



New Era for **Democracy:** a pathway to **Votes at 16**



Parliamentary Briefing:
Co-created by The British Youth Council & The Body Shop

Introduction

Since 1998, the British Youth Council has campaigned to lower the voting age to 16 across all nations in the UK. We have galvanised youth voices in all their diversity, inside Parliament and out, to advocate for greater youth participation in democracy. Votes at 16 has consistently recurred as a top issue throughout our engagement with British Youth Council members, be it annual surveys, council meetings or general election priority ballots.

In April 2022, The Body Shop added its support to the Votes at 16 campaign, as a brand known for championing social causes and human rights issues. This is part of the company's global Be Seen Be Heard campaign which seeks to elevate youth voices on the issues that matter to them and increase youth political engagement at global level.

Our work, over decades of focusing on youth issues, consistently shows that politicians today should be doing more to engage with young people on the social and environmental issues that will directly affect their lives.

Young people aged 16 and 17 in the UK face a democratic disadvantage: they can be workers; they can be taxpayers; they can be renters; they can be carers; and they can be in need of healthcare, but they cannot choose who should legislate on issues that affect their lives within these social roles, or on issues such as climate change that will shape the world throughout their lives.

The devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales have already taken the step to extend voting rights to include 16- and 17-year-olds. They join Argentina, Austria, Cuba, Ecuador, Guernsey, Indonesia, Isle of Man, Jersey, Malta and Nicaragua in doing so. Campaigns to extend the vote are running across Australia, Canada, Chile, France, Italy, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Venezuela and many more and yet the UK is lagging with no consistent policy across devolved nations and across both local and general elections.

Today, young people up and down the UK are urging Westminster to catch up. This manifesto outlines policy recommendations for all political parties to adopt by the next General Election.

Our belief is that all elections must be inclusive and accessible to 16- and 17-year-olds, and they should enjoy their full rights as active participants in our society.



It's time
for a new
era of inclusive,
future-focused
democracy, powered
by youth, and to
the benefit of
all.

Foreword

Maddie Smith

Managing Director UK & Ireland
The Body Shop



Today, our world is home to the largest generation of young people in history. But what kind of world are these young people going to inherit? And crucially, will they have a say in shaping it?

In the UK, youth voices are severely lacking from our public political conversation.

This is true at the ballot box: 16- and 17-year-olds are subject to a **postcode lottery** when it comes to their voting rights, with some granted a say and others not. It's also true in Parliament itself:

35% of the UK population is under 30, yet only 3.2% of MPs are¹.

Our Prime Minister is the youngest the UK has had in modern political history, but we have more work to do to ensure a range of young voices are represented in our political and public institutions.

You don't have to look far to find examples of young people making real and meaningful change on causes that matter to them – from climate change to economic instability and conflict.

Young people have already shown that they have the ideas, spirit, and commitment to drive positive change. So why shouldn't they be able to do this within our democratic process?

Young people's representation impacts us all. We need their innovation, creativity, determination, and crucially, their optimism. The more we listen to young people, the broader our outlook and more inclusive our thinking on the important issues of today will be. And the more likely we are to find the urgent solutions we need.

It's vital that the decisions we make today are shaped by the people whose lives are most affected by them.

Now is the time for young people to be meaningfully invited into UK politics. **We must look at systemic change** to allow fresh views and perspectives to be heard and young people to enjoy their full rights as part of the electorate.

That's why we have partnered with the British Youth Council, to call for all political parties to incorporate full voting rights for 16- and 17-year-olds in national elections and referenda into their manifestos.

¹ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/house-of-commons-trends-the-age-of-mps/>
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationprojections/bulletins/nationalpopulationprojections/2020basedinterim>

It's a cause close to our hearts at The Body Shop. We're seeking to raise the voices of young people around the world through our campaign Be Seen Be Heard, launched with the United Nations' Office of the Secretary General's Envoy on Youth.

