Democracy notionally assumes equal rights for its citizens, but in practice the right to vote in formal elections, engage in civic structures and participate in civil society has not always been available across the board. Despite historic extensions in suffrage, voting restrictions related to age or nationality continue to prevent many young people and UK residents without British citizenship from voting. Beyond this, there are social groups that do not participate as much as others, and may therefore feel under represented or without voice in decisions. Social and political exclusion can adversely affect social cohesion and perceptions of political legitimacy, reproducing alienation from the mainstream.

Young people are among the social groups that disproportionately engage in formal politics. Concern about the lower proportion of 18-25 year olds voting in elections has led to stronger calls for formal political education in schools as a precursor to lowering the voting age.

During the 2015 General Election, there was a growth in projects and campaigns to teach or train young people in politics. London Borough of Lewisham initiated the longest running youth democracy programme in 2002, formally launching a Young Mayor election in 2003. Since then there have been 13 young mayors elected in Lewisham and each year thousands of young people participate in these formal elections alongside related opportunities for young people across the borough. This programme allows young people to vote for their own representatives and creates opportunities for collaborations in the civic arena across generations. This programme has been emulated in other cities of the UK and interest is growing in the model across the EU.

Our submission relates to citizenship and young people and is based on an ongoing evaluation of Lewisham Young Mayor Programme (LYMP) that began in 2012. The research was conducted using mixed methods:

a. Base line surveys of each cohort of candidates over five years
b. An ethnographic study of participation in the annual election campaigns
c. Interviews with adult stakeholders, programme founders as well as young candidates, alumni and advisors
d. Exit polls over four years at a sample of schools

LYMP operates in the context of political education being offered in a number of sectors:

a. Schools
i. Already host formal mechanisms of political education, whether through subject areas like sociology and general studies or 21st century citizenship lessons as part of a broader PSCHES agenda, prompted by the work of Bernard Crick (1998). Crick had promoted ‘political literacy’, to enable young people to understand the political world around them and their role within it.
ii. Some political science academics are calling for compulsory political education
iii. Some practitioners who support a reduction in voting age for sixteen and seventeen year olds have called for regulated political education

b. National Citizens Service
   i. a social action programme to inculcate values of volunteering and service as part of citizenship obligations.
   ii. Now a major provider of one off short term (summer) opportunities for 16 year olds.
   iii. The NCS message to 16 year olds is that they have citizenship responsibilities. However, only some UK nations permit that age group to vote in elections.
   iv. Votes at 16 campaigners, including Lewisham Young Mayors have pointed out that since under 18s can, engage in NCS, school councils and social action, they can work and pay taxes, but they can’t have the right to vote until they are 18.

c. Youth work
   i. Provides social and political education, typically through informal education and learning.
   ii. An outcome of austerity has been the dramatic closure of most local authority youth provision.
   iii. Youth workers are increasingly looking to engage with schools and non traditional sites like hospitals.

d. Religious and Faith Groups Faith groups have always offered youth services. The reduction of local authority provision has turned a variety of religious/faith based institutions into primary providers.

e. Community Projects working on specific issues, with particular disadvantaged groups or localities. In providing specialist advocacy, support or services, these organisations tend to promote equality for social cohesion. These include Operation Black Vote, which has worked to encourage ethnic minorities and young people to register to vote.

f. Youth sections of political parties operate to promote a particular political party. Traditionally, these have not been particularly successful. In 2017, Momentum, a Labour Party group, successfully engaged young people in the general election.

g. Youth Democracy/Youth Participation programmes include Young Advisors, Youth Parliaments and Young Mayors. These have grown and are overseen by the British Youth Council. BYC coordinates sittings of the Youth Parliament, supports the ‘Votes and 16’ campaign and the Young Mayor Network. European Youth in Action and Erasmus programmes have supported strategic networks and exchanges promoting youth democracy.

