

Our Ref: JD/LH

8 January 2013

Ms. Nicola Sturgeon MSP
Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities
Scottish Parliament
St. Andrew's House
Regent Road
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

Dear Ms Sturgeon,

Consultation on the Draft Referendum Franchise (Scotland) Bill

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the consultation on extending the right of 16 and 17 years olds to vote in the Independence referendum. CELCIS is the Centre for Excellence for Looked after Children in Scotland based at the University of Strathclyde. Together with partners, we are working to improve the lives of all looked after children in Scotland. We are keen to ensure as set out in your accompanying documents that all 16 and 17 year olds will have their new electoral rights realised; the inclusion of looked after young people will require additional and tailored efforts.

There have been considerable debates and contributions from youth organisations on lowering the voting age. We particularly value the campaigning work of the Scottish Youth Parliament on this issue over many years. Our contribution to this consultation will focus on key issues affecting 'looked after' young people and careleavers in Scotland to ensure that they have an equitable opportunity to fully participate in the democratic process.

According to the most recent Scottish Government figures, 1395 young people aged between 16 and 17 years old were legally 'looked after' in Scotland as of July 2011. Just over a quarter of young people lived in a residential setting, including residential schools and secure accommodation (26%) and over a quarter lived with foster carers (27%). Around 30% of young people resided with their parents and 14% were in kinship care settings. As highlighted in the work of the Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People¹, many young people leave the care system at the age of 16. As of July 2011, 1463 young people beyond school leaving age ceased to be looked after by local authorities i.e. 'left care'. A total of 3662 careleavers up to the age of 21 were eligible for aftercare services, of these 1610 were aged between 15 and 17.

Key Areas to Consider

- **Change in living arrangements for looked after young people and careleavers**
The collation of data for Register of Young Voters as proposed in December 2013 for the referendum in autumn 2014 presents some specific challenges for including this group of young people. At the age of 16, many looked after young people become careleavers and will change their living arrangements. Furthermore, it is not unusual for this group to experience multiple placement moves and around one in eight experience one spell or more of homelessness. This is also relevant for looked after young people who have previously lived with birth parents, in kinship care placements and in foster care. Therefore, a household survey approach has a bias towards young people in stable placements living in the same household.

¹ SCCYP (2008) Sweet 16? The Age of Leaving Care in Scotland, Edinburgh: SCCYP.

- **16 and 17 year olds who do not live in a household**
The household canvas conducted by Electoral Registration Officers should consider the inclusion of young people living in a range of residential settings, including residential children's homes, secure accommodation, residential schools and semi-independent living settings. All residential providers will be registered with the Care Inspectorate. It should be noted that these locations are sensitive and any distribution of location information to campaigning groups would not be welcomed. We welcome young people being able to register without disclosing their address but note that concerted efforts will be required to adequately raise awareness of this provision.
- **Inclusion of looked after disabled young people**
Specific attention should be given to ensure the equitable participation of disabled 16 and 17 year olds in the referendum process. As of July 2011, 17% of young people eligible for aftercare services had a disability (although recognised to be an underestimation given that data was not known for 18%). The majority of these young people will be competent to vote in the referendum; however, the Government will need to ensure that this group are not overlooked and marginalized in the process due to their place of residence or their communication needs not being met. Specific attention should be given to the role of professionals and carers who can support young people's participation.
- **Equitable participation - Appropriate and accessible information**
Young people with care experiences are less likely to be engaged in education, training and employment than their peers. The provision of information about the referendum will need to take into account the variety of residences young people may reside in, appropriate use of language and format, and young people's potential additional support needs in engaging in the process.
- **A right for all to be heard**
The majority of looked after young people and careleavers have experienced severe adversity in their lives. Stigma surrounding young people in care is a common concern. We join you in being committed to ensuring that young people with care experiences are equally valued as citizens and their voices on the future of Scotland are heard.

We look forward to future developments in this area. Please do not hesitate to contact us if we can be of further assistance (0141 444 8513).

Yours sincerely



Jennifer Davidson
Director
Centre for Excellence for Looked after Children in Scotland (CEL CIS)