Every country needs a unique solution, which is why we're working with local partners, like the British Youth Council in the UK, but there is a clear universal message:

Young people deserve a say, and we need to open our democratic systems to make that happen.

This manifesto sets out how the UK specifically can lead the way in youth enfranchisement.

It is founded on young people's own observations on the barriers and opportunities they face when it comes to political participation. It also takes a holistic view, demonstrating how rounded reform can extend the franchise and re-engage existing voters alike.

Above all, we hope that it provides optimism that including young people in our voting system will greatly benefit the future of our democracy.



Foreword

Lucy Hulme

Chair – Votes at 16 Youth Action Group



A combination of the opinions of young people, the latest research and the teams at the British Youth Council and The Body Shop UK, the release of our Manifesto has been hotly anticipated. I am excited to introduce the final document to the wider community!

Manifestos are a quintessential part of any campaign; seen in practice across our political system as a clear and concise method of laying out plans, demands and promises.

We'll be using our Manifesto as a guideline to follow as we look forward to a strong period of campaigning.

We hope this document will be utilised by a diverse range of players: from corporations and government officials, to school children and academic boards. It stands to be a powerful, expressive document tailored to robustly support the Votes at 16 campaign.

Our **manifesto strives for change;** young people from within my Youth Action Group and beyond are ready for it.

For so long, we have been outcast from the political sphere; kept away from decisions regarding our future.

Together, as a collective, we are on a mission to change that.

Finally, I would like to thank The Body Shop UK for their partnership and unceasing support in the “Be Seen Be Heard” campaign. We are grateful to have the backing of such an immense organisation, and their partnership has aided us in taking this campaign to a much wider level.

I am excited, as Chairperson, for what's to come.



Summary

Young people in the UK are subject to a postcode lottery when it comes to voting rights.

There are a great many factors which play a part in democratic engagement, as far ranging as demographic, age, geographic location and economic status. Currently, 16- and 17-year-olds in Scotland and Wales may vote in their representative Parliament and Assembly elections but not in UK-wide general elections, whilst their counterparts in England and Northern Ireland may not vote in any elections.

This means that a segment of the UK's youth population is denied their opportunity to have a say in who makes the decisions that ultimately guide their lives and communities.

From employment, taxation and schooling, to youth services, housing and health, young people have valuable experiences and perspectives which must form part of the national debate as political parties offer their manifestos at general elections.

There are three key themes that have emerged through this consultation, and as we look ahead to the next General Election, they must be prioritised by political parties, politicians and the political system more broadly.

1. We must increase young voters' confidence in voting
2. We must ensure that the democratic system is inclusive of young voters
3. We must ensure that the democratic system is accessible to young voters

Recommendations

Our recommendations also follow these three themes.

1. Educate young people:

High quality political education must be implemented in all schools, and complemented with practical experience provided in youth work settings

2. Reduce misinformation:

Access to unbiased information should be made available at election times, to combat misinformation.

3. Enfranchise early:

The voting age should be lowered to 16 in all elections, in order to develop early voting habits in new generations

4. Opportunities for young people to see themselves reflected:

Young people's political priorities should be reflected at Cabinet level, through a dedicated Youth Minister

5. Promote an inclusive democratic system:

Parties should use universal language and include young people in their manifestos

6. Eliminate barriers to voting:

Remove photographic voter ID requirements in all elections, enact automatic voter registration directly at the age of 16 when receiving notification of National Insurance

7. Secure the future of voting:

Expand polling day formats to include digital voting, voting in schools, and longer voting hours

Methodology

In the consultation for this manifesto, we focused on three key questions and sourced opinions through a series of focus groups and two surveys of 385² and 360³ young people respectively. We also reviewed recent literature and reports⁴.

Across the surveys and focus groups held at key British Youth Council members meetings; the same questions were asked around ease of voting, difficulties in voting, and confidence in voting.

