

Votes@16 consultation Youth Citizenship Commission

A response from the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS)

December 2008

Introduction

1. The National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS) is the independent voice of the voluntary youth sector in England. A diverse network of over 170 national voluntary youth organisations and regional and local youth networks, NCVYS has been working since 1936 to raise the profile of youth work, share good practice and influence policy that has an impact on young people and the organisations that support them.
2. The NCVYS network reflects the diverse range of voluntary organisations working with young people at community, local, regional and national level. Most of our members offer opportunities to engage in challenging activities or develop creative talents. They also support young people to become active in their communities and offer opportunities for their voice to be heard. Some offer interventions to prevent or tackle specific issues such as homelessness or offending behaviour. Others offer counselling, advice, guidance and information. All contribute to young people's personal and social development; some also engage with spiritual development.
3. This paper was researched and written by Kathryn Aston, Resource and Information Intern at NCVYS, October to December 2008.
4. For more information on any element of this paper, please contact NCVYS's Policy Officer, Hannah Dobbin on 020 7278 1041.

Context

5. In order to inform a response to the Youth Citizenship Commission's *votes@16 consultation*¹, NCVYS carried out an online poll with its membership to consider whether the voting age should be lowered from 18 to 16 years old.
6. Currently the minimum voting age is 18 years old. The consultation explored whether 16 and 17 year olds should be allowed to vote in local and general elections and what measures the government could take to encourage voting if the current age was reduced.
7. The poll was carried out in November 2008. 41 people responded to the poll, a mixture of young people and adults from NCVYS member organisations.
8. This briefing paper provides a summary of key findings resulting from the responses received.
9. This briefing paper also draws on the wide-ranging experience of the NCVYS membership representing children and young people through their own organisational activity and local democratic processes.

Key findings

10. 71% of respondents supported the reduction in the voting age from 18 to 16 years old. This supports the views of other voluntary and community youth organisations such as the British Youth Council, Electoral Reform Society, UK Youth Parliament and the Votes at 16 Coalition.
11. 73% of respondents thought that the voting age should be lowered to 16 in General elections.
12. 80% of respondents thought that the voting age should be lowered to 16 in Local elections.
13. 61% of respondents thought that the voting age should be lowered to 16 years old in European elections.
14. 71% of respondents thought that the voting age should be lowered to 16 years old in Mayoral elections.
15. 74% of respondents thought that lowering the voting age would encourage young people to participate in elections.

Key comments

16. This section highlights issues raised by the *votes@16 consultation* and key comments received through the NCVYS poll.

Should the voting age should be reduced from 18 to 16 years old?

17. 71% of respondents were in favour of reducing the vote from 18 to 16 years old. This indicates that young people are interested in engaging with the electoral process. One respondent highlighted that some young people are interested in political issues and would like to have their views represented:

¹ Further information on the Youth Citizenship Commission, and at the time of writing the *votes@16 consultation* is available via: <http://www.ycc.uk.net/votes/>

Young people have strong views and have the right to be represented. A lot of policies that are created by the government directly affect young people. We should have the right to control certain aspects of our lives.

18. In some cases, young people could be seen to suffer under a double standard of having adult responsibilities but not rights. For example, they can leave home, get a job, pay taxes and get married with parental consent but still cannot vote. One respondent commented that:

.... all 16 year olds have most of the same responsibilities as 18 year olds and are mature enough to choose someone who will make decisions that affect them. The decisions MPs make affect everybody especially issues such as education and therefore it is relevant to a 16 year old.

19. However, those who argued against lowering the voting age (15%) believed that 16 and 17 olds are not mature enough to understand political issues and therefore exercise the right to vote responsibly. One respondent highlighted the diversity in the maturity of 16 year olds and that this 'has a chance to even out by the time they reach 18'.

20. Another respondent commented that 'maturity' is actually hard to define and while some young people mature and develop definitive opinions below this age, people's opinions and thoughts continue to develop throughout their lives:

I feel that it's unlikely that the majority of 16 and 17 year olds would have sufficiently formed political opinions to vote responsibly in an election. That said, there will definitely be a proportion of the population who are sufficiently mature to undertake to vote seriously, so I'm uncertain as to whether a lowering of the age would be a positive or negative step.

21. Some respondents cited that although at 16 young people can get married, move out of home and pay taxes, that the minimum age for various other rights and responsibilities is 18. Furthermore, not all of these rights are directly comparable with the right to vote or stand at elections.

22. A few respondents were undecided as to whether the voting age should be reduced. Some felt that they needed more political education and guidance through schools to make informed decisions and gain a better understanding as to how the political system works.

Do you think the voting age should be lowered to 16 in all elections (General, Local, European, Mayoral etc.)?

23. Many respondents argued that it would be unjust to change the law and allow young people to use their vote in one type of election and not the others as these are all elections that directly affect young people; 'one cannot be allowed a voice in one arena and denied it in another'.

24. A few respondents suggested lowering the voting age for local elections only or initially, and if there is substantial turnout by those aged 16 and 17 years old, the franchise could be extended to General and other elections:

Even where a young person may not be able to vote responsibly at a national level, they are still entitled to have their say in the running of local government, and I feel that permitting young people to vote in local elections would help encourage young people to get involved in politics, ready to vote in general elections.

