The British Youth Council – written evidence (CCE0098)

The British Youth Council is the National Youth Council of the UK. As a youth-led charity, we empower young people aged 25 and under to influence and inform the decisions that affect their lives. We support young people to get involved in their communities and democracy locally, nationally and internationally, making a difference as volunteers, campaigners, decision-makers and leaders.

The British Youth Council runs a number of youth-led networks and programmes - including the UK Youth Parliament, the Young Mayor Network, the Local Youth Council Network and Youth Select Committee - which encourage young people to get involved in democracy and campaign to bring about social and political change.

- The British Youth Council believes that 16 and 17 year olds should have the right to vote in all public elections and referenda; by extending the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds, we believe that they will be meaningfully engaged in decisions that affect their lives.

- Young people believe that changes to the voting and registration process will engage more of the electorate. Young people are in favour of registering up until Election Day, and with voting online. Young people believe that both of these adjustments would make the whole process more accessible.

- For the last five years, young people voted the need to have a curriculum that prepared them for life as a priority issue. Education plays an important role in empowering young people to become active citizens, and in 2013 the Youth Select Committee found that both primary and secondary schools have a critical role to play in nurturing these skills. The Youth Select Committee also found that the quality of citizenship lessons varied across the country, and that in some cases teaching on citizenship was not effective as teachers who lacked expertise found it difficult to cover the range of topics in the citizenship curriculum.

- A lack of meaningful and sustained engagement by politicians can act as a barrier to young people’s active citizenship. Young people feel like politicians only engage with them around election time. Democratic engagement programmes and initiatives need to be sustained – they should last longer than the duration of an election campaign.

- The UK Youth Parliament is a great role model of positive British Citizenship within a tolerant and cohesive society. We are proud of the diversity of the programme and of the issues young people prioritise. In 2015, Members of Youth Parliament voted to tackle racial and religious discrimination as their national campaign – as part of this over 300 young people participated in social action for the campaign.

This submission was written by Francesca Danmole on behalf of the British Youth Council. This submission is supported by the Children’s Rights Alliance for England.
Do current laws encourage active political engagement? What are your views on changes to the franchise for national or local elections, including lowering the voting age? Should changes be made to the voting process or voting registration process?

1. The British Youth Council has been campaigning to extend the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds in all public elections and referenda for the last 19 years. We are a member of the steering group for the Votes at 16 Coalition alongside the Children’s Rights Alliance for England (CRAE), National Union of Students (NUS) and the Scottish Youth Parliament. We have found that Votes at 16 has been consistently prioritised as an issue by young people.

1.1 We have over 200 members ranging from national organisations such as the Girlguiding, National Federation of Young Farmers’ Clubs and St John Ambulance to local youth councils across the UK. In the run up to the 2015 General Election, we consulted our members to find out what priority issues they wanted the future parliament to address - Votes at 16 topped the poll.

1.2 Since 2012, Votes at 16 has been voted as a priority issue for the British Youth Council’s members.

1.3 The British Youth Council runs the UK Youth Parliament – in 2014 and 2016, members of Youth Parliament voted to make Votes 16 their national campaign.

1.4 UK Youth Parliament coordinates Make Your Mark – the largest annual UK-wide consultation with young people aged 11-18. In 2016, over 975,000 young people (1 in 6 11-18 year olds) took part – Votes at 16 was voted as one of the top five issues.

1.5 In 2014, the Youth Select Committee undertook an inquiry into whether the voting age should be lowered to 16 for all UK elections. After reviewing oral and written evidence from parliamentarians, young people, civil society organisations and academics, the Committee concluded that 16 and 17 year olds should be given the right vote. They also concluded that:

1.5.1 Voting is a fundamental human right and that any restrictions placed on it should be the minimum to achieve their aim.

1.5.2 There was no single age of maturity in the UK – a definitive age of maturity is difficult to prove and they received no evidence which suggested that 16 year olds were not mature enough to vote.

1.5.3 There needed to be a balance between rights and responsibilities. 16 and 17 year olds are able to make various contributions to their country. We believe that citizens who are seen as old enough to make such contributions should also be able to elect the representatives who make decisions about the effects of these contributions, like public spending and going to war.
1.5.4 16 and 17 year olds are interested in and care about political issues and the World around them but cannot engage in formal political processes.

2. We believe that extending the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds will meaningfully engage them in the decisions that affect their lives.

2.1 Young people’s participation in the Scottish Referendum demonstrates that they are eager to engage. The Referendum gave 16 and 17 year olds a once in a lifetime opportunity to have their say in shaping the future of their country. It was necessary to ensure that this age group participated in the historic vote. The precedence set by enfranchising 16 and 17 year olds in the Scottish Referendum, and enactment of the Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill are hugely positive steps towards a more inclusive and equal political system.

2.2 In 2015, we delivered a consultation, in which over 270 young people aged 12 to 22 from North West, North East, London, East of England, Midlands, South East, South West Regions and Scotland participated.

