

Political literacy and the referendum on independence for Scotland

Purpose and audience

The purpose of this briefing is to provide information on sources of information and guidance for anyone interested in developing young people's political literacy around the referendum on independence for Scotland. The audience is anyone with a responsibility for - or interest in - young people's education including teachers, head teachers, Education Authorities, community learning practitioners, and college/university staff. This briefing has been issued by the Association of Directors in Education Scotland (ADES), Education Scotland, The Electoral Commission, the Electoral Management Board for Scotland and School Leaders Scotland.

Background

A referendum on independence for Scotland is planned to take place on 18 September 2014. It is the Scottish Government's intention to allow 16 and 17 year olds to vote in the referendum. The arrangements for ensuring that those young people who will turn 16 on or before the date of the poll can register to vote are set out in a Franchise Bill which is expected to be passed by the Scottish Parliament by the end of June 2013.

The inclusion of 16 and 17 year olds in the franchise for the referendum raises a number of important questions about their participation. Young people will source a lot of their information about the referendum from the media, campaigners, their friends and family. This is a natural and important part of how public debate will be conducted at the referendum. However, there are certain aspects of the referendum, and how young people receive information about it, where it will be important for there to be a consistent approach that ensures they receive information in a clear, neutral and accessible way.

These can be grouped into two broad areas:

- Ensuring young people are registered and know how to cast their vote
- Ensuring that young people are politically literate and are equipped to engage in the referendum debate.

A number of different organisations have important roles to play in relation to these aspects of the referendum and the purpose of this note is set out what those roles are and how we intend to fulfil them.

Other professionals working with young people can play a crucial role in supporting young people to develop the confidence and skills they need to participate in the referendum and this note also sets out what resources will be available to help anyone – including parties and campaigners - who want to make sure that young people have the information they need.

1. Ensuring young people are registered and know how to cast their vote

Registering young people

Most voters are added to the electoral register by completing and returning the voter registration form which is sent to all households during the 'annual canvass' each autumn. This year the canvass will take place from 1 October and the Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) will send an additional 'young voter registration form' to collect and confirm the details of any 15 year olds in the house who will reach their 16th birthday on or before 18 September 2014. EROs will pre-print the forms with the details of any eligible young person known to be resident at that address and they will request this information either from education authorities or occasionally directly from schools.

Details gathered from all the young voter forms returned to the ERO during the canvass will be used to compile a young voters' register which will only be used for the purposes of the independence referendum. EROs will not be able to add any young person if the form is not returned even if they are known to be resident at that address. Any eligible young person who does not return the household form will still be able to register as long as they complete a registration form and return it to their ERO by midnight on 3 September 2014.

Who is responsible for this:

- Registering young people is primarily the responsibility of Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) and the Electoral Commission will provide them with guidance and set standards for how they should do this. This guidance will be issued by the end of June 2013.
- The Electoral Commission will be running awareness raising activity aimed at 15-17 year olds to provide them with the information they need to make sure they are registered. This activity would run from the beginning of the autumn canvass and is in addition to the mass public awareness campaign that will be take place nearer to the referendum.
- Education Scotland will be working with educational establishments to raise awareness and promote electoral registration.

- Anyone else who works with young people and wants to support them to participate in the referendum Resources available:
- Registration forms will be sent directly to every house this autumn by local EROs
- EROs will be able to supply registration forms to schools, colleges and universities, for those young people who were not registered during the canvass and some local EROs may offer schools visits or assistance at educational events.
- Information on registering to vote and printable registration forms from the Electoral Commission's '[aboutmyvote](#)' website. This will be available from September 2013.
- Communication activity from Education Scotland to build awareness of young people's entitlement to register to vote.

Explaining how to vote

To be able to participate in the referendum all voters will need access to voter information including:

- the date of the referendum
- how to fill in the ballot paper
- how to vote by post or by proxy
- polling station opening hours

Young people voting for the first time may be particularly apprehensive about the voting process and may want to know what happens when they arrive at the polling station including what to do if they make a mistake on their ballot paper or what assistance is available to disabled voters.

