Report on Local Democracy
Issues for Young People

A Consultation Project by:

STROUD DISTRICT
YOUTH COUNCIL

FEBRUARY 2016

SUPPORTED BY:
**Introduction**

Young people’s participation and empowerment is an integral aspect of the Stroud District Youth Council (SDYC). Built upon the fundamental principles set down in legislation under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, SDYC strives to be the active voice of young people in the Stroud district. Through membership of the British Youth Council (BYC) we sometimes align ourselves to their various campaigns – in this instance (and following initial project work which began in 2012) it was decided to carry out a formal consultation project to canvas the opinion of young people in the district on lowering the voting age to 16 years. It was important to gain a mandate from young people before responding to the BYC Campaign.

With a desire to influence change, the dedicated SDYC Local Democracy Focus Group designed the consultative e-survey. This consultation was to reach a wide range of young people and was therefore sent out to every secondary school in the district as well as Sir William Romney School and the South Gloucestershire and Stroud College. It asked young people about whether they felt their voice was being heard, their views on voting and political education, and ultimately whether they would like the voting age reduced.

Alongside this work, the SDYC members also met with political group leaders within Stroud District Council and (at the time) prospective MP candidates. Supporting another BYC initiative, we also wanted to ‘Adopt a Lord’. Taking it upon themselves, however, the young people contacted three local Members of the House of Lords. Lord Michael Bichard, Baron of Nailsworth, Baroness Jean Corston who lives in Wotton-under-Edge, and Lady Janet Royal, Baroness of Blaisdon each met with members of the Local Democracy Focus Group to discuss the issue. They shared their thoughts on politics, as well as their role and their time in the House of Lords and each was pleased that the young people were keen to explore the issues. These meetings, throughout 2014 and 2015 enabled the young people to gain an understanding of the political landscape regarding voting age, as well as gauge local political opinion.

Through participation on the aforementioned meetings, SDYC gained support for researching what factors were causing concerns around voting, political education, and the BYC Votes at 16 campaign. This is the final report of this work.

**Aim**

‘To consult young people in the Stroud district regarding political education, their voice, their understanding and opinion of the political system, and the lowering of the voting age.’


George Gooch, SDYC Principle Member for Local Democracy 2014/15
The Results

The electronic survey was sent to 9 secondary schools in the area as well as SGS College (Stroud Campus).

There were 413 respondents across a wide age range: 11 to 18 years, of which;

- 69% were 11 – 14 years and 29% were 15 years and older

![Age Range Chart]

![Gender Balance Chart]
Did the young people feel their voice was heard locally?

- Almost 72% felt their voice was heard by teachers.
- Over 52% disagreed that their voice was heard by local councilors and a further 25% strongly disagreed.
- Less than 20% thought they were heard by their MP.
- Almost 40% felt they were listened to by SDYC.

If young people had the vote at 16 years, would they use it?

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<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
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- Almost 80% of participants agreed they would have used their vote.
- 81% of female participants would use their vote.
- 75% of male participants would use their vote.
- 84% of participants over 16 years would have voted (when they were 16 and 17).
- 80% of 11–15 year old participants would have voted.
Some reasons for the young people’s responses (for disagreeing or strongly disagreeing)

- 15 people felt they did not possess sufficient knowledge/experience to vote
- 12 thought they were too young to vote
- 5 people stated they would not be bothered as they were too busy

“16 year olds are not aware of the world as a greater place. I feel it would be irresponsible to let people with such a narrow world view decide how our country should be run.”

“There is not enough political education.”

“I would not know who to vote for.”

“Politics does not interest me, and to be quite frank I do not believe I have enough information to make an educated decision on the matter.”

“I would like to be informed enough to have a vote, but realistically I would be contributing an uninformed view which is dangerous to society.”
In terms of how their vote would be used:

- Over 80% would vote in the local elections
- Over 90% would vote in a General Election
- Almost two thirds would vote in a European Election or Referendum

Would participants know who to vote for?

- 67% agreed or strongly agreed that they would know who to vote for
- Almost 1/3 of participants disagreed that they would know which candidate to vote for
Would participants know where to get information?

- Only 20% strongly agreed that they would know where to go for information
- But, over 40% agreed that they know where to go for information
- Almost 10% strongly disagreed that they would know where to get information

"If I were to vote in an election this year, I'd know where to get information"

![Pie chart showing responses to the question.]

