



A Submission to the Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy

Scottish Youth Parliament

Background to the Scottish Youth Parliament

Our vision is of a stronger, more inclusive Scotland that empowers young people by truly involving them in the decision-making process.

The Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) is democratically elected voice of Scotland's young people. We listen to young people, recognise the issues that are most important to them, and ensure that their voices are heard.

In working towards our aims, we support the following values:

Democracy - All of our plans and activities are youth-led, and we are accountable to young people aged 14-25. Our democratic structure, and the scale of direct participation across Scotland, gives us strength and sets us apart from other organisations.

Inclusion - We are committed to being truly inclusive. The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that all young people have a right to a voice, it doesn't matter who we are or where we come from. We celebrate our diversity.

Political independence - We are independent from political parties. Only by working with all legitimate political parties can we make progress on the policies that are important to young people.

Passion - We believe that drive and energy are key to successful campaigning. We are passionate about the key issues and believe that young people are part of the solution, not the problem.



Executive Summary

- The Scottish Youth Parliament welcomes the opportunity to submit a response to the Commission for Strengthening.
- The Scottish Youth Parliament would be supportive of measures that would enhance the responsibility and accountability of locally elected people, both Councillors and MSPs.
- The Scottish Youth Parliament would be supportive of measures that improve the consistency, availability, accessibility and quality of information in relation to what powers Local Authorities have over local decisions, what those decisions are, and when those decisions are made across all Local Authorities.
- The Scottish Youth Parliament would be supportive of measures that would further enhance the accountability and level of responsibility for locally elected people.
- The Scottish Youth Parliament would be supportive of any measures that would place requirements, such as minimum standards, on Local Authorities to involve young people in decision-making processes.
- The Scottish Youth Parliament would be supportive of any measures to strengthen local democratic decision making in Scotland through increasing the amount of information available and increased consultation on local decisions with the communities they affect.
- The Scottish Youth Parliament would be supportive of any measures to provide a more structured programme of engagement between Local Authorities/Service Providers, elected representatives and the existing youth participation structures, e.g. youth councils, MSYPs. Where these structures do not exist, they should be created.
- The Scottish Youth Parliament would be supportive of any measures to increase the quantity, accessibility and quality of information in relation to how local democracy may change or be improved, regardless of outcome of the independence referendum.



Methodology

The Scottish Youth Parliament are committed to a completely youth led structure. The responses submitted on behalf of the Scottish Youth Parliament are based on direct consultation with young people, existing SYP policy formulated by Members of the Scottish Youth Parliament and our youth manifesto “Change the Picture” which is based on nearly 43,000 responses to a mass consultation exercise with young people. Therefore, Scottish Youth Parliament responses are based on the genuine views of young people and should be seen as an accurate and fair representation in this regard.¹

This response is based on the findings of a mixture of quantitative and qualitative research in the form of a short online survey and a focus group session undertaken during December.²

¹ For more information about the Scottish Youth Parliament, our structures and our policy making procedures, visit www.syp.org.uk

² The online survey was facilitated through survey monkey and contained twelve questions based on the Commission’s “Call for Evidence” document but amended in order to be more age specific.



Background and Policy Precedent

The Scottish Youth Parliament welcomes the opportunity to respond to the “Call for Evidence” from the Commission for Strengthening Local Democracy. As the democratically elected voice of Scotland’s young people, the Scottish Youth Parliament actively pursue opportunities for young people to engage with local, national and international decision-makers and provide young people with platform to avail of those opportunities.

The Scottish Youth Parliament has existing policy that is directly relevant to this response. The following statement was endorsed by 80% of the responses to our “Change the Picture” youth manifesto:³

“All young people should be involved in the services which affect them and should have the opportunity to get involved in local decision making opportunities.”

SYP Response: Research Findings

This section provides the research findings from the online survey and focus group sessions. Respondents were asked to choose the extent to which they agree with each of the following statements ranging from: Completely Disagree; Disagree a little; Neither agree nor disagree; Agree a little; and, Completely agree.

Decisions about local issues and services are made locally enough in Scotland.

Whilst just over a fifth of respondents indicated that they neither agree nor disagree with this statement. Furthermore, the respondents were split between those who either completely disagree or disagree a little (38.5%) and the opposite view (38.4%).

