Mr David Dixon – written evidence (CCE0015)

Clearly people will engage better if they understand the system, and how change can be achieved under it. A compulsory GCSE paper on levels of government and electoral systems, maybe covering such things as the judicial system and freedom of information as well, would be useful.

This would be important education prior to exercising the right to vote, if it remains from age 18: to lower this would result in people being entitled to vote before having learned what it is all about. Looking back, I recognise that I would not have been able at a younger age to make an informed decision on how to vote. I only had a vote when 21, and recall no sense of deprivation at not being able to vote earlier; but with the age of majority now 18, it is now the appropriate age from which to be able to vote.

Conversely, an upper age limit for voting should be considered: it caused some resentment among the young that the old – to whom it would make less difference - outvoted the majority of younger people who were of the view of that the UK should stay in the EU. In my view this resentment was justified, and one cause of distrust of politics. Perhaps 80 would be the right threshold: I say this despite being among the oldies!

Far more important if one wants greater involvement in the political process is abolition of “first past the post”. It has long been recognised that this gives the power to change governments only to those living in a minority of constituencies; if (say) 120, 80% of the population are effectively disenfranchised in parliamentary elections. Where I live, one party regularly has a large majority (18,000 in 2017); my vote had no influence on the outcome. It is hardly surprising that many people don’t bother to vote.

I am aware of the wide choice of alternative voting systems, and that all have defects (albeit lesser ones than the present system); the method used for the Scottish parliament seems to reflect well the opinions of their voters as a whole, and I know of little criticism of it. It has the vital merit that every vote counts.

Such a system would be suitable for local government elections too, thus representing more closely the interests of local people. In my county in 2017, the leading party gained less than 54% of the votes, yet over 82% of the seats. The pattern in the District Council elections in 2015 was similar. This mismatch between voters’ preferences and the resulting governance leads to disaffection with the political process.

A separate issue leading to disenchantment is the financing of local Councils. The substantial contribution of central government to these Councils is being reduced, but the Councils are severely restricted in the extent to which they can replace this lost income from local taxation. This inevitably reduces the effectiveness of local government, and thus the interest taken in it by local residents.

In summary, people need to know that their votes count. Under our present electoral system in England (and the rest of the UK for parliamentary elections), in most cases they don’t. It is hardly surprising that this leads to lack of interest in the process, or frustration or worse. As a result we have too many powerless citizens. If we want more interest taken in good citizenship, reform of the electoral system for Westminster and English local authorities is vital.