Action for Children Response to the Commission on Parliamentary Reform for the Scottish Parliament

**Background**

After the May 2016 Scottish Parliamentary elections, incoming Presiding Officer Ken Macintosh MSP established a Commission on Parliamentary Reform. A panel of members of the commission were appointed and are led by John McCormick as Chair.

The Commission on Parliamentary Reform wants to hear what key stakeholders, such as Action for Children, think about how the Scottish Parliament is working and about what improvements should be made.

The Commission was set up to look at three areas:

1. How the Scottish Parliament engages with the people of Scotland;
2. The identity of the Scottish Parliament, as distinct from the Scottish Government; and
3. Whether the right ‘checks and balances’ are in place to ensure effective parliamentary business.

**About Action for Children**

Action for Children Scotland works with more than 14,000 children, young people, parents and carers each year. Based across Scotland, our 84 services provide a range of interventions and assistance in terms of:

- Youth Homelessness
- Disability Respite
- Intensive Family Support
- Support for Young Carers
- Alcohol and Substance misuse
- Youth Employment
- Criminal Justice

We help transform the lives of thousands of children and young people each year and we’ve been doing so for over 60 years in Scotland. For more information, visit actionforchildren.org.uk or follow us on Twitter @actn4childrScot.

**Complexities in hearing the voices of ALL disadvantaged children and young people**

Hearing the voices of ALL disadvantaged children and young people is no easy process. Nor should it be treated lightly, especially as there are a number of complexities involved. A number of young people in our residential and short breaks services have behaviour and communication difficulties. Also, there is variation in terms of number of young people who are interested in participating or are confident in even doing so. This makes using traditional tools i.e. spoken words to communicate quite difficult.

Action for Children works to ensure that we hear all the voices of the children, young people, and families we support. We want to be inclusive as possible. Therefore, we utilise innovative approaches and technologies to achieve this. Action for Children uses the following communication tools to support those with additional needs:

- PECS – this is commonly used by 80% of the children and young people we support with communication needs. It is used to provide structure in life such as mapping out a child and young person’s day i.e. waking up, having breakfast, brushing teeth, going to the park etc. The use of illustrations helps children, young people, and supporting adults to effectively communicate about their needs such as wanting to go swimming, or have something to eat etc.
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- Talking Mats – a communication tool used to help children and young people with communication barriers to let supporting adults know about how life is for them. Helps them to express themselves i.e. likes, dislikes, feelings when doing so vocally is not an option.

- Signalong – a simplified version of sign language which is also used in schools. This helps children, young people and supporting adults to make requests from each other.

Therefore, Action for Children would strongly recommend to the Commission and to the Parliament to strongly consider how it communicates to and engages with all groups in society including disadvantaged children and young people who may lack interest, lack confidence, or have behaviour, communication and learning difficulties. We would support making use of some of the aforementioned communication tools being used in addressing this.

**Action for Children’s Response**

Action for Children welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the inquiry being conducted by the Commission on Parliamentary Reform. We have consulted our staff and service users across Scotland in developing our responses below with regards to the Commission’s remit:

**Engaging with Parliament**

Action for Children has worked with the Scottish Parliament and MSPs from across Scotland since the Parliament was created in its current form in 1999. We have hosted a number of MSPs on service visits to learn more about our work and directly engage with the children, young people and families that we support. This engagement has allowed Action for Children to develop our advocacy work by working with MSPs who have dealt with individual cases or have written to the Scottish Government and asked parliamentary questions on our behalf.

As always, Action for Children would welcome more MSPs to visit our services and engage with our work. We would also welcome list MSPs and relevant constituency MSPs holding more Regional Parliamentary Meetings whereby our service users and staff based in the respective regions could attend to discuss key issues and concerns.

Paul Carberry, Director of Action for Children Scotland, led ‘Time for Reflection’ at the Scottish Parliament on Tuesday 27 September 2016 during which he called on parliamentarians to involve disadvantaged children and young people in decision making and ensure that their voices, and that of their families and communities, is also heard.

Furthermore, a number of our services have engaged with the Parliament through visiting the Parliament. Our staff have contributed to the work of committee hearings through submitting written and oral evidence. The Parliament has hosted various events and receptions to celebrate the work of Action for Children, such as our 60th Anniversary in 2015 and the publication of an evaluation report of our ‘Roots of Empathy’ programme. Action for Children’s Policy and Campaigns Department has ensured MSPs receive topical briefings before debates and parliamentary questions are asked relating to key public policy issues affecting disadvantaged children, young people, and their families and communities.

Action for Children would also like to explore the opportunity of the Scottish Parliament’s Information Centre (SPICe) being allowed to collaborate more with the third sector in terms of sharing research information and building the evidence base jointly. Action for Children notes the very helpful topical information and briefings that are publically available on the parliamentary website but it would also be helpful to have access to SPICe colleagues to discuss complex issues or share information. For Action for Children, we could, within the parameters of Data Protection and Confidentiality, also offer
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SPICE colleagues access to, or help by sharing our evidence base through our services, programmes, and data gathering systems.

Differentiating Parliament from Government

Action for Children found that not all of its service users and staff were aware of, or even understood, the difference between the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government. Those who were deeply interested in Politics and Government, or whose job it was to engage with the Scottish Democratic institutions i.e. senior leaders, and the policy and campaigns team, did know about and understand the difference.

Therefore, Action for Children would encourage the Scottish Parliament to explore how the difference between Government and Parliament can be better explained and add to existing material which can be found on the parliamentary website. For example, using innovative digital and print guides, more games and quizzes, and videos on social media channels to name but a few approaches that can be explored.

The Right Checks and Balances

Having the right and effective checks and balances in place is pivotal to a thriving democracy and fair society. Action for Children would therefore welcome ways to strengthen this. For example, First Minister Question Time, could perhaps explore separating this into two weekly events. One session for party leaders to question our First Minister with the other opportunity focusing on constituency and regional issues. This second opportunity to question the First Minister could also be used for business and the third sector to feed in questions to parliamentarians to ask on their behalf.

Conclusion

Action for Children welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the work of the Commission on Parliamentary Reform. Our responses have been based on engagement with our staff and service users across Scotland and we look forward to seeing what the Commission recommends to the Scottish Parliament.

Contact Information

If you would like to discuss anything in this submission further, please contact:

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