³ The consultation exercise for “Change the Picture” received nearly 43,000 responses and can be accessed here:

<http://www.syp.org.uk/img/Youth%20Manifesto/Scottish%20Youth%20Parliament%20Youth%20Manifesto-%20Change%20the%20Picture.pdf>



In response to the question of what “locally” means to you, the majority of respondents responded with “near where I live” or “my area” or “my community.”

This split was further echoed by those who participated in the focus group sessions. Participants noted that there was diverse range of experiences across different Local Authorities. Notable comments from the focus group sessions included:

“I agree. My area was going to merge two secondary schools and the council carried out a consultation and listened to the opinions of the people. The schools were not merged.”

“Disagree a little. Councils are not regional enough to make big decisions, but not small enough to make locals ones.”

“Local is your town. It should be as local as it can get.”

It is important for locally elected people to be responsible for decisions about local issues and services.

An overwhelming majority of the young people who responded to our online survey indicated that they agree with this statement: 29.7% of respondents indicated that they Agree a little; and, 57.6% indicated that they Completely Agree.

Notable comments from the young people that participated in focus group sessions include:

“Local representatives should have more power over local issues”

“It is very important that locally elected officials are accountable for the services they deliver.”

“Local power is a good thing, further devolution is good thing.”

Recommendation: The Scottish Youth Parliament would be supportive of measures that would enhance the responsibility and accountability of locally elected people, both Councillors and MSPs.



There is enough information about who makes decisions about local issues and services in my area.

In response to this statement, a majority of respondents indicated that they either Disagree a little (37.8%) or Completely disagree (22.1%). However, a sizeable number of young people indicated that they Agree a little (20.9%). This points to an issue that was identified and confirmed through focus group work; the amount of information provided by Local Authorities about local decision is extremely varied.

Notable comments from focus group sessions include:

“Since the Scottish Parliament came about, people have become apathetic about local decisions because they are unaware where the distinctions lie.”

“There is a lack of education and information around Government and what matters are and are not devolved to Local Authorities. People aren’t sure what decisions are made locally, in Holyrood, in Westminster, and in Brussels.

Recommendation: The Scottish Youth Parliament would be supportive of measures that improve the consistency, availability, accessibility and quality of information in relation to what powers Local Authorities have over local decisions, what those decisions are, and when those decisions are made across all Local Authorities.

Locally elected people have a lot of responsibility for local issues and services.

Whilst the majority of young people who responded indicated that they Agree a little (33.1%) or Completely agree (22.7%), a sizeable number of respondents said that they Neither agree nor disagree (26.7%). This further supports the view that in many cases, young people may not be aware of what decisions are made at which level of government and young people’s experiences and perceptions vary depending on where they live.

Some notable comments from the focus group sessions included:



“I don’t the public know enough about very local levels of democracy - many groups have a big influence on Local Authorities and don’t get credit for the hard work they do.”

“They should take responsibility for things that go wrong, because they do when things go well.”

“The Scottish Parliament system is very open, if you devolved further responsibilities to the Local Authorities, could you ensure the system was as open and transparent.”

Locally elected people should have more responsibility for local issues

An overwhelming number of young people indicated that they either Agree a little (36.6%) or Completely agree (34.9%) with this statement.

Reasons cited for this response in the online survey include:

“Locally elected people are closest to the community and therefore should have more power when it comes to local decisions.”

“Because they know the area first hand.”

“They have been elected to make decisions by local people, and therefore should have the power to do it.”

Recommendation: The Scottish Youth Parliament would be supportive of measures that would further enhance the accountability and level of responsibility for locally elected people.

Young People are encouraged to be involved in local issues and services

Whilst many of the young people indicated that they Neither agree nor disagree with this statement, more young people indicated that they either Completely disagree (15.1%) and Disagree a little (18.6%) than those who Agree a little (14%) or Completely agree (12.8%). This is further evidence that in many occasions, even where there are



opportunities for young people to participate, they are not aware that those opportunities exist.

Some of comments from the online survey included:

“I have been offered any opportunities before.”

“I had the opportunity to join my local youth council, but I am not sure how impact or influence it has.”

“Encouraged but not supported sufficiently and/or things aren't pitched at the right level.”

There are enough opportunities for the views of young people to be heard by local decision makers

In response to this statement, a majority of respondents indicated that they Completely disagree (23.8%) or Disagree a little (34.9%). Only 21.5% of respondents indicated that they either Completely agree or Agree a little.

