

Making our voices heard – the views of Scotland's Youth Voice Network on how young people in Scotland can participate in democracy and be heard

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What is the Youth Voice Network for Scotland?

The Youth Voice Network for Scotland is a group of young people who share their views and ideas about ways to get more young people engaged in democracy and voting. The group is facilitated by Children in Scotland for the Electoral Commission who run similar Youth Voice groups in the three other UK nations.



Youth Voice Network,
Edinburgh

The group is made up of young people aged 12-18 from across Scotland. They meet online and in-person to inform the Electoral Commission's national awareness campaigns, feed back on education projects and create new ideas for engaging young people in democracy.

The aim of the group is to support the Electoral Commission to improve young people's knowledge, understanding and confidence in democracy and voting in Scotland. The Youth Voice Network ensures young people's views inform the Commission's education work.



Introduction

This briefing is based on views shared by members of the Youth Voice Network in sessions throughout 2024. The sessions discussed different aspects of how young people can have their voices heard, including but not limited to voting. This was primarily due to the shared view that voting should not be seen as the only way that young people can have their voices heard in the democratic system.

Discussions that focused on votes at 16 did so in the context of the newly elected UK Government's manifesto commitment to extending the right to vote in UK elections to all aged 16 and over. The Electoral Commission in turn asked Youth Voice Network groups across the UK to share their views on the impact that reducing the voting age would have on young people's participation and engagement with democracy.

This briefing presents these views about setting the voting age at 16 and the other ways identified by group members that young people can participate in democracy to have their voices heard. It also explores the different barriers that members believe prevent some young people from voting and having their voices heard in other routes.

We intend for this briefing to provide valuable insights for all decision makers who hold responsibility for engaging children and young people in the electoral system and who support them to have their voices heard. This could include civil servants, councillors, community development workers and local democratic officers.

We also hope this briefing will provide a format for adults working with children and young people to host their own discussions about voting and democracy.



Voting at 16

Young people's views on the voting age being 16

All members of the Youth Voice Network are passionate in their view that all young people over the age of 16 in the UK should be able to vote in all local and national elections. Several members of the Youth Voice Network are of voting age and are currently registered to vote, giving them a unique perspective on the idea of extending voting rights.

The most significant reason identified by members of the Youth Voice Network as to why over 16-year-olds should be able to vote was the fact that they can contribute to society in many ways. Being able to work for a living, paying taxes, and abiding by laws were all highlighted as ways that over 16-year-olds hold a stake in how and who runs the country.

"Even if you would consider that a 16-year-old is not a fully developed adult, 16- and 17-year-olds will turn 18 plus over a five-year parliamentary term. It makes sense then that they should have their say at the start of a government's term."

Member of the Youth Voice Network for Scotland

Members drew attention to some arguments they had heard in opposition to giving over 16-year-olds the vote including that young people may be too “uneducated” or “immature” to be given the opportunity to vote. They said that young people were **‘often better at finding out reliable information’** than many older people and yet nobody disputes the right of older people to vote.

In Scotland, young people over the age of 16-years-old have been able to vote in local and devolved elections and referendums since 2014. Members pointed to the fact that over 16-year-olds have voted in a referendum and elections in Scotland over the past ten years, saying it has resulted in **‘nothing bad happening’**. They said the comparatively high turnout rates for 16- and 17-year-olds in recent elections and referendum further demonstrates this point.

Opportunities presented by implementing votes at 16

Several members pointed to votes at 16 as a method of ensuring young people’s positive engagement with voting and democracy for the rest of their lives. They viewed giving young people aged 16 years old the vote as a tool to ensure their participation in future elections and to strengthen the UK’s democracy.

“Votes at 16 helps make democracy real for young people. It stops being just an idea that other and older people deal with.”

Member of the Youth Voice Network for Scotland

Members also said that if young people over 16 were able to vote it would help them to feel that their voices and views mattered. This is important as young people’s views are often excluded from major decisions about the kind of society we live in, **‘I think that feeling your voice makes a difference is very important’**.