2.3 Participants concluded that 16 and 17 year olds deserve the right to influence policies and laws which affect their lives but, that they currently have no say on. They believe that the extension of the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds would enable this to become a reality, and empower them to actively participate in their future. To this end, participants proposed that extending the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds would ensure that youth voice is represented in politics, which would mean that politicians have to meaningfully engage with them. They further suggested that this could lead to an increase in the number of younger politicians. Participants also spoke about how they are often judged harshly by society; granting 16 and 17 year olds the right to vote in all public elections would promote mutual respect between young people and adults and would challenge negative stereotypes of young people.

3. Changes to the registration process

3.1 In the consultation mentioned above, we also explored potential changes to the voting process and voter registration process. We explored registration to vote up until Election Day and online voting.

3.2 Registering up until Election Day: Life circumstances determine what makes something a priority, and unfortunately for some of the electorate, registering to vote was not a priority. They believed that voting is important and so there should be flexibility for people to register up to Election Day – they also believed that this would ensure that more people had the chance to participate. They considered the idea that political parties’ campaigns intensified closer to the election, often after registration had ended.

3.3 Voting online: Participants concluded that voting online would be more convenient as people could vote from wherever they are; as society continues to develop it would be
important that participating in democracy was not bound to a location (Polling station). They suggested that an increase in voting methods could increase voter turnout, and an option to vote online would have a positive impact on the environment as less paper would be used.

3.4 Participants expressed some concerns about how online voting could be susceptible to hacking and voter rigging. They believed that democracy could be compromised if people began making fake accounts, personal information of the electorate was unwillingly shared, and that online voting could bring in a new wave of voter fraud. However, they concluded that more people than ever before manage their lives online and used the security of online banking as an example to pacify their earlier concerns. Security systems needed to be in place that would create paramount safe cyber environments to protect the electorate; and agreed that for it to be a smooth process much ground work (education) would have to be done.

**What should be the role of education in teaching and encouraging good citizenship?** At what stages, from primary school through to university, should it be (a) available, and (b) compulsory? Should there be exemptions? Should there be more emphasis on political participation, both inside and outside classes? How effective is current teaching? Do the curriculum and qualifications that are currently offered need amending?

3.1 We believe that good PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic education) includes education on citizenship and political participation. Since 2012 – young people from across the UK (through the Make Your Mark Ballot) voted having a curriculum which prepares them for life as a priority issue. The calls for a Curriculum for Life include citizenship education.

3.2 In 2013, the British Youth Council’s Youth Select Committee (in partnership with Parliament) led an inquiry into the role of the education system in England in supporting young people to develop life skills. They considered the development of different skills needed help young people realise their full potential.

3.3 The Youth Select Committee found that both primary and secondary schools have a critical role to lay in nurturing these skills. However citizenship lessons were not meeting young people’s needs.

3.4 Evidence gathered by the Youth Select Committee suggests that current teaching is not effective; they found that teachers who lacked expertise found it difficult to cover the range of topics in the citizenship curriculum – political literacy was particularly intimidating.

3.5 To ensure the quality of PSHE and citizenship, the Youth Select Committee recommended that PSHE teachers should be afforded the same standard of training and support as in any other subject. They also recommended that Local Authorities
should monitor the quality of PSHE provision in schools and encourage schools to undertake further training where necessary.

3.6 We believe that young people’s education does not currently prepare them to adequately vote. We believe that to prepare for lowering the voting age, a comprehensive programme should be designed and implemented to improve formal political engagement amongst young people.

Why do so many communities and groups feel “left behind”? Are there any specific factors which act as barriers to active citizenship? Are there specific factors which act as barriers to active citizenship faced by different communities or groups – white, BME, young, old, rural, urban? How might these barriers be overcome?

4.1 In the run up to the EU Referendum, the British Youth Council ran a voter registration campaign. As a general observation, young voters continue to turn out in low numbers in elections, though it was up from the General Election 2015 (64% from 43%). The additional challenge here comes with the fact that 18-25 year olds are not a homogenous group in that, within this demographic, there are groups from different backgrounds, socio-economic status, employment status and education levels. We have found a lack of meaningful engagement from politicians, acts as a barrier to young people’s active citizenship. Engagement is not just for election times – it must be meaningful and sustained over time. There are young people who believe that their vote is not valued, and who do not want to engage with politicians or democracy. Meaningful engagement takes time; and we have identified that the work the British Youth Council does through our programmes, initiatives and education can make a difference to young people.

Can you give examples of initiatives and role model that have helped promote a positive vision of British Citizenship within a tolerant and cohesive society?

5.1 UK Youth Parliament is the British Youth Council’s flagship programme; we are very proud of the diversity of the young people who are engaged in the programme. Young people come together from across the UK to debate important issues, and when they disagree they do so in a respectful way. At the 2016 UK Youth Parliament House of Commons Sitting there were speeches from young people on a better and kinder democracy.

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5.2 In 2015, Members of Youth Parliament voted tackling racial and religious discrimination as their national campaign. The campaign aimed to

5.2.1 Change discriminatory attitudes of young people towards race and religion.
5.2.2 Raise levels of understanding about different races and religions, communities and cultures.
5.2.3 Challenge negative images of race and religion on social media.
5.2.4 Promote diversity and inclusion within communities.

5.3 Over 300 young people from across the UK participated in the campaign, coordinating their own social action projects to reach its aims.

7 September 2017