Political education and young people making informed decisions

- Almost 60% of respondents stated they were not taught enough about politics.

"I feel I have been taught enough about politics to have an informed opinion"

![Pie chart showing responses to the question.]

Lowering the Voting Age

Ultimately the survey aimed to gain an insight into whether the young people of the Stroud district thought the voting age should be lowered to 16 years. This would give a mandate to SDYC to represent this opinion at a local, regional and national level.

The respondents were therefore asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement;

“I think the voting age should be lowered to 16 year olds.”

- Over 70% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that 16 year olds should get the vote.
- Less than 10% strongly disagreed.
- Almost 5% gave the reason for their opinion due to the fact ‘Teachers don’t teach about politics.”
- Almost 10% stated that they felt 16 year olds were not mature enough.

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Why do you think this?

“...because young people who choose to vote, will do. Those aged over 18 who do not want to vote will still not do so.”

There were over 160 individual comments regarding political education and lowering the voting age to 16 years.
78% of the comments were positive and these can be categorized into separate groups.

21% of the comments mentioned the widening of the reach of politics and greater involvement. For instance, some suggested that the earlier people vote the more chance they will continue to vote.

Others commented that greater numbers would add to the political process.

17% of the comments stated that the government’s decisions affected young people and so they needed to be part of the discussion, as well as the fact that MPs needed to address young people’s issues.

“We [sixteen year olds] are the ones that will have to live through the decisions that are made now. If we can’t get the vote, then we can't choose the decisions that will impact our futures.”

31% of the respondents commented on the need for young people to have a voice and become actively engaged in politics.

21% of the comments that were in favour of lowering the voting age mentioned the future as being their primary concern.

“Most 16 year olds are mature enough to vote, and as the 16 - 18 year old age group is a vital group in which the government will affect, they should certainly be able to vote on their future
Over **14%** of the positive comments stated the rights of young people to have a voice and be heard in the decisions that affect them.

“Because it gives young peoples voices a chance to be heard.”

Other comments included the discrepancy between: being able to smoke; play the lottery; marry; fight for the country; drive; but not being able to vote.

“At the age of 16 you can legally marry your MP, yet you are considered too young to vote for them. This seems wrong.”

However, almost **21%** of the comments were not supportive of lowering the voting age and commented on age, maturity, being influenced and exams as the main reasons.

Over **12%** of all comments mentioned political education and knowledge being an important element to the debate.

“Politics has a massive implication on everyone’s lives [...], it would be great to have a say [...]. Of course this hinges upon being taught properly about politics...”
Conclusion

This report highlights a number of important issues of interest for organisations and agencies involved with young peoples’ engagement in the political process.

The Stroud District Youth Council, as the active voice for young people in the Stroud district, through the SDYC Local Democracy Focus Group, have acted as the project team for this consultation. They have concluded the following:

Whilst not all young people were able to participate in this survey, it was found that of those that did, there was an overwhelming support for an improvement to political education alongside the lowering of the voting age.

Many young people would like further opportunity to become engaged in the decision making processes that affect them because they have a right and a responsibility to impact positively on the future.

Therefore the survey highlights a number of key recommendations;

- The consultation grants a mandate for SDYC to continue to support the BYC in its campaign to reduce the voting age to 16 years.

- The results indicate the need to improve political education in schools and beyond.

- The survey illustrates an awareness of the political process, the rights of young people to have their voice heard, and the desire to engage actively with politicians and decision-makers.

Next Steps

- SDYC will continue to represent the voice of young people across the Stroud district.

- SDYC will explore setting up an event to raise the political awareness of young people in the district.

- SDYC will formally support the British Youth Council’s work around political action, including their Votes at 16 campaign and the Adopt-a-Lord initiative.

- SDYC will engage with local political stakeholders by presenting the report and supporting an open discussion to explore ideas stemming from this project.
Acknowledgements

This report was compiled by SDYC Local Democracy Focus Group members:

George Gooch               Charlotte Bignell
Holly Abbott               Thomas Schaffner
Oliver King                James Lauchlan
Lily Clarke                Ollie Catchpole
Nyima Trawally

With support from:

Steve Miles, Senior Youth Officer for Stroud District Council
Simon Gillings, CEO of Youth and Community Services