The Electoral Commission will be running a mass public awareness campaign in the run-up to the referendum in the summer of 2014. The campaign is expected to include TV, radio and online advertising and an information booklet sent to every household in Scotland.

The Electoral Commission has asked the Scottish and UK Governments to clarify for voters what would happen next in the event of a Yes or No vote at the referendum. If this clarity is provided it would be included in the Commission's public awareness campaign, along with other information about how to participate, but the Commission will not seek to explain the issues or campaign arguments.

Who is responsible for this:

- The Electoral Commission will be responsible for the national public information campaign
- The Chief Counting Officer and Counting Officers (who will be running the referendum) will also have an important role in raising awareness locally about these aspects of the referendum
- Anyone else who works with young people and wants to support them to participate in the referendum

Resources available:

- Electoral Commission's information booklet. This will be sent to every household in Scotland in the run-up to the referendum and will also be available online.
- www.aboutmyvote.co.uk. This website will be updated with information about the referendum from September 2013.

2. Ensuring young people understand the issues and are able to make an informed choice

Supporting young people to learn about the referendum

Introducing the referendum as a topic provides opportunity for learning across the curriculum. While there are obvious links to the social studies subjects the referendum topic can be used more widely to support the four capacities of the Curriculum for Excellence in enabling each child or young person to be a successful learner, a confident individual, a responsible citizen and an effective contributor.

Who is responsible for this:

- Education Scotland is responsible for providing nationally available teaching resources and case studies to support the development of political literacy around the referendum.
- Councils and schools are responsible for ensuring that materials being used, and the learning and teaching approaches are of a high quality and balanced nature.

Resources available

- Information about the issues at the referendum will be available from a range of different sources, including the campaign organisations and the UK and Scottish Governments.
- Education Scotland will publish 'CFE Briefing 14: Political Literacy', by the end of August 2013. This will provide clear guidance on approaches to promoting political literacy. It will also introduce the context for resources that will be developed over the coming months.
- Education Scotland webpages which will provide ready access to teaching resources, guidance, case studies and links to information on the referendum.

Providing guidance to support teachers and other professionals working with young people

While education on the referendum offers many opportunities for developing young people as active citizens who are equipped to engage in the debate about Scotland's future, it may also expose professionals to challenge if any information or activities are perceived to be weighted towards one side of the debate over the other. Many campaigners may also want to bring their arguments directly to young people in schools or youth work settings and those professionals allowing access for campaigners will need to be able to evidence a consistent approach to granting requests. It will be important for professionals to be supported in this work by clear guidance on impartiality and policies on access to young people by campaigners and these should also be communicated to referendum campaigners.

Who is responsible for this:

- Education Scotland, ADES and School Leaders Scotland will be taking a collaborative approach to providing advice and guidance to practitioners, head teachers and Education Authorities. This will follow the publication of CFE Briefing 15 which provides initial advice on ensuring impartiality in the context of political literacy. It will be issued by the end of August 2013.

Providing guidance to all council staff

Prior to each electoral event councils issue their own code of conduct to staff to ensure that the council acts at all times in a politically neutral way and this will also be the case for the referendum. The key principles are:

- Council staff must by law act in a politically neutral way at all times.
- There is particular sensitivity around this political neutrality in the run-up to an election or referendum.

- Particular care needs to be taken to ensure that any events, publicity or other communications are politically neutral during a pre-election or pre-referendum period.
- Council facilities and resources must not be used, or appear to be used, in support of a political party, an election candidate or a particular campaign in a referendum.
- Unless otherwise stated, it should be assumed that normal council business will continue.

This guidance will be issued by or on behalf of Chief Executives who have local responsibility for ensuring that standards are being met by council employees, in this case specifically in educational settings. In the case of schools and other educational establishments, Head teachers and heads of establishment should seek clearance and guidance from Directors of Education if they receive requests for Referendum related activities by outside bodies before agreeing to them.

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