² British Youth Council survey of member organisations, November - December 2022

³ British Youth Council survey of member organisations, January 2023

⁴ <https://dpart.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Votes-at-16-Making-it-a-success-2.pdf>



Themes

We must increase young voters' confidence in voting

In our consultations, most young people considered a good standard of knowledge of the democratic system as crucial to their confidence in taking part.

On measures that could increase confidence, young people agreed that **greater understanding of the democratic system, and easily-accessible, unbiased information** about elections and parties were key.

Others talked about accessibility in the voting system, and more open discussions about politics in trusted environments where they can explore ideas and opinions. Good quality, universal, and standardised political education was by far the biggest call out from our members to encourage participation rates and confidence.

When asked if there are enough **opportunities for young people to learn about politics and democracy at school**, **85%** of respondents to our snap survey **answered no**⁵.

⁵ British Youth Council survey of member organisations and wider young people, January 2023

Recommendations:

1. Educate young people:

High quality political education must be implemented in all schools, and complemented with practical experience provided in youth work settings

2. Reduce misinformation:

Access to unbiased information should be made available at election times, to combat misinformation

“Knowing what each party stood for and how their plans impact our lives would increase my confidence...”

— focus group member

DO YOU THINK THERE ARE ENOUGH OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TO LEARN ABOUT POLITICS AND DEMOCRACY AT SCHOOL?

NO:
85.3%

“Teach young people the basics of voting such as how our electoral system works, and what are the core beliefs of certain political parties...”

— focus group member

We must ensure that the democratic system is inclusive of young voters

The obstacles that young people face when choosing to participate in democratic procedures were described as both based on location or logistics, such as voter registration and IDs, but also systemic.

British Youth Council members told us that policies addressing what are commonly referred to as “youth” issues are deprioritised by candidates, and any potential youth offer is perceived by some politicians and parties to be less important than engaging with other parts of the electorate. One of our survey questions asked whether young people thought parties and candidates speak directly to young people in the lead up to elections, and 91% of respondents answered no⁶.

The de-motivating impact of this is clear to see in the responses to the consultation. Young people suggested that seeing their vote being taken into perspective, more of their counterparts in decision-making positions and their vote making a difference would increase their likelihood to vote.

A particular set of barriers cited by our members was described as the “Westminster bubble” effect, encompassing the language that is used by political parties and candidates, the balance of media reporting, misinformation on various platforms about policies, and voting myths about young people. Members felt that these obstacles render the political system more exclusive, rather than inclusive of all.

“Voter registration can be a bit confusing when you’ve got two addresses (Uni and Home)...”
— focus group member

DO YOU THINK PARTIES AND CANDIDATES SPEAK DIRECTLY TO YOUNG PEOPLE ENOUGH IN THE LEAD UP TO ELECTIONS?

NO:
91.8%

“What makes voting difficult is candidates lacking interest in youth issues...”
— focus group member



For Scottish and Welsh 16- and 17-year-olds, the disconnect between national elections and Westminster elections is a significant one. While their respective devolved administrations have extended the franchise, as individuals they continue to be denied a vote in UK elections. This has resulted in a tiered set of voting rights for young people in different nations.

A Nottingham Trent University study⁷ outlining lessons learnt from the Welsh example is instructive in its determinations. The 2021 Senedd election was the first election that 16- and 17-year-olds in Wales were eligible to vote in, and our consultation echoes some of the key barriers that were faced. These include mobilisation efforts and registration, a coalition of different partners equipping and preparing young people to vote, and the persistence of inequalities regionally and socially in civic engagement.

