Votes for Schools – written evidence (CCE0111)

1) What does citizenship and civic engagement mean in the 21st Century? Why does it matter, and how does it relate to questions of identity?

The 21st Century, particularly in a post-Brexit UK, presents us with a difficult and changing landscape in which the word ‘citizenship’ can be divisive, unifying or confusing. For some, citizenship highlights grievances for its ties to nationality and national identity, whereas for others it conjures thoughts of shared values and belonging to something bigger. The division is also reflected in people’s thoughts about their own identity. Some people like to think of themselves as ‘global citizens’ rather than ‘British citizens’ and others are very much the opposite, restricting citizenship to something that comes as a birth right.

While identity amongst the adult population has become a potentially partisan issue, what VotesforSchools has seen from young people is the inclination to believe that they are part of something bigger and can have an impact on something bigger. In today’s world, there are more ways than ever to engage in your community and the world, and to spread opinion. The introduction of tech outlets like social media, blogs and open letters have given voice to the previously voiceless, a fantastic step forward in terms of increasing involvement in the democratic process, but this democratisation has also created an incubator for radical and isolated views through the development of echo chambers. As a result of this, what we are seeing is a landscape that is both divisive and democratising, that is both isolating and opening, and where questions of identity are becoming linked to different interpretations of citizenship.

2) Citizenship is partly about membership and belonging. Are there ways we could strengthen people’s identity as citizens, whether they are citizens by birth or naturalisation? Could citizenship ceremonies or events throughout the educational process play a role? Should pride in being or becoming British be encouraged?

VotesforSchools sees classrooms and schools as the ideal space to explore what it means to belong, to have an identity and to find out what shared values are, because schools offer a microcosm of people representing different cultures, religions, backgrounds and upbringings. Questioning pupils through careful planning of lessons on global and controversial issues and encouraging pupils to challenge each other and celebrate their diversity of opinion is crucial for developing their ideas of what it means to be a citizen of a democratic country. Events in schools would be a brilliant way to develop pupils as citizens, so long as they have clear goals and outcomes that are focused on a sub-subject of citizenship rather than the broad umbrella or on “being British”. Examples of these could include joining a debate club, contributing to the political process in some way (writing to an MP, signing a petition), or engaging in a community project that brings cultures together, all of which would encourage a sense of community and belonging that celebrate diversity through a shared experiences outside the more divisive feelings of identity.

Our experience demonstrates that young people respond better to events with clear goals that they understand and are passionate about. The Youth Parliament could be seen as a good example of this as well as VfS organising a Question Time event in Autumn, and STEM girls events which are great for developing a shared identity for women interested in science. The end goal of all of these activities, being based on voluntary action, is that they can influence on-going active citizenship and encourage positive association with getting involved with others in your community. Other events based on “being British”, should not be encouraged until students understand what “being British” really means. Being British should be an open identity reliant on the very diversity that
exists within it and one that newcomers can claim for themselves so long as they are willing to contribute to their community. As was seen by the mixed response to the British values agenda, people are uncomfortable with the term and it’s tendency to be used in an exclusive, dividing way in tabloid papers and political language, and time needs to be committed to ensuring this term is redefined. One way to do this is to encourage discussion of shared values and human rights, on shared behaviour and relationship building rather than individuals, in a democratic society like Britain, before moving on to allow pupils to define what it means to them to be British.

3) Civic engagement can be seen as both a responsibility and a right of citizenship. Beyond the existing legal framework, should citizens have additional formal rights and responsibilities? How do you see the relationship between the two? Should they have the force of law individually or be presented as reciprocal duties between citizen and state? How should they be monitored and/or enforced?

We would advocate access and encouragement over formal rights and responsibilities. The state should organise positive opportunities for citizens and non-citizens that promote civic engagement in their community which assign value to the idea of citizenship for the individual and community. A legal ruling on responsibilities which is not backed up by education in this area, would do nothing to improve engagement or increase community cohesion but instead could lead to a form of aggressive populism. For the disaffected, formal rights/responsibilities could become simply another rule or force to rebel against or ignore. Our work with prisoners has demonstrated this. Instead, the state must take the lead and initiate regular engagement with its citizens that encourages contribution to the community.

4) 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 the voting registration process?

The common argument is that young people are not interested in politics, however feedback and experience within schools indicates the opposite. Students are curious about current affairs, particularly issues that are controversial, and show a keen interest in and concern over global issues. Through the teaching of citizenship, students debate and discuss issues within a forum of diverse backgrounds free from entrenched political affiliation, creating informed and empathetic citizens. Arguable, young current sixteen-year olds are some of the first to have experience citizenship and PSHE in schools and for this reason should be seen as better informed and more empathetic than older voters.

