

ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL

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COMMITTEE	Council
DATE	31 October 2013
LEAD OFFICER	Chief Executive
TITLE OF REPORT	Scottish Independence Referendum – schools activities
REPORT NUMBER	OCE/13/029

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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

The report brings before the Council guidelines for schools activities in relation to the Scottish Independence Referendum to be held on 18 September 2014.

2. RECOMMENDATION

That the Council agrees the following expectations for schools activities in relation to the Scottish Independence Referendum:-

- i) schools will facilitate the work of the Counting Officer and relevant organisations in reaching 15 to 17 year olds in school with information on voter registration and related matters;
- ii) in developing and delivering learning and teaching activities schools will be mindful of the advice and resources on offer from Education Scotland and other relevant organisations; and
- iii) in inviting representatives of campaign organisations to engage directly in school with 15 to 17 year olds, schools will be able to evidence a consistent and balanced approach.

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The report has no specific financial implications.

4. OTHER IMPLICATIONS

The Scottish Independence Referendum will be governed by the Scottish Independence Referendum (Franchise) Act 2103 which received Royal Assent on 7 August 2013 and the Scottish Independence Referendum Bill which is expected to receive Royal Assent before the end of December 2013.

## 5. BACKGROUND/MAIN ISSUES

The Scottish Independence Referendum will be held on 18 September 2014. The franchise for the vote has been extended to include those who are 16 and 17 on the date of the poll. Consequently, given that many of these potential voters are currently in full-time school education, it is felt that there is a requirement to ensure that efforts within schools to raise awareness of the Referendum amongst this target group of 15 to 17 year olds are clearly structured on the basis that information provided is accurate, balanced and consistent.

The Chief Executive as Counting Officer in Aberdeen City has a responsibility to enhance public awareness of the Referendum and how to engage in it. In discharging this responsibility she will be mindful of the advice and support provided by both the Electoral Commission and the Electoral Management Board for Scotland.

The Electoral Commission is working closely with the Electoral Registration Officer in developing and delivering specific publicity activity during the annual canvass which began earlier this month designed to ensure that 15 to 17 year olds are aware that they are eligible to vote in the Referendum, but that they also understand that they need to be registered in order to do so, are aware how to register and know the deadline that applies to the process.

The Electoral Commission is working closely with Education Scotland, the Association of Directors in Education Scotland (ADES) and School Leaders Scotland to develop and share materials and to co-ordinate activity in schools. In addition, the Electoral Registration Officer with responsibility for Aberdeen City will be providing information for City schools and will make himself available to brief appropriate groups of educators on these matters should there be interest.

The expectation is that schools within Aberdeen City will facilitate the work of relevant organisations in reaching 15 to 17 year olds in school with the messages relating to voter registration.

In the run up to the Referendum in the summer of 2014, the focus of the public awareness campaign messages will shift to ensuring that eligible voters understand the mechanics of voting, either in a polling station or by post. Again, the expectation is that schools within Aberdeen City will work with the Counting Officer and others to ensure that these messages reach 15 to 17 year old potential voters.

In addition to the requirement to ensure that the extension of the franchise and that the arrangements voter registration are understood by those in school who will be 16 or over on the date of the poll, it is recognised that within schools there will be a desire to ensure that pupils understand the issues and are able to make an informed choice in casting their vote.

Education Scotland has recently published Curriculum for Excellence Briefing 14 on Political Literacy and further resources are to follow to assist in learning and teaching in relation to the Referendum. In addition, Education Scotland, ADES and School Leaders Scotland are taking a collaborative approach to providing advice and guidance to practitioners, head teachers and Education Authorities in granting access to schools for campaigners. The expectation is that schools in Aberdeen City will work to this guidance once it becomes available.

In the meantime, learning and teaching with regard to the Referendum (including any involvement of campaigners invited into school) will be delivered within the clear parameters set out ahead of each electoral event in the guidance issued by the Chief Executive/Returning Officer. In particular namely, that Council staff must by law act in a politically neutral way at all times and that Council facilities and resources must not be used in support of a political party or a particular campaign.

It is entirely appropriate for schools to invite representatives from the campaigns on either side of the Referendum debate to engage directly with pupils as part of the learning and teaching activity in place within the school. The expectation will be that each school will be able to evidence a consistent and balanced approach in its issuing of such invitations.

It is envisaged that sensitivity around this political neutrality in relation to schools-based activities will heighten in the final weeks of the Referendum campaign with the new term beginning just over four weeks before polling day. It is recognised that there may be an increase in requests for visits to and events at schools and the pre-election guidance issued by the Chief Executive will reflect this.

## 6. IMPACT

The subject matter of the report concerns the Chief Executive's role as Counting Officer for the Scottish Independence Referendum. It is likely to be of some public interest.

## 7. MANAGEMENT OF RISK

The report seeks to address the requirement to ensure that within the City's schools young people receive balanced and accurate information in relation to the Scottish Independence Referendum.

## 8. BACKGROUND PAPERS

None.

9. REPORT AUTHOR DETAILS

Ciaran Monaghan  
Head of Service, Office of Chief Executive  
[cmonaghan@aberdeencity.gov.uk](mailto:cmonaghan@aberdeencity.gov.uk)  
01224 522293