who have not responded to the canvass request;
- That young people can act as a Proxy voter – which is likely to be particularly empowering for young people who are young carers; and
- That specific consideration has been given to looked after young people by placing a duty on each Local Authority to support voter registration in their role as corporate parents.

We also welcome the approach taken by the Committee to engaging young people in the development of the Bill, having carried a survey of 16 and 17 year old first time voters about their experience of the Scottish Independence Referendum.

4. Supporting implementation

Research undertaken throughout the Referendum has provided a great deal of insight into how best to support young people to engage in the democratic process. Jan Eichorn\(^1\) of the University of Edinburgh summarised some of the key learning points and insights as:

- “Young people are as interested in politics as adults”
- “Young people engage with politics in conversations when actual issues are concerned”
- “Parents do not strongly influence young people’s political perceptions and confidence (apart from normative views on the importance to vote)”
- “Political perceptions of young people and not substantially related to parental educational background”
- “Discussing political issues in schools increases pupils confidence in ways nothing else does”

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\(^1\) Dr Jan Eichorn (2014), d|part, “How lowering the voting age to 16 can be an opportunity to improve youth political engagement: Lessons learned from the Scottish Independence Referendum” 
• “After the engaged referendum process, more young people feel close to a political party”

• “Teaching classes dealing with political structures itself is not sufficient to enhance political understanding and engagement. Schools need to allow for informed political discussions in the classroom.”

There is now a significant opportunity to build on this learning and the enfranchisement of young people in Scotland to demonstrate that the trend of decreasing youth participation in elections, as seen in many other countries, can be reversed. Young Scot will continue to work with partners, including the Electoral Commission, the Scottish Youth Parliament and YouthLink Scotland, to encourage young people – and first time voters in particular – to register to vote. We will also use our communications channels and engagement methods to ensure they are informed and able to participate effectively in the democratic process.

4. Further information

For more information on the information in this document, please contact:

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