Teachers are frequently asked their political stance and opinions by their students and are faced with many a challenging question about the world around them. Moreover, students have shown they often have informed opinions and views on politics and current affairs. All of this points to the fact that they are in an informed position to make a vote outside of school. Our data indicates that students are not unenthused by politics, but that they are disillusioned with politicians and don’t see political parties as representative of their views. We have learnt that turnout in internal school elections is much higher in schools which teach, debate and discuss current affairs and politics, which is why it is crucial to instil in them the importance of being involved in the conversation, no matter their opinion whilst they are young, in the hopes that this commitment to voting will continue in the real world. Young people are more likely to protest and participate through means outside of voting, and this plays a large role in what it means to be a citizen in a democratic society.
If the voting age were to be lowered, it could increase political engagement, but this should not happen unless accompanied by a rigorous citizenship education. As the situation currently stands, the teaching of citizenship is compulsory in KS3 but not KS4, thus is potentially allowing KS4 students to become politically disengaged before they need to register to vote at age 18. Add to this the type of deeply politically entrenched exposure students are getting to current affairs on social media, and we risk the echo chamber effect if these students are not able to also discuss what they are seeing/hearing in a safe and structured deliberative environment. An alternative would be to provide structured citizenship education where students also get to register to vote in school. This would avoid registration being overlooked in the “grey area” where students move on to higher education where they may not register to vote and become disenfranchised. If these young people are not given meaningful ways of participating in politics, they will become disillusioned. By giving the vote to 16 year olds, extending citizenship education to KS4 and allowing registration to vote at school, political participation would most likely increase and students would be informed when casting a vote.

5) 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 any exemptions? Should there be more emphasis on political participation, both inside and outside classes? How effective is current teaching? Do the curriculum and the qualifications that are currently offered need amending?

Our results suggest that citizenship education should be a) available to all young people from primary to undergraduate university and b) compulsory from primary (KS1) through to sixth forms/colleges (KS5). This should include Young Offender Institutes/Prisons and forms of alternative provision that fall within the same age range. While there should be no exceptions, there should be flexibility within the citizenship curriculum to allow schools to explore needs and issues specific to their community and their cohorts. For example, communities that are vulnerable to gang culture would benefit from extra time focused on this, whereas an ethnically or racially homogenous community might benefit from more time exploring different cultures and their beliefs.

In terms of political participation, it should be encouraged but only when bound to the principle that political participation should be based on having the responsibility to have a good knowledge of the subject and an awareness of, and empathy towards other sides of the argument, before engaging politically. To be clear, this does not mean that only those educated to a high standard should engage with politics, but emphasises that there is a responsibility attempt to understand and learn about both sides of the debate. This can be achieved straightforwardly in schools. When debating the legalisation of drugs, higher learners could be expected to understand quantitative data and statistical evidence about such ideas as the impact of the illegal drug trade and the economic benefit to the state of legalisation. Lower learners would instead be expected to understand simplified versions of the same arguments, for example allowing people to buy drugs legally would generate money for the government rather than criminal organisations.

The current curriculum does need modifying to encourage citizenship and political participation across the age ranges. Feedback from the 220+ institutions on the VotesforSchools programme demonstrates that students are switching off from the current curriculum. To counter this, our aim is to bring the core tenets of citizenship to life through discussions about current affairs and debates that feel fresh and engaging. We believe bringing current affairs into the classroom is more likely to give someone tangible learnings that they can take away. For example, an adult who has been through the current citizenship course is unlikely to take away any real life learning
about freedom of speech in their use of social media, whereas having a lesson where they debate the American President’s use of Twitter is more likely to leave an impression that will last and have real life impact.

Overall, we believe a curriculum in citizenship should go for a two-pronged approach. Starting in KS1 and carrying right through to higher education, the first step should be to ensure that young people have the basic, necessary facts, such as geographical knowledge, population figures, how government works, rough government spending, so they have benchmarks from which to question and challenge what they read and hear in daily life. Once this basic knowledge is there, it can be built upon to then engage young people in current affairs and give them the sense that they have a both a voice and a role to play in the political developments of the present. Schools should also encourage as much as they can, the incorporation of the community in which they live, through inviting guest speakers in, engaging parents and carers, and having a feel for the issues that affect the local community within which they work, tailoring the curriculum to fill their gaps in knowledge so they can get prepared to engage in the material. It is especially crucial that more time be made in Primary schools for teachers to plan cross-curricular opportunities to develop citizenship, for tight timetables and focus on core subjects often leaves it on the sidelines. There are many ways of incorporating citizenship education into lessons if teachers are given the time to plan it into other subjects, for example focusing on planning in the skillset (debate, empathy, listening, respect) that citizenship develops in their lessons, which is just as important as the knowledge in order for pupils to develop as citizens. Furthermore, if pupils are taught citizenship through current affairs and knowledge at a young age, they will be in a much better position by secondary school to apply this knowledge and think critically about the world around them, being able to focus on developing their critical thinking, empathy and debating skills to a deeper level, which in turn would contribute to their political engagement at a later age.