Evidence from the focus group session indicated that there are some Local Authorities that provide excellent opportunities for young people to have their views heard.

Some notable comments include:

“Youth Councils should engage more as well. In my local area, there are lots of opportunities but young people don't take them up.”

“Sometimes involving young people seems to be tokenistic.”

“Some areas do not use young people at all and some engage a diverse range of young people. It varies.”

<p>Recommendation: The Scottish Youth Parliament would be supportive of any measures that would place requirements, as minimum standards, on Local Authorities to involve young people in decision-making processes.</p>



Local decision makers make enough effort to engage young people in decisions about local issues and services

The majority of young people who responded indicated that they either Completely disagree (24.4%) or Disagree a little (33.1%). A fifth of young people who responded indicated that they Neither agree nor disagree. Whilst this suggest that most young people feel that local decision makers do not make enough effort to engage young people, many young people appear to be unaware of what local decision makers are doing in this regard. In addition, the 16% of young people who indicated that they Agree a little with this statement supports the view that there are some Local Authorities that perform very well in this regard. This was supported by the evidence from focus group sessions.

Some notable comments include:

“The youth council in my area just had its budget cut.”

“Local Authorities try to engage young people, but many don’t know how.”

“Local Authorities can be narrow in their approach to reaching young people. They target or visit a school and assume that a box has been ticked and all young people have been consulted.”

“Some councils genuinely want to hear from young people; others just want to use them.”

More should be done to strengthen local democratic decision making in Scotland

An overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that they Agree a little (35.5%) or Completely agree (44.2%).

Some of the comments from the online survey in relation to how this could achieved included:

“Improve local community centres facilities. Increase and improve the number of community interactions e.g. meetings regarding local problems.”

“Engage more with youth forums in schools and youth councils.”



“Involve young people in decision making to a much greater extent and on a more consistent basis.”

Recommendation: The Scottish Youth Parliament would be supportive of any measures to strengthen local democratic decision making in Scotland through increasing the amount of information available and increased consultation on local decisions with the communities they affect..

Young people should have more opportunities to have their voices heard by local decision makers

The majority of respondents indicated that they either Agree a little (23.3%) or Completely agree (60.5%).

When asked about how young people could be more involved, some of online responses included:

“Local Decision makers could spend more time in schools and education settings talking with young people.”

“Provide young people with more information.”

“More structure programme of engagement between LAs and local youth councils/MSYPs.”

“Youth only surgeries with elected representatives.”



Recommendation: The Scottish Youth Parliament would be supportive of any measures to provide a more structured programme of engagement between Local Authorities/Service Providers, elected representatives and the existing youth participation structures e.g. youth councils, MSYPs. Where these structures do not exist, they should be created.

There has been enough discussion about local democracy in the debate about Scotland's future

Whilst a large number of respondents indicated that they Neither agree nor disagree (27.3%), nearly 20% more of respondents either Completely disagree (23.8%) or Disagree a little (22.7%) in comparison to those who Completely Agree (6.4%) or Agree a little (19.8%). This indicates that many young people are unsure about the extent to which local democracy has featured in the debate about Scotland's constitutional future thus far.

Some notable comments made during the focus groups include:

“No, both sides have failed to engage with young people and to talk about either option will affect local democracy.”

“Too much focus on national level, not enough on local.”

“They are not asking people in local communities about how they want the future of local democracy to look.”

Recommendation: The Scottish Youth Parliament would be supportive of any measures to increase the quantity, accessibility and quality of information in relation to how local democracy may change, or be improved, regardless of outcome of the independence referendum.



Concluding Remarks

The Scottish Youth Parliament welcomes the opportunity to respond to the “Call for Evidence” by the Commission for Strengthening Local Democracy. Indeed, we welcome the opportunity for further engagement in this process going forward.

The key findings of our research in advance of this response indicate the following:

- The amount of information available about who makes decisions in local areas, when, and what decisions local representatives can make is insufficient and varies according to each Local Authority;
- Although there are some examples of excellent work, the opportunities for young people to meaningfully participate in local democratic decision making are few in number and can often be tokenistic; and,
- There is a need to involve the community and young people in any plans to reshape local democracy in light of the debate on the constitutional future of Scotland.

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