

## **Workshop Report:**

### **The Leverhulme Trust-funded Project: *Learning from Scotland: Your Experiences of 'Votes at 16'***

**Scottish Youth Parliament, November 2019**

#### **Introduction**

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is the basis for the Scottish Youth Parliament's (SYP's) vision, mission and values. In particular, SYP embodies Article 12 of the UNCRC, which states that young people have the right to express their views freely and have their opinions listened to in all matters affecting them. As a completely youth-led charity, the words and sentiment of Article 12 have profound importance for our work.

#### **Our Vision**

The Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) is the democratic voice of Scotland's young people. Our vision for Scotland is of a nation that actively listens to and values the meaningful participation of its young people. Our goal is to make this vision a reality, in order to ensure young people in Scotland grow up loved, safe and respected, and able to realise their full potential.

#### **Our Mission**

SYP is a rights-based charity, with members supported by all of Scotland's 32 local authorities and 11 National Voluntary Organisations.

SYP's mission is to provide a national platform for young people to discuss the issues that are important to them, and campaign for changes to the nation that they live in. We support our members in their work by training them, supporting their personal development and empowering them, using a youth work ethos.

Our democratically elected members listen to and recognise the issues that are most important to young people in every community across the country and ensure that decision-makers listen to their voices.

#### **Our Values**

- **Democracy** – We are youth-led and accountable to young people aged 14 to 25. Our democratic structure and the scale of our engagement across Scotland gives us a mandate that sets us apart from other organisations.
- **Rights** – We are a rights-based organisation. We are passionate about making young people aware of their rights, and ensuring that local and national governments uphold their rights.

- **Inclusion and Diversity** – We are committed to being truly inclusive and work tirelessly to ensure policymakers and politicians hear the voices of young people from every community and background in Scotland.
- **Political Impartiality** – We are independent from all political parties. By working with all stakeholders, groups, and individuals who share our values, we deliver the policies that are most important to young people.

## SYP Recommendations

The Scottish Youth Parliament recommends that:

- The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that there should be more information around elections which is non biased, less daunting and easily accessible – aimed at young people with more notice before elections, and for parties to be encouraged to campaign with and to young people to enhance engagement. SYP Policy recommendation passed on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2018.
- The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that every young person should learn about politics in secondary schools across Scotland, including teaching about political systems and voting, to ensure that they have the best start for engaging in politics. SYP Policy Statement, passed on 27<sup>th</sup> October 2017 with 89% agreement.
- The Scottish Youth Parliament believes schools should impartially assist pupils in registering to vote. SYP Policy Statement, passed on 24<sup>th</sup> October 2015 with 85% agreement.
- The Scottish Youth Parliament recommends that political literacy is included in S3 and S4 Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) classes, and therefore calls on the Scottish Government to include a specific action in their Children and Young People’s Rights Action Plan to this effect. SYP Policy Recommendation, passed on 18<sup>th</sup> April 2018.
- To avoid tokenism when politicians and political parties are consulting with young people, especially prior to elections, youth work organisations such as the Scottish Youth Parliament must be sustained to ensure that meaningful dialogue can take place.
- The Scottish Youth Parliament believes the voting age should be lowered to 16 for all elections and referendums in Scotland, the UK, and Europe. SYP Manifesto Statement, passed on 12<sup>th</sup> March 2016, with 70% agreement.

## ***Learning from Scotland: Your Experiences of 'Votes at 16.'***

SYP welcomes the opportunity to respond and contribute to the Leverhulme Trust-funded *Lowering the Voting Age in the UK* project, the first ever research to talk to young people across the UK about Votes at 16. This response is based on the findings of co-designed questions in the **#WhatsYourTake** survey prior to SYP's 70<sup>th</sup> National Sitting in Dunfermline, Fife and the **Consultation Workshop** which took place on Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> October 2019.

The workshop was attended by **24 young people**, called 'Learning from Scotland: Your Experience of 'Votes at 16' and was co-produced by SYP's Culture and Media Committee Convener and Deputy Convener, Wiktoria Orlicka MSYP and John Walker MSYP and Dr Andrew Mycock, Reader in Politics at the University of Huddersfield and Co-investigator of the Leverhulme Trust project.

