

“It’s our Scotland just as much as anyone else’s”

People with learning disabilities and the Scottish Referendum

Scotland has just been through the biggest democratic process in its history. It has enjoyed records levels of participation with an additional 1 million people registering to vote and an over 89% actually voting. And following the result there remains an ongoing process of involvement with membership of some political parties soaring and other organisations enjoying a wide range of public support

Since the announcement of the referendum in 2012, the Learning Disability Alliance Scotland was keen to maximise the involvement of people with learning disabilities in the process. We have had a good record of involving people with learning disabilities in campaigns over issues that matter to them and some work with people over the various elections to the Scottish and UK Parliaments.

Two of our Stronger Together groups (Glasgow and Stirling) began the process of looking at the issues concerned in the referendum. Stronger Together groups are activist groups for people with learning disabilities who have experience in advocacy groups or service provider’s participation groups where they can discuss issues of direct concern.

Early discussion soon established that there were already strong opinions on the issue with many people having fixed positions. But a large number of people unsurprisingly found they didn’t really understand the issues.

Good information was hard to get to start with. Neither camp published Easy Read information until late into the campaign. So some of our activist groups prepared their own Easy Read information. They worked through the arguments being used by both the YES and No campaigns and voted on which ones they thought were most important to people with learning disabilities. This was then put into an easy read pamphlet using a cartoon characters.

In the summer of 2013 the groups had wanted to host traditional style Husting meetings which could then be videoed and used to inform others in different groups. But speakers proved unreliable and there was a period of frustration as several meetings of the groups went by either with last minute or no apologies from booked speakers.

Finally two members of the Glasgow group went off to the Scottish Parliament to interview Jackie Baillie from Labour who runs the Cross-Party Group on Learning Disabilities and Joan McAlpine of the SNP, whose sister has Down’s syndrome and put together a short video outlining what difference the referendum would make for people with learning disabilities.

The contributions from the politicians turned out to be more useful than a general debate would have been. Both were able to refer to contemporary issues such as welfare reform and health and relate their comments to people with learning disabilities.

The material was now combined into a workshop by the Glasgow group. A series of questions based on the easy read material was drawn up. Most of the questions all multiple choice and linked to a remote voting system similar to that used in the “Ask the Audience” section. Following each question the results would be displayed on the screen allowing everyone to share the results.

A number of small group questions were asked as well. Those taking part in the workshops were able to identify their reasons for voting yes or for voting no. There was a further question on what areas people wanted more information on. These questions were important because we intended from the start for the workshops to be part of a process that used these questions to help other people decide.

4 members of the group volunteered to co-present the workshop depending on time and location. And the workshop was offered up to a range of collective advocacy and service user participation groups around Scotland.

The workshop programme ran for over 12 months with 52 workshops delivered to over 700 people with learning disabilities from Ellon in the north to Newton Stewart in the south of Scotland. The groups ranged in size from as small as four or as large as eighty nine.

We started from the basis that people with learning disabilities can decide how they vote on any basis. There should be no “understanding” test. Often people with learning disabilities have a barrier put against them that says ‘you don’t really understand, and therefore you can’t vote’. If people with learning disabilities like the look of a particular politician and wanted to trust them, why not? We put this to the test with a Voting slide featuring Pictures of the Prime Minister, David Cameron and the First Minister, Alex Salmond.

The early feedback was good with one person telling us – “you’re better than that lot on the telly.”

The range of argument identified in the small discussion groups were wide ranging.

The **Kirkintilloch Ceartas** workshop identified the following reasons for voting Yes.

- Opportunity for a fairer system of benefits
- Opportunity for Scottish people to be more a part of Europe
- Scottish don’t have much say in affairs of UK & therefore the UN
- Opportunity for greater development of hydro power and other renewables
- Renewable energy resources
- We have a large source of renewable energy
- The people of Scotland would choose their own road
- Oil wealth
- Economy will improve
- One man’s voice would be bigger in an independent Scotland
- Scotland will have lots of talent
- Scotland would be a lot more independent if they had a lot of money.

Idem Lewis from Glasgow was one of the Co-presenters and is voting YES.

“This way we will get the parliament we vote for and it’s easier to get hold of our politicians in Edinburgh than if they were away at Westminster.

“I am not convinced by the offer of new powers for the Scottish Parliament. English based politicians might not want this and it won’t happen.”

The **ARK Housing Association National Group** identified the following reasons for voting No.

- Will we need a passport?

- How long would it take to set up a new currency
- How long will the oil last
- Would we be forced to join the Euro
- Changes to support and benefits if we were independent
- Quite happy the way it is!
- There would be a cutting of public services if we vote no
- I want to stay in Britain because I like it the way it is
- I don't want to be different – keep in
- I believe there would still be a bedroom tax if independent
- More cuts to support services if independent

After 15 workshops the replies on what “more information” was needed were compiled and grouped into similar questions. Both the Stirling and the Glasgow groups helped to put together the Easy Read answers for the top ten issues. It was by this time January 2014 becoming clear to both of these groups there was no such thing as simple more information - there was differing more information by the Yes camp and more information by the No camp. The pamphlet was laid out with a single issue such as “What will happen to the currency?” split between arguments from Yes Scotland and from Better Together.

There were characteristics in each of the workshops. One was delivered to an employment support service for young people with learning disabilities run by Momentum in the east end of Glasgow. All the young people were in the 17-19 age group. The young people were highly sceptical about the workshop and indicated before it started that they weren't interested – it was just a compulsory part of their work programme. In the first question asked in the workshop 12 out of the 17 young people said either that they didn't care about the referendum or hadn't thought about it. This feels reflective of a general disengagement from politics by young people. But by the end of the workshop 88% had decided that they were going to vote either Yes or No.

The Turning Point Scotland Annual Conference workshop ended up being in front of the whole conference rather than a smaller workshop. Seventy four people with learning disabilities supported by fifteen members of staff took part in a sometimes raucous and heated debate. The workshop featured an audio question where participants rate both God Save the Queen and Flower of Scotland. This saw the audience split with part standing saluting while others swayed and waved as in a football ground. Now many of the audience were confident to argue their views to more complicated questions.

In addition to being used at the workshops, the pamphlets were also offered to a range of organisations and services which worked with people with learning disabilities. The first 2,000 pamphlets went within 6 weeks and a second print run was ordered.

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Demand for the workshops grew beyond our capacity to meet it and all the resources were made available on our website including a version of the workshop that used coloured cards instead of the voting handsets. The webpage received over 13,000 unique visitors over a period of 3 months.

But we also knew that many people with learning disabilities would not be able to use Easy Read information without the support of staff or carers. So we asked participants in the early workshops to record 60 seconds of whatever they wanted to say about the referendum. 38 people took part in the recording and 20 people made it into the final DVD. The DVD was a balance of Yes and No and other comments and copies were given to everyone who came to subsequent workshops.

Each group was asked to vote at the end of the workshop on their intentions in the referendum and the results collated. This could not be a traditional style of opinion poll. It was conducted slowly over a 12 month period. But it does give some indication of what people with learning disabilities thought. 37 workshops had a majority for Yes, 10 a majority for No and 5 were evenly divided

A total of 721 people voted in the poll. 400 (55.5%) voted Yes – 207 (28.7%) voted No and 114 (15.8%) were still Don't Knows at the end of the workshop.