**Open letter to members of Government**

Dear Ministers and Government Officials,

After failing to push its plebiscite legislation through the Senate last week, the Turnbull Government has announced it will be conducting a voluntary postal vote. The non-binding optional survey that will be carried out by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) to determine whether LGBTI people have equal rights or not, is reportedly occurring in September.

People with disabilities know what it is like to have rights withheld, for tradition, fear of the unknown or because they are simply valued less in society. The topic of marriage is particularly relevant to the experiences of the disability community. Many who have a learning disability can have their right to marry so seriously interfered with it is a denial of their basic human rights. People are quick to make prejudiced and ill-informed judgments about what people with a learning disability can and can't do. This is largely tied to a wider battle of allowing people with disabilities to have a family.

This ‘postal plebiscite’ is expensive. When funding is being pulled from essential services, including the disability sector, it is insulting to spend so much on something that has the same binding affect as an opinion poll – especially when all polls to date have indicated ‘Yes’ to marriage equality. The postal vote is also unhealthy for the wellbeing of the LGBTI people, forcing a historically oppressed minority to literally plead with the majority for the same rights. Given the vast number of people with mental health issues in both the LGBTI, disability, and youth populace this is a reckless and ignorant move by the Government. This vote does not provide respectful, democratic discussion but rather a platform for those opposed to misinform the general public and spread hate about LGBTI people.

As an organisation which represents young people, who overwhelmingly agree with same-sex marriage in Australia, we believe it is our responsibility to speak up for the right to vote without stress. The ABS and government have left those with a disability as an afterthought in this ‘democratic’ process. There has been a gross lack of information provided to the disability community about how they will be able to vote in an accessible and stress-free way.

Last week our Committee Chair, Jesse Williams, wanted to promote how young people with disabilities could vote, and what accessible measures were in place. When searching the ABS website there was no section on accessibility. When he called the number the person on the phone was seemingly lost as to what to say before stating “well it isn’t compulsory so they don’t have to do it”. While this statement is true, and the voting is not compulsory it was disgraceful that this expensive democratic process was quickly abandoned. Young people with disabilities should be valued voices in the community, and may want to vote – the disability community has fought hard to move away from the paternalistic barriers placed in front of us. We have a voice and have the right to use it. When the worker was pressed for a response they stated that the ABS was “working on its measures and would be available on the website”. For a vote in September, this does not leave a great deal of time for those with disabilities to have certainty and be able to prepare. The Government and ABS has failed to consider people with disabilities and their accessibility is an afterthought.

After extensive searching we found the ABS submission to the parliamentary inquiry – not a very advertised document. There are some good accessibility measures proposed in this document but there are also questions which YDAN would like to be addressed:

1. When will the accessibility measures be advertised and the public notified?
2. The document states that “Eligible Australians in these categories will be able to request a secure access code from the ABS” these are defined as those Australians overseas, remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities, Australian Government and Defence Force Personnel deployed overseas, culturally and linguistically diverse Australians, people who are blind, who have low vision or another disability, and older Australians. What is the process for requesting a code?
3. When and how will the information and processes be distributed to those living with disabilities in Australia?

These questions have arisen because officials have failed to consider people with disabilities as equal citizens in this vote. They have not provided adequate information and have caused undue stress to young people with disabilities. Lastly, YDAN would like to apologise to those in the LGBTI community for any hurtful comments and negative campaigns that may arise from this postal vote. In particular, we would like to lend our support to young people who are likely to be affected and remind them that they are not alone and have the support of a nation. We implore all politicians to vote yes in this vote – and remember that all people, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity or disability deserve to be treated as equal.

Sincerely,

**Youth Disability Advocacy Network Committee**