

The following pages set out London Youth's response to the Youth Select Committee inquiry on lowering the voting age to 16.

About London Youth

London Youth supports a network of over 400 diverse community youth organisations where young people choose to go. With a unique reach to over 75,000 young Londoners, we deliver programmes with and through this network in every London borough and out of town at our two residential learning centres.

We nurture a breadth of expertise, because it creates integrated pathways for young people to learn in a range of settings through sports development, youth social action, outdoor education, inclusion and employability. By developing youth organisations and young people simultaneously, we strive for impact and sustainability.

Dare London, our Youth Advisory Board, exist to ensure everything we do is relevant and responsive to the needs of young Londoners. Aged 16-24, Dare Londoners volunteer to support and guide our work at all levels, from the recruitment of new staff and assessing quality standards of our member youth clubs, to designing and developing youth programmes, as well as sitting on our Trustee Board. Dare London is made up of a diverse group of young people, from those who are already quite active in their local youth club to those who would not normally engage in a leadership role of this kind. Young people use the opportunity not only to build their own skills, but to also give back to their local communities and improve the opportunities available to other young people more widely.

We have responded to this consultation by drawing on our experience of working with and through local trusted community youth organisations and young Londoners over the years, as well as by directly consulting young people such as those on Dare London.

Should the age at which people are allowed to vote be lowered? Why/why not? If yes, to what age?

The age at which people should be allowed to vote should be lowered to 16, because it is fair and more representative, 16-years olds have the qualities necessary to vote, and it would be beneficial to society as a whole.

At this age, young people are responsible for deciding their next steps from school, into further education or employment, and it is right that they are able to influence the politics that influence these decisions.

At the age of 16, our youth board work with London Youth staff in the same capacity as those who are older, and they provide the same level of support as their older board members. At this age they show they are able to provide invaluable opinions and ideas, as well as the skills, commitment and sense of responsibility to implement them.

At present, there appears to be a generally negative perception of many young people in the press and in media rhetoric, and this can lead to the diverging of generations. By granting young people of 16 the vote, it would help to build inter-generational relationships as it would show that older people respect the opinions and abilities of younger people, and help to build the intergenerational relationships.

For what reasons is the voting age currently set at 18? What qualities mean that a person is ready to vote? Do 16 and 17-year-olds possess these qualities?

Qualities that people need to possess to be ready to vote include: responsibility, understanding, analytical skills, understanding of the wider world and confidence.

Through the work London Youth conducts with and for young people, we have evidence that those younger than the age of 18 can possess these qualities, and be supported to develop these during childhood. Below are some examples of this.

London Youth's programme *Volunteer It Yourself (VIY)* combines volunteering and DIY, by challenging young people aged 14-17 in deprived areas to learn vocational trade and building skills on the job by committing to fix local youth clubs and community buildings in need of essential repairs. Supported by older trade mentors from Wickes with the practical work, young people are involved in the decision-making around which areas of their club need to be renovated and how, such as which new facilities are needed and which colour scheme to go for. This programme shows the analytical skills possessed by young people in assessing the best way to utilise the time to renovate the building. In London alone, VIY was delivered in 22 youth clubs, with a total of 517 participants and 405 young people being accredited from these clubs.

Athan 31 is a youth social action programme which provides young people with the framework and resources to have a say in which activities should be run in their local communities and to deliver these activities themselves alongside the support of a youth worker. The programme engages youth club members as young as 10 and 11 right up to 25. This programme shows the leadership skills that young people younger than 18 possess, and the responsibility they show in running a programme from conception to delivery. This programme also shows that those younger than 18 are able to appreciate the welfare of the wider community.

This is also seen through *Urban Nature*, a programme that enables young people to design, deliver and learn from their own environmental initiatives, appreciating the need to contribute to a sustainable London. In 2013, projects undertaken by youth clubs included a community garden, a grow-your-own 'pickle project', developing a sensory garden and improving youth centre's environmental impact. They also initiated a wide spectrum of environmental initiatives in response to their interests and locality. These included a furniture building from recycled material, an eco-mural, a cycle maintenance programme, a food growing project and beekeeping.

At our two outdoor education centres, Woodrow High House in Amersham and Hindleap Warren in East Sussex, we see first-hand how young people from a variety of ages can be equipped with the confidence, the resilience and the relationships to make better choices and challenge some of the inequalities they face themselves. This suggests that due to circumstance, not all 16 years olds may possess instant confidence and resilience, but that outdoors education can be used as one of the tools to help them develop this, and that it is proven to be achievable. As well as outdoors education, school, family and community-based youth provision all play a huge part in this.

Confidence is a quality that young people need to develop in order to vote as they must feel assured in their ability to influence decisions that impact them and their right to have a say in the running of their communities. Similarly, young people must feel confident that they will be listened to and that their engagement will be valued. Through giving 16-18 year olds the opportunity to vote, it could show a level of respect and trust from the political system that would in turn help to build this confidence, and sense of responsibility for their decisions.

Should the age at which people are able to vote vary between types of election? For example, should the voting age be different for local and General elections?

London Youth believes that there should be no difference in the voting age between different types of elections. The decisions made by local governments affect the lives of young people as well as the policy changes made by central government. Young people are impacted by local budget decisions, by local provisions and the quality of services. A particular example is the changing nature of funding opportunities available to youth clubs from local councils, and this impact this has on the daily lives of young people. Young people are similarly affected by central government policy, for instance further education funding and opportunities, and employment schemes.