What needs to be put in place to support the implementation of votes at 16: education, accessible information and support to vote

In addition to members’ support for allowing young people over the age of 16 to vote in all UK elections, they recognised that there are several barriers that prevent young people in Scotland from engaging with their right to vote. These barriers already have an impact on young people over the age of 16 who can vote in Scotland and would have a similar impact on young people across the UK should the voting age be reduced for all UK elections.

A perceived lack of education around how young people should use their vote was identified as a notable barrier with one member saying, **‘I think there has to be accessible education too about how to use your vote to make it fair for all young people participating for the first time’**.

Members believed that without suitable information and education, young people who can vote may not because they feel **‘confused’** or **‘intimidated’** by the process of voting and deciding who to vote for. They said school-based education about voting and democracy was **‘one size fits all’** and that it likely did not appeal to all young people because of this.

Moreover, members viewed young people who live with politically disengaged families as facing additional barriers to accessing as voting and engaging in politics may be **'something they're not used to'**. They said this further emphasised the need for accessible education for young people to be provided in settings like schools where pupils spend time outside of the home.

The lack of accessibility around the process of voting and learning how to vote was viewed as a unique barrier facing young people who are blind, partially sighted or experiencing sight loss. One member of the group, speaking on their lived experience, shared how information about voting is often not available in formats accessible to them. They also said that polling stations sometimes do not have information and resources to help them vote. They also shared how members of their family had asked at their own local polling stations about the resources they had available and none were available in these areas, showing that this is not a location-specific issue.

"It can be a struggle to vote. There's no information in braille about political parties. Polling stations are meant to be fully accessible for me, but often they aren't or people working at stations don't know how to help me."

Member of the Youth Voice Network for Scotland

Who is responsible for letting young people know about their right to vote?

When asked who holds responsibility for encouraging children and young people to vote, members of the Youth Voice Network identified a range of different individuals, groups and organisations including: 'parents and teachers'; 'government and schools'; 'youth organisations and groups'; 'electoral commission and parliament'. Following this discussion, members of the group agreed that no single individual or organisation is wholly responsible.

"I think that everybody has a role to play, not just certain groups of people. We should be looking at each other to help us too."

Member of the Youth Voice Network for Scotland





Ways that young people can get involved in democracy

Where children and young people already have a voice

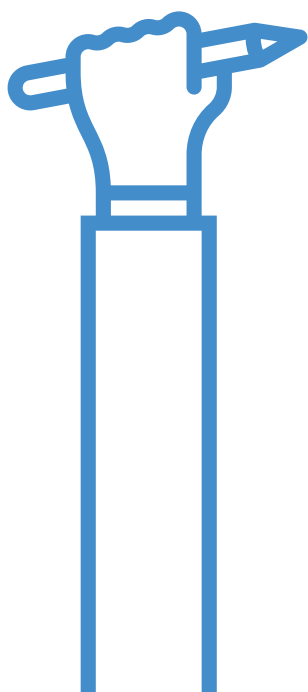
In terms of having their voice heard by elected officials on local and national issues, members of the network identified several methods that they see young people engaging with to have their voices heard.

Members said that they know young people could engage directly with elected officials by attending surgeries held by their local Member of Parliament (MP), Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP) or councillor. Whilst most members of the group said they were familiar with where surgeries were held, they also said ***'it would be good if MPs hosted surgeries specifically for young people'***. This was in part due to surgeries seeming like ***'serious'*** and ***'intimidating'*** places for young people to attend to share their views and that many take place whilst young people are at school or working.

Members of the network also said that writing letters or emails to MPs could be a way of having their voices heard by elected officials on specific issues. They did, however, acknowledge that writing to MPs may not be the most effective method for getting your voice heard as they know ***'it can take some time to receive a response'*** and build momentum to address a concern or issue.

Members held similar views about completing surveys as a method for young people to have their voices heard by elected officials. They said that they would 'normally avoid completing surveys often pushed through social media' as they had doubts about how influential it would be – ***'I'm not sure whether an MP or MSP would actually listen to the views expressed in a survey'***.