25. Several respondents emphasised the importance of the participation of young people in Mayoral and European elections; 'Particularly Europe, because so few realise the importance of our being in Europe'.

Do you think lowering the voting age might encourage young people to take part in elections?

26. One of the most worrying features of modern elections has been low, and decreasing, turnout levels. Low participation leads to questionable legitimacy and should be a source of constant worry for our elected politicians and their parties. The lowest turnout levels are always to be found among the youngest voting age groups, this suggests that younger voters may be becoming disengaged from the political process.
27. According to NCVYS's survey, 74% of respondents feel that reducing the voting age to 16 would stop young people from feeling excluded from politics by providing them with the opportunity to have a real influence over the political process through having a say in shaping policies that affect them. However, the language used in politics and the information available would have to be young person-friendly so that young people can engage effectively.
28. Many respondents argued that lowering the voting age would give politicians a real reason to respect the desires of young people and be more responsive to political issues affecting their lives. Of these, jobs and wages, crime and drugs, education and the environment were most frequently mentioned.

If young people realise that they have the ability to affect decisions and the right to vote it would cause political parties to start looking to benefit younger people, therefore encouraging young people to express their opinions more often.

29. Many respondents highlighted the need for including young people in the political process as early as possible in order to create a basis for greater political engagement in later life.
30. Those who disagreed thought that lowering the voting age would not make any difference in voter turnout in young people or may actually have an adverse affect or create a more unstable and less effective political system:

There are a lot of young people who obviously just don't care about the community enough to vote. The risk of parties entering on default is too great for this risk to be taken.

If the voting age were to be lowered, what measures should the Government take to ensure young people register and exercise their right to vote?

31. One method highlighted in response to this question was that young people should be able to choose other, more convenient ways to register their right to vote. For example,

this could be achieved through a free telephone registration service, or the ability to register through postal voting, through the internet or by SMS text service.

32. It was also suggested that increased political educational lessons in schools and teachers encouraging local MPs or local councillors to visit schools would also encourage young people to vote. Some schools already carry out mock elections.
33. Some participants recognised the potential role of voluntary and community organisations that have young people as members in promoting the importance of using the right to vote.
34. Sufficient and accessible information was highlighted as being an essential tool to enable young people to make informed decisions about the parties and their policies. Advertising through various media channels was considered important by some respondents in getting messages across to young people.

What more can be done to encourage new electors to vote?

35. It appears that young people are drawn to charismatic politicians. Seven respondents mentioned the success of Barak Obama in America where young people voted in higher numbers than ever before:

Look at Barack Obama and the young vote that he has managed to ignite. Maybe it's not about the voter but who they are voting for that is the problem - a sense that politicians fail the public and are disconnected rather than vice versa.

36. Many young people felt that political candidates lack sharp distinctions from one another, and therefore do not capture the attention of young people. One respondent highlighted:

Changing the political system is impossible. None of my politics class actually wants to vote because a vote for any major party is as good as a vote for any other major party. The Conservatives, Labour and the Lib Democrats are all the same in our eyes.

37. More education and information about the importance of using your vote and the ability to affect change was considered necessary in order encourage young people to turnout at elections. Five respondents mentioned that parties' political manifestos needed to be simplified and information on parties' policies needed to be made more accessible to young people.
38. Involvement in local politics and voluntary and community organisation was considered important in increasing political participation and interest. More young people are now becoming engaged in local community campaigns and other political activities. One respondent commented that Government and electoral administrative bodies should be:

Working closely with the third sector to promote positive change, as it is often these 'informal' relationships that can have the most influence on young people.

What issues may arise if the voting age is lowered to 16? For example around the funding and administration of elections and education, advice and information for young people?

39. Respondents felt that changing the voting age would have a number of resource and administrative implications such as educating a new generation of those eligible to vote and a need for additional government funding to enable administrative changes to be made.
40. The Electoral Commission noted that 'Financial analysis suggested that there would be a marginal increase in the running costs of the registration process to reflect the larger number of eligible electors'². Some respondents saw this increase as not comparable to the positive benefits to young people of lowering the vote.
41. Some respondents thought that there might be various administration implications if the voting age is lowered, for example around registration, poll workers, polling places and election equipment. One respondent commented that voting hours and polling stations would need to be accessible to young people who go to school, college or work.
42. As highlighted previously, citizenship education was seen as one way of improving young people's knowledge and awareness of the political process:

There needs to be more education on the subject within school. Topics such as drugs and sexual health are taught over and over, and yet I have been given no knowledge on how my country is run, or what different parties stand for.

43. There are also many other ways which can develop young people's political knowledge, awareness and understanding. One respondent commented:

Education and advice should be given at schools, colleges and voluntary organisations. Any area that young people will access should be used. It is important to remember not everyone goes on to further education and therefore there must be another way to connect with people who leave education at 16. This could be done through workplaces. An informative, youth-friendly website could also be created. The issue could be incorporated into youth TV shows such as T4.

Next steps

44. This briefing will be sent to inform the work of the Youth Citizenship Commission³. The Commission's website is continually updated with information and developments around the votes at 16 debate.

² Youth Citizenship Commission (2008) *Old enough to make a mark? Should the voting age be lowered to 16?* is available to download via: <http://www.ycc.uk.net/votes/ycc.pdf>

³ Further information on the Youth Citizenship Commission is available via: <http://www.ycc.uk.net/>