Through Dare London, we have experience of working with young people from the age of 16 on political activity and have successfully engaged them on opportunities to campaign and discuss with policymakers about issues that impact them. Some even feed into the consultation and inquiry responses for London Youth, such as this one, and support the Communications Team to decide their forthcoming political strategy. They have also met with governmental department representatives, such as the Cabinet Office, to explain how broader policy can affect the running of their local youth clubs and the impact of policy decisions on young people in their locality. At the local constituency level, young people have hosted their local MPs and councillors at their youth clubs, effectively representing their youth organisation and the good work they do in the community. This shows that young people younger than 18 certainly have the awareness to vote for all elections.

What short term and long term effect would lowering the voting age have on voter turnout? Should the likely turnout of 16 and 17-year-old voters affect the decision on whether to lower the voting age?

The Dare Londoners believe that the decisions of some young people not to vote should not determine if all young people of a certain age should be able to vote. The main focus here should be how to encourage high turnout, through improved political education, and engaging with youth clubs and organisations that work with young people, to encourage greater political engagement.

Additionally, the Dare Londoners believed that by encouraging engagement at a lowered age, as they grow older, this habit would then be embedded, thereby increasing turnout in the long-run.

What can be learned from countries where the voting age is lower than 18 or where lowering the voting age has been proposed?

Much can be learned from our international counterparts about the value of lowering the voting age to 16. However, we currently do not have enough experience to comment specifically on this.

What was the motivation for allowing 16 and 17-year-olds to vote in the referendum on independence for Scotland? What can be learned from this example?

The Dare Londoners believed that even though the motivation to enfranchise 16-years olds may have been to harness national sensibilities, they believed that the variation in backgrounds and experiences of the young people mean that the election would benefit from a variety of opinions and political viewpoints. One example was given from the group, which was that although it may seem that initially young people from affluent areas with high standards of education may be more likely to vote due to the encouragement of teachers and parents, young people from all other backgrounds, including disadvantaged backgrounds, could be encouraged to vote in the same way through an effective system of political education and by utilising information education through out-of-school contexts too such as youth clubs. This in turn would ensure the voter turnout is higher and representative.

What would the practical implications of lowering the voting age be?

London Youth has experienced through many of its programmes the positive impact of giving young people increased responsibility, and the positive response this has from the young person, who then wants to show that the trust has been correctly placed. Therefore the impact on wider society would be beneficial; giving younger people the vote would help to combat the negative images of young people that are perpetuated by much of the media.

Another practical implication should be increased political education and support to young people in the political process. Through our programmes we know young people are capable, but proficient support from trained and trusted adults is equally important to such success. In Athan 31, we trained 47 youth workers and eight volunteers in youth social action principles in 2013, due to the understanding that this would be impact the programme's success. Similarly through outdoor education, the opportunity to learn with each other, and with trusted adults, to challenge themselves and enjoy and flourish in the natural environment, is a large part of a young person's personal development.

How effectively does citizenship education prepare young people to vote? How could it be used to prepare young people to vote?

From their personal experiences in their schools, Dare Londoners were generally quite critical of the existing provision and said that this was an area that needed great improvement. A key recommendation was to bring in experts in these areas, instead of using teachers of other subjects to fill the gap and teach outside of their expertise. Political education could benefit from bringing in representatives from *Bite the Ballot*, for example, and similarly sex education should be outsourced to representatives from local health centres or individuals from sexual health specific organisations.

Utilising informal education through the youth club system would also be very effective. From our experience of working with young people in their local youth club, which is somewhere that individuals choose to go themselves, we have found that, they are more receptive to new ideas and learning. Additionally, they develop trusting relationships with the youth workers, which is beneficial for a subject like citizenship education and political education.

What is the best way to engage young people with the political process?

This is an important opportunity for young people who are currently of voting age, as well as those currently below the age.

Following on from the previous question, improved education, through the school system, and the information education route is key. There should be a focus on the process of voting and practicalities, why political engagement is important, and how it can be used at a local and national level to influence policies that directly affect young people.

Dare Londoners believe that an important way of engaging young people is to show them what an important collective force they could be if they voted. By engaging and voting, political parties would need to formulate policies that benefit young people, because they would be an important target vote. The impact of policies on young people would therefore be a more important consideration for policymakers. Dare Londoners argued that this would eradicate the feeling that engaging in the political process is pointless.

It is also important to involve young people in the development of policies that are going to affect them because they are far more likely to be successful. London Youth are dedicated to ensuring that young people lead, as well as continually participate in the programmes that affect them. This

ethos can be exemplified by *Talent Match London*, a youth employability programme that is youth-led, and continues to have youth leadership and participation at its core. Ensuring young people have fed into all levels of the programme, including deciding which sectors to pursue for specific employer engagement, has ensured that the areas that really matter to young people are being represented in the programme. The impact of what young people look for in a programme has already provided great results with high levels of recruitment being reported.

If you would like more information on any areas of our work, or would like to discuss any of the issues referred to in this inquiry response with the young people London Youth work with, please contact me on Suzanne.Foster@londonyouth.org.uk or 020 7549 8844.