I understand that it was not possible for you to take up an offer to give oral evidence to the Referendum (Scotland) Bill Committee on the child protection implications of the Scottish Independence Referendum (Franchise) Bill. The Committee therefore agreed, at its meeting on 14 March, to write to you to seek written evidence instead.

The Franchise Bill sets out, at section 2, who is entitled to vote in the referendum on independence. Among other criteria, those entitled to vote will have to be at least 16 years old on the date of the referendum. In practice, this means Electoral Registration Officers will have to collect the details of 15-year olds, and possibly a small number of 14-year olds depending on the date of the referendum (which has not yet been announced). Sections 4 to 9 of the Bill concern the registration of young people, and in particular create a register of young voters and set out how information on the register is to be handled, make provision for declaration of local connection for young people, and detail the canvass form for young people (see Schedule 2).

The Committee understands the Scottish Government undertook some informal consultation on the draft Franchise Bill with the Scottish Child Protection Committee Chairs Forum and some other organisations, and that views were sought on who should have access to the “marked register” and specific arrangements for vulnerable young people to allow them to register to vote and vote without disclosing their address.

Members of the Committee are particularly interested in whether any concerns you may have had have been addressed by the Bill as introduced. In addition, the Committee is interested to know whether young people who are the subject of a non-disclosure order, or are vulnerable more generally, are afforded sufficient protection by the provisions of the Bill. It would be helpful to know whether, in your view, the canvass form is designed adequately to take account of child protection issues. The Committee has also been taking evidence about providing information and raising awareness in schools about the registration of young people, and you may have views on this from a child protection perspective.

A copy of the Bill and its accompanying documents can be found on the Parliament’s website: http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/Bills/60464.aspx

Official reports of the evidence already taken by the Committee can be accessed via the Committee’s webpage: http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/55798.aspx

I would welcome any views you or members of the forum may have, either on the issues mentioned above or any other issues arising from the Bill to which you wish to draw attention.
The Committee will be taking evidence from the Deputy First Minister at its meeting on 28 March, and it would be particularly helpful if any comments you have could be received by Friday 22 March, to enable them to be circulated for that meeting. If you wish to comment but cannot meet that deadline, I suggest you contact the Committee clerks to discuss timing, using the contact details at the top of this letter.

18 March 2013