⁷ https://www.ukvotingage.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Huebner-et-al_2021_Making-Votes-at-16-work-in-Wales.pdf



“It is unfair that Scotland allow for 16 year olds to vote but not England...”
— focus group member

“Young people’s voting habits influence their parents and older people too...”
— focus group member

Recommendations:

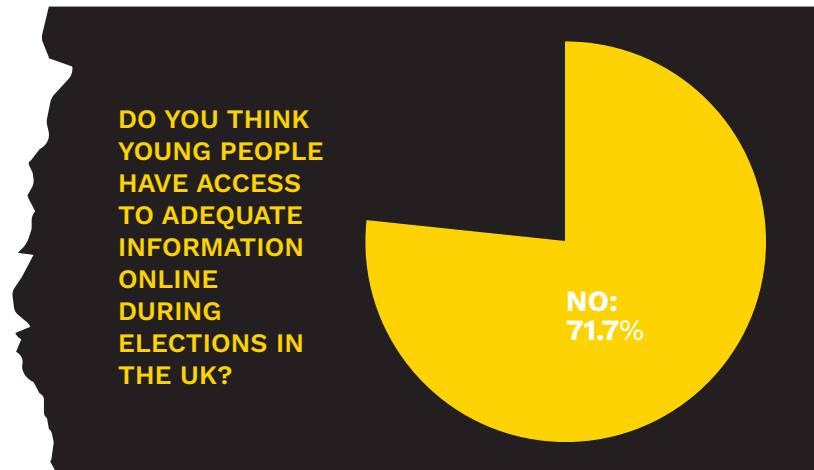
- 3. Enfranchise early:** The voting age should be lowered to 16 in all elections, in order to develop early voting habits in new generations
- 4. Opportunities for young people to see themselves reflected:** Young people’s political priorities should be reflected at Cabinet level, through a dedicated Youth Minister
- 5. Promote an inclusive democratic system:** Parties should use universal language and include young people in their manifestos

We must ensure that the democratic system is accessible to young voters.

Democratic engagement does not start or end at the ballot box, but the right to vote is an inalienable part of ensuring that the democratic system is accessible to young voters. When asked about familiarity with the voting system, the response from the focus groups was that there wasn't. We also asked those surveyed whether they thought there is access to adequate information online during election times in the UK, 72% answered no⁸.

Researchers from the universities of Edinburgh and Sheffield have mapped 16 year old first-time voters in Scotland since 2014, and noted their increased voting behaviour and significant follow-through effect in subsequent elections, concluding that enfranchising younger voters across the UK could improve long-term voting behaviour⁹.

According to the study, early enfranchisement has, however, not had longer-term positive effects on wider political engagement beyond voting. Therefore, there is an opportunity for politicians and political parties to go further in ensuring accessibility for young voters from all backgrounds and sustained political engagement from a young age.



“It (voting) would make me feel that we actually have a say on matters and our opinion matters to the politicians...”
— focus group member

“The right to vote would motivate young people to take an interest in their voting options, and research more...”
— focus group member

⁸ British Youth Council survey of member organisations and wider young people, January 2023

⁹ <https://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/sites/default/files/assets/doc/Votes%20at%2016%20in%20Scotland.pdf>

Our members highlighted the need for **more accessibility around polling stations**, for example, for young people with visual impairments and hidden disabilities.

Different forms of automatic voter registration received a significant amount of support in our consultations, including those outlined in this report¹⁰, with suggestions ranging from direct registration at 16 to automatic enrolment whilst at school, university or in applications for passports.

One of the fears we encountered in consultation was the need for ID while voting, and the possibility of being turned away at the polling station. Members highlighted the concern that young persons' railcards or student cards are not a valid form of ID to vote, whilst older people's bus passes and Oyster 60+ cards are. This discrepancy puts young voters at a disadvantage.

¹⁰ <https://tobysjamesdotcom.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/is-it-time-for-automatic-voter-registration-single-sides.pdf>

Recommendations:

6. Eliminate barriers to voting:

Remove photographic voter ID requirements in all elections, enact automatic voter registration directly at the age of 16 when receiving notification of National Insurance

7. Secure the future of voting:

Expand polling day formats to include digital voting, voting in schools, and longer voting hours



Conclusion

For 25 years, the British Youth Council have advocated for widening the franchise to include young people's voices at the ballot box.