Restricted suffrage
a. Many of the educational political literacy projects and ideas outlined above are based on the idea that political issues are really questions of expertise and knowledge.

b. This approach comes from elite theorists of democracy, such as Edmund Burke - his theory of representative democracy favoured restrictions on suffrage because it placed a premium on the wisdom and superiority of elites who were deemed to have access to a body of reliable political knowledge and political competence.
c. From this perspective, elites are believed to know best, as those with access to key knowledge are considered best placed to represent and choose representatives.

**Universal Suffrage**

a. An alternative perspective of representative democracy comes from JS Mill, who favoured universal suffrage on the basis that ‘It is important that everyone of the governed have a voice in the government.’ (cited in *The Concept of Representation*, H.F. Pitkin, 1972:202)

b. Mill saw democracy as about the representation of opinions rather than about utilising expert knowledge. From this perspective, political issues are a matter of whim and viewpoint and so subjective opinion based in own life experience trumps scientific knowledge. From this perspective, formal knowledge transmission is not key to political education but learning from lived experience is.

c. LYMP does not assume that formal transmission of political literacy is a prerequisite to citizenship rights. For LYMP, the challenge is to encourage political participation by encouraging debate, questioning and reflection.

**The Young Mayor Programme in Lewisham (LYMP)**


b. The programme pivots on the annual election of a Young Mayor (aged 13-17) who represents the 11-17 year olds who live, work or go to school in Lewisham. The annual elections are run to fill four roles: Young Mayor, Deputy Young Mayor and two Youth Parliament Representatives.

c. The Young Mayor has a budget of £25-30 000. The Young Mayor and advisors consult young people on how to spend this budget and present their proposals to the Mayor and Cabinet for approval.

d. Unsuccessful candidates tend to stay involved as Young Advisors. The Young Advisors meet weekly, in the town hall and engage with professionals seeking advice, offering services or requesting feedback from young people.

e. The Lewisham model purposely provides minimal formal political because it is built on the ethos that political participation is about having the opportunity to share opinions. As one young person has said ‘why do I need training to have an opinion?’

f. Bernard Crick’s essay on *Politics as a Form of Rule: Politics, Citizenship and Democracy* (2004) points to the importance of promoting political literacy. In LYMP this is achieved by giving young people opportunities to become voters, campaigners and candidates. Participants grow a deep political awareness through engaging in the politics of representation and/or the politics of deliberation and social action. These are cultivated through:

g. The model allows young people to learn about politics and elections by engaging in real, formal elections. The process of standing as a candidate encourages a strong civic identity. Deciding who to vote for provides young people with the opportunity to exercise a right to vote alongside civic responsibilities.

h. A weekly young advisors forum develops democratic group work and is core to the programme. The Young Advisors meeting is oriented towards deliberation and social action in the form of a team that acts in support of the four elected representatives but also to collaborate with policy makers, service providers and other young people.
i. Opportunities for intercultural contact during and between elections. The election brings young people from across the borough into contact with each other on a range of sites and produces learning through those conversations. International exchanges also boost international perspectives.

LYMP - doing politics for real
a. Offers opportunities for political engagement eg. with police, politicians
b. Allows young people to define issues and engage in critical dialogue
c. Creates opportunities for young people to share and contest opinions
d. Develops spaces for young people to engage with adults in debate that respects young people’s expertise
e. Enables experiential and informal learning

How many young people have participated in the LYMP elections?

a. 316 young candidates for Young Mayor of Lewisham between 2004-2016
b. 50 formal positions representing young people filled through 13 Young Mayoral elections
c. 42-56% turnout – significantly higher than in local adult elections
d. Core supporters of each candidate engage actively campaign
e. 25-30 Young Advisors meet weekly