6) Do voluntary citizenship programmes such as the National Citizen Service do a good job of creating active citizens? Are they the right length? Should they be compulsory, and if so, when? Should they include a greater political element? Should they lead to a more public citizenship ceremony? Are they good value for money? What other routes exist for creating active citizens?

In the confines of the program young people develop skills to enable them to be active citizens. The program is effective in giving young people the opportunity to register to vote. Allowing students the opportunity to plan and deliver a real social action project. In addition, the program introduces and nurtures skills in teamwork, leadership and communication and values; trust, responsibility and understanding and empathy. The emphasis on active citizenship features in the 3rd phase of the program. Whilst activities in the first week are both enjoyable and character building they do not have a clear link to citizenship. As a result, citizenship can be seen to have secondary focus. A full length and condensed version of the program is currently offered. 2 young people from each ‘wave’ go on to the youth bored. However, the majority are not supported in developing as active citizens beyond the program.

As a voluntary program, young people must be ‘active’ to say ‘yes’ and take part. The impact of compulsory attendance can be seen on the many occasions when young people are forced to take part, having been signed up to do it by their parent or guardians or as part of a college course (Croydon College). This can have a negative impact on groups as a whole as they do not have the intrinsic motivation.

The focus of the program is on social action at a community level. Whilst young people do engage in a one hour evening session looking at voter registration, impact of low turnout and government spending, this is isolated and political engagement is not embedded in the program. Increasing the
political focus requires careful thought as those students who are most disengaged may be put off by an increased political focus. There is perhaps opportunity to broaden the options for the last phase of the program. This could take the form of a political motivated campaign or petition to the government on a particular issue. In addition, young people are allocated a social partner, which in some cases can limit engagement as oppose to letting young people campaign on an issue they are passionate about.

There appears to be a need to expand the programme beyond 15-17 years age group. The focus is on post GCSE students rather it would be beneficial to engage young people within 17-18 years age group as these are students who are the verge of political participation and active citizenship. These are also the students who do not have the option to engage in a citizenship curriculum at school or college.

7) How can society support civic engagement? What responsibility should central government, devolved and local governments, third sector organisations and the individual have for encouraging civic engagement? What can the Government and Parliament do to support civil society initiatives to increase civic engagement?

Central government has a responsibility for making sure the process of voting is as straightforward as possible. The registration process is adequate as it stands. The postal vote process needs to be improved. (e.g. http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/general-election-300-postal-votes-missing-plymouth-marginal-seat-a7776376.html, http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/814225/general-election-2017-postal-vote-delays-hit-thousands-of-expats)

Central government also has the responsibility to get more information out to the public about their representatives. Currently, great work is being done by organisations such as mySociety, democracy club and Votes for Policies. While the government should not rely on the third sector to provide these sorts of services, it could work with them to give these ideas greater exposure. Local government has a remit within which it can explore a host of options to encourage voter registration and higher turnout. VotesforSchools has begun to work with local government outreach staff to encourage young people to register to vote and encourage them to be engaged with activities in Westminster.

Schools must be seen as a central vehicle for reaching the most vulnerable and disengaged young people. However, schools cannot manufacture meaningful means of participation. Participants must have positive experiences of civic engagement if its value is to be embedded. VotesforSchools is working with schools across the country to encourage greater awareness about registering to vote and greater knowledge of the avenues to interact with the state. A large barrier to civic engagement is simply a lack of knowledge of the different ways of engaging with government.

8) What are the values that all of us who live in Britain should share and support? Can you identify any threats to these values, which affect the citizenship of, for instance, women or various minority groups? If so, how can their citizenship be strengthened?