This has led to the creation of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Votes at 16, currently chaired by Conservative MP Sir Peter Bottomley.

Through this group, we have maintained a presence in Parliamentary debate since 2018, ensuring that incoming Parliamentarians, as well as those more established, are attuned to the call for greater youth democratic engagement. Our work has also involved facilitating a Votes at 16 Coalition including multiple national and regional organisations campaigning for democratic reform, and a Votes at 16 Youth Action Group where young people direct the focus of the campaign as a whole.

Yet the ballot box is not the only place for young people to have their say. In our work as the national youth council, we regularly facilitate meaningful engagement between young people and decision-makers that impacts policy and thinking at a government-level.

Politicians and policy-makers agree that it is important to have young people around the table, but we argue it is equally as important that young people have their say in who reaches that table to begin with.

The time is right for these changes. The UN appointed a Youth Envoy a decade ago, 2023 is the Commonwealth Year of Youth and the UK will be promoting progress on youth issues.

Closer to home, The Body Shop has launched a worldwide "Be Seen Be Heard" campaign with key partners, the British Youth Council one of them, alongside the United Nations' Office of the Secretary General's Envoy on Youth. Together, these organisations seek to promote youth voices in decision-making around the world.

Momentum is building, but we have no time to lose particularly as the scale, scope and complexity of issues facing our societies are increasing.

Our recommendations cover these issues and more, and we now call on political parties, government and institutions to carry them forward into a new era for democracy.

Closing remarks

Sir Peter Bottomley MP
Worthing West



It is appropriate that this year, as we recognise 105 years since the Representation of the People Act of 1918 which first gave (some) women and almost all men the right to vote, we discuss the important topic of enfranchisement. We have consistently been one of the first countries to recognise the rights of the disenfranchised, and we should not be afraid to be at the forefront of progress once again. I commend the British Youth Council and The Body Shop, as well all other young people across the UK campaigning for this change, for reigniting this conversation.

If we want to continue to consider our nation a United Kingdom, irrespective of any level of devolution, the voting age should be lowered. It has already happened in Scotland and Wales. It is now the case that 16-year-olds are able to vote in the British dependencies of the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey, as can those in Scotland for the Scottish Parliament, and in Wales for the Senedd. Indeed, 16 and 17-year-olds may vote in the Conservative Party's leadership election. If it is acceptable in those circumstances with no issues, then why would this not be acceptable across the rest of the UK?

Students and apprentices at colleges in my constituency, or interns in my office, make clear to me that they are not too young to vote. They are impressive, and they are sensible. Most importantly, they are capable of making reasoned and independent judgments.

Colleagues share the same feelings when in discussions with their youth councillors, youth mayors and Members of the Youth Parliament from across the country. I would implore anyone who doubts whether or not 16 and 17-year-olds can make reasoned and sensible judgements over political issues to watch or listen to the debates of the Youth Parliament in the House of Commons each year.

We must not approach this with calculations of party advantage. The proposals in this manifesto have come about through serious consultation with young people; and they reflect the debate happening in schools, colleges and youth centres nationwide. It is now up to us as politicians to consider how best we might engage and empower the UK's future generations of voters.

About The Body Shop

As a B Corp business, The Body Shop is committed to ambitious social and environmental targets. Earlier this year, it established a Youth Collective to help amplify youth voices within its own business. The Body Shop Youth Collective is formed of 10-12 people from inside and outside the business, all aged under 30. They will advise The Body Shop Executive Leadership Team with the views and voices of young people.

The Body Shop invests heavily in activism and has a dedicated activism team, focused on research and tactics, operating around the world. Long before activism was an industry buzzword, The Body Shop has pushed for change where other brands saw risks. It has mobilised its global collective and campaigned for over 20 years on issues such as the rights of indigenous peoples, animal rights, sex trafficking and the burning of the Amazon rainforest.

About the British Youth Council

The British Youth Council is the National Youth Council of the UK.

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.