LYMP Collaborations:
a. Schools and Colleges are partners in the programme. They host polling stations and hustings for Young Mayor elections.
b. Some schools use LYMP election period as an opportunity to run assemblies on democracy or run their own school council elections
c. School council representatives that are elected or appointed through school-based processes meet the Young Mayor at an annual meeting. LYMP visits schools to consult on budget proposals.
d. Primary Schools students are not eligible to vote or stand as candidates but do meet regularly with the Mayor and LYMP representatives to learn about the Young Mayor’s Programme and have an opportunity to quiz a young person about what its like to be Young Mayor and what a Young Mayor does. One elected Young Mayor has highlighted how he was inspired to become involved as a result of one of these events
e. Young Offenders Forum encourages youth voice amongst young offenders in a collaboration with the Youth Offending Team (YOT).
f. Children in Care Council representatives are Looked After Children (LAC) supported by a dedicated participation officer. The Young Mayor collaborates with this group.
g. Neighbourhood Assemblies allow councillors to work with Young Advisors to explore how neighbourhood forums might include more young people and as neighbourhood structures have evolved, so have the links with young people.
h. Greater London Authority (GLA) has a Peer Mentor Scheme (young people employed by the GLA) with a Youth Participation officer, that LYMP has worked with.
i. House of Commons visits have been arranged either as a tour or to influence policy. The most high profile of these was when the Young Mayor and Advisors joined Gordon Brown round his table at Downing Street to discuss plans for youth policy at the time. More recently there has been significant engagement with the Votes at 16 lobby.
j. 10 000 Hands and Safe Havens Campaign led by Jimmy Mizen Foundation in partnership with LYMP
k. British Youth Council (BYC) Votes at 16 campaign has been actively supported by LYMP.
l. Erasmus exchanges enable young people to exchange ideas and engage in international debate

**Minority engagement:** The programme has been notably successful at involving candidates who are young women, from BME backgrounds and/or have a disability.

**Social Media:** An online presence matters
a. Online visibility of candidates has been reflected in recent year results, with those with the most interactive, diverse and entertaining online presence also attracting strong voting numbers.
b. As digital technology, community radio and social network sites have diversified, so has their usage in young mayoral elections.

**Why Young People Become Candidates**
a. Young people are motivated to stand for election for a combination of altruistic and personal development reasons and hold the position of Young Mayor in high regard. Candidates say they want to make a change in Lewisham, want to help or speak for others and hope the experience of standing will provide them with significant personal development.
b. Candidates treat the positions as of higher significance than anything else they may have been engaged in before and sometimes candidates stand several times before being successful. Candidates’ previous experience is primarily gained from school, though in 2014, a larger proportion of the candidates had previous experience as Young Advisors

**Youth Democracy as a Youth Work process**
a. LYMP is facilitated by professionally qualified youth workers based in the town hall offices
b. The youth workers offer young people opportunities for civic and political engagement that is consistent with traditional youth work ethos and methods
   i. allowing young people to define issues based on their lived experience
   ii. engaging young people in conversation and critical dialogue
   iii. creating opportunities for young people to share and contest opinions
   iv. developing spaces for young people to engage with adults in debate, respecting young people’s expertise

**Voting Age**
a. Lewisham Young Mayor elections are important for testing the arguments that:
   i. young people under 18 aren’t mature enough to make an informed decision
   ii. that young people wouldn’t turn out to vote if the voting age were to be lowered
   iii. under 18s wouldn’t make a mature decision.
   iv. These arguments are examined in the 2017 article ‘Extending democracy to young people: is it time for youth suffrage?’ by Kalbir Shukra. It can be read on [http://research.gold.ac.uk/20166/](http://research.gold.ac.uk/20166/) or [http://www.youthandpolicy.org/y-and-p-archive/issue-116/](http://www.youthandpolicy.org/y-and-p-archive/issue-116/)

**Recommendations**
a. That voting age is reviewed and lowered to include more young people
b. That programmes be developed to support young people to stand for election as councillors
c. That youth work be envisioned to support young people (outside of school) in developing their opinions through active engagement as citizens. On this basis the youth worker’s role in citizenship would be to offer opportunities for young people to engage in conversation,
opinion formation and deliberation, value lived experience but be open to hearing other perspectives

d. That local authority programmes engage young people in local democracy, build intercultural communication and social solidarities for community cohesion.

18 August 2017