The values that all who live in Britain share and support must, most crucially, be identified, shaped and decided upon by those who are to follow them. Just as a teacher would create rules in a classroom using the pupils’ ideas and values, so should British values be created, with shared ownership and refinement or flexibility over time if needed. The mixed response to British values has demonstrated the potential flaws in imposing a set of shared values (this is my opinion coming up) so the focus needs to come from an angle of what values should we have in a democratic, fair
and human rights adhering society. Calling the values British in itself suggests there is something exclusive about them, which in reality there isn’t, and brings in feelings of a divisive national identity again which leaves others who live in the UK feeling outside and pushed aside. It is especially crucial for students to arrive at the British Values on their own, through carefully planned and meaningful discussions about morality, kindness and how to treat other people. If they do not take part in defining their own sense of ‘British values’ then it becomes an imposed sense of identity, defeating its own purpose. This is felt in schools.

9) Why do so many communities and groups feel “left behind”? Are there any 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?

What we have seen in schools is that there are no outstanding groups of students in full time education who felt left behind. Whilst in education they are supported and on a level playing field to discuss their concerns. However schools do not have the capacity, time, or specifically resources to teach young people about ways in which they can empower themselves and seek change. Much work can be done with the elderly, not specifically encouraging them to engage as they have a notably high turnout, but instead looking at giving them access to news and information about politics. This could possibly be encouraged or implemented in care homes.

10) How do you see the relationship between citizenship and civic engagement on the one hand and social cohesion and integration on the other? What effect does the level of diversity in schools and workplaces have on integration in society as a whole? How can diversity and integration be increased concurrently?

Civic engagement when done incorrectly can oppose social cohesion. Partisan and ill-informed engagement can create barriers between groups. Thus citizenship, civic engagement and political participation must be underpinned by social cohesion. Opportunities for civic engagement must create and include opportunities to learn about others rather than a means to clash with others. As well as the state, political parties have a responsibility to engage in public, cross-party debates, discussions that are non-partisan and an openness to encourage new members to join who bring different approaches and opinions. Parties have become well-drilled organisations set on a target of recruiting like-minded people and putting out uniform opinions. There should be some rules or events where parties demonstrate how they accept other opinions. The school is a young person’s first contact with a community outside of their immediate family as such it can instil an acceptance of diversity and encourage students to embrace and value it. The school can be a vehicle to raise diversity and integration. Schools could hold a “One world Show” allows students to present aspects of their cultures to the whole school. This would encourage a broader notion of citizenship. Diversity needs to be embedded into every aspect of school life. Classroom Displays celebrate difference, signs are in more than one language, the registers is taken in a different language each day. Integration through understanding, normalises having diversity. Restructuring of religious education is a good example if this, taught thematically encouraging a comparison of similarities and differences between religions. Vital to integration is to keep EAL students within the classroom, allowing them time to absorb and be part of the classroom environment. Furthermore any support for EAL students is widely accepted to support native speakers. All students learn and benefit from labels and instructions given in Romanian.
It should not solely be the responsibility of the EAL student to integrate, the whole school should move to understand new cultures.

11) How important are levels of English proficiency for first and second generation immigrants and what could be done to increase them, including through support for ESOL classes? Are there particular barriers faced by newcomers to Britain? Could the naturalisation process, including the citizenship test, be improved and if so, how?

Schools need to view EAL and SEN as distinct; the two are often conflated which can result in EAL students not being sufficiently challenged. More guidance is needed on how to challenge as well as support EAL students. A beneficial change can come for EAL students by taking the attitude that English speakers should always endeavour to pick up some of the languages in their school. A lack of understanding of the language can subsequently lead to challenging behaviour; students struggle to articulate their emotions inhibiting any preventative action taken by the teacher.

For parents and students, greater effort needs to be made welcome and brief on the workings of English schools and society. Whilst this does occur in some schools it impact of social cohesion makes it a responsibility of government.

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

VotesforSchools is working hard to encourage young people to understand and actively participate to improve their country and increase social cohesion. We are working with over 220 schools and have over 10,000 active weekly voters. The community is spread across the country, with schools from low income backgrounds and independent schools all participating. We would be happy to share our methods and data with the committee.

Please see a snapshot of our weekly debates (Sample size of at least 5,000 voters):

![Pie chart showing the results of a question on whether celebrities should get involved in political issues.]

- Yes: 63.0%
- No: 37.0%
16th Sep - 23rd Sep

Does the UK need more grammar schools?

Overall Results

- Yes: 36.4%
- No: 63.6%

Does the news encourage terrorism?

Overall Results

- Yes: 72.2%
- No: 27.8%

16th Jun - 23rd Jun

Would you take a refugee into your own home?

Overall Results

- Yes: 35.6%
- No: 64.4%

7 September 2017