Some young people spoke about experiences of elected officials visiting their school and discussed whether this could provide an opportunity for groups of young people to be heard by MPs, MSPs or councillors. While they agreed that it was good for elected officials to visit the spaces that young people spend time in, they said that this was ***'more of an opportunity to learn about what an MP, MSP or councillor does than one for us to share our views directly'***.



Attending protests and the use of social media platforms to build effective campaigns were viewed by members of the group as one of the most significant methods that young people's voice could be heard by elected officials. Members distinguished this from other ways of having their views heard as protest and social media campaigns often represented the ***'collective voice of young people'*** on a specific issue rather than individual opinions. The mass participation of young people in these campaigns were considered by the group to be more difficult for elected officials to ignore.

Supporting young people to have their voices heard

Barriers to participation can be overcome via:

- Education
- Access
- Representation in parliament
- Building trust via contact with elected representatives.

In addition to recognising the different spaces and ways that young people can have their voice heard by elected officials and decision makers, members acknowledged that these opportunities were not always open to all young people. Members were able to identify several barriers that they believed prevented different groups of young people from sharing their views with those elected to represent them.

Education

A lack of awareness and education about democracy and the political system was viewed as a significant barrier preventing young people from accessing opportunities to have their voices heard – ***‘if young people don’t take modern studies and don’t have that education, they won’t even know they have a voice’***. This was viewed as a factor that prevented young people from attending opportunities like MP or MSP surgeries or making use of social media to join campaigns about issues affecting young people in Scotland.

Access

Where young people in Scotland live was also identified as a potential barrier for young people having their voices heard. Members of the group who live in remote and rural areas of Scotland shared that they would ***‘probably have to travel for miles’*** if they were to reach an MP or MSPs surgery to speak with them as their elected official represents a geographically vast constituency. Moreover, they said that living in remote and rural areas ***‘means you sometimes have limited access to the internet’*** impacting their ability to make use of social media and other online tools of engagement with elected officials.

Representation in parliament

Discrimination was also identified as a persistent barrier for young people who want to have their voices heard on the issues impacting their lives.

“Some groups of people are discriminated against, and their views are taken less seriously because of it. This includes young people from minority backgrounds in Scotland.”

Member of the Youth Voice Network for Scotland

They said the views of young people from minority backgrounds are less likely to be taken seriously partly due to their ***‘underrepresentation in the political system’***.

Building trust via contact with elected

Several members of the group highlighted that many young people they know 'have a deep distrust of government'. They pointed to popular ideas among young people such as '*politicians have other interests at heart*' and that '*the government doesn't represent me or my views*' as reasons that young people have a distrust in government and elected officials.

A distrust of elected officials and government was seen as a unique barrier as members said it could contribute to young people feeling that their views will not be taken seriously by elected officials and decision makers.



Conclusion

This briefing has presented the views and ideas of young people involved in the Youth Voice Network for Scotland on the ways that they see young people can participate in democracy and make their voice heard. This included both participation via the ballot box – through votes at 16 in Scotland – and other methods of participating in democracy and sharing their views with elected representatives.

Members of the Youth Voice Network's views on voting and having their voice heard demonstrates that young people who are engaged and informed about voting feel confident and enthusiastic to share their views – either via the ballot box or other opportunities to engage with elected officials.

The Youth Voice Network was clear in its view that votes at 16 was one way to help engage young people in the democratic process and that this should be a primary factor in lowering the voting age in all UK elections. This view is also supported by the existing evidence on the impact of votes at 16 on political engagement.

However, votes at 16 was not viewed as a silver bullet to include disengaged young people in voting and the democratic process. They also clearly identified the existing barriers faced by disengaged young people including education and awareness, accessibility of resources, digital exclusion, rurality, discrimination and a mistrust of government and elected officials.

To overcome these barriers, the Youth Voice Network believed various stakeholders who already interact with young people should work to develop accessible, youth-friendly information and inclusive opportunities to ensure young people's views are heard by elected representatives.

There is a role for young people, including those involved in the Youth Voice Network for Scotland, to support the development of this work to ensure more young people feel confident and able to voice their views and become active participants in democracy.

In the words of one member of the group, "*Everyone's voice matters*" and we will continue to ensure that the views of children and young people are heard and taken seriously.