This consultation offered opportunities to share and discuss attitudes and experiences of young Scots to voting at 16. The project seeks to explore what lessons young people and policy makers elsewhere in the UK – where the voting age is still 18 – can learn from Scotland. Through a series of interactive activities, MSYPs gave their views on three key themes. MSYPs discussed if young people in Scotland felt sufficiently prepared to ensure they were ready to vote at 16, if they felt they are valued and well represented by politicians and political parties in Scotland and the rest of the UK, and if Votes at 16 has influenced how young people in Scotland understand and experience transitions to adulthood. These views are summarised below.

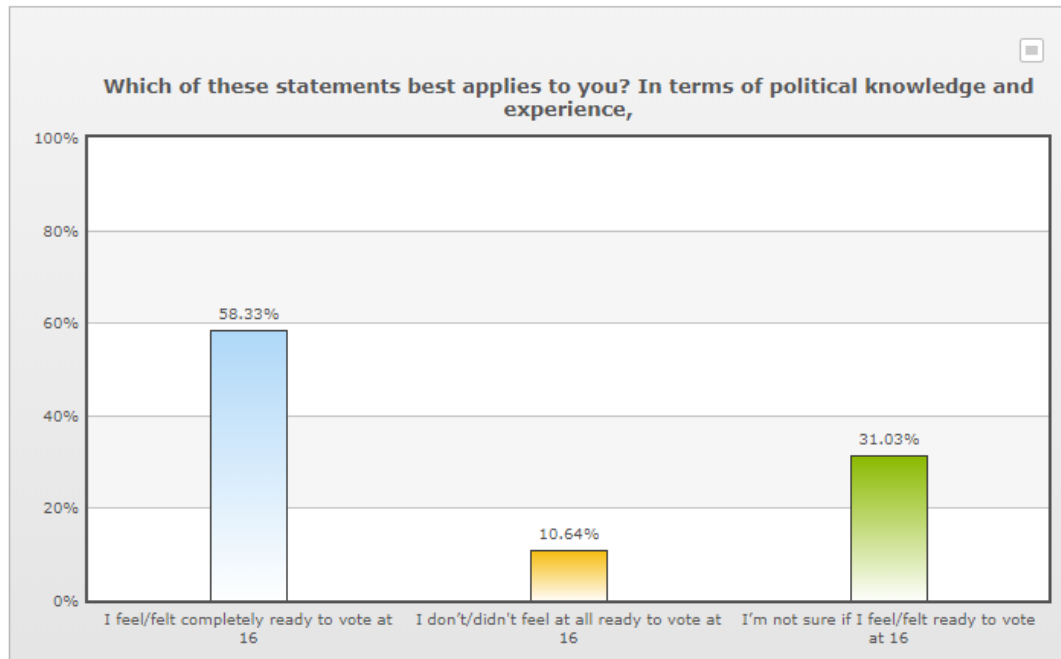
The #WhatsYourTake online survey was open from 27<sup>th</sup> September until 30<sup>th</sup> October, gathering **817 responses** from young people aged 12-25 across Scotland, from all 32 local authorities, our 11 national voluntary organisations and various others representing a diverse range of communities of interest, '**seldom heard**' **groups** and lived experience (including different faiths, disabilities, care and carer experience, LGBTQI+, a range of cadets, sports and environmental clubs, Shelter and Police Scotland Youth Volunteers).

### **Background information of survey respondents**

The majority of respondents are at school (86%) and aged 12-14 (48%) and 15-17 (42%). 55% of respondents are female, 40% were male, 2% identified as non-binary and 1% prefer to use their own term. 16% of respondents belong to minority ethnic groups.

## Findings

**Which of these statements best applies to you? In terms of political knowledge and experience.**



### Online responses in support

The vast majority of online survey respondents report that they feel or felt completely ready to vote at 16 (58%). Reasons for this include a general awareness of politics, individual research into key issues, feeling responsible to vote and the benefits of studying politics/ Modern Studies and developing skills at school:

- *I'm very aware of politics and I'm ready to input*
- *Because I feel responsible, enough and I care about how my country is run.*
- *I am aware of what goes on politically and regularly see discussion in school about politics. I think skills developed in school have helped me feel confident in researching party promises etc. so even though I don't know everything I'd feel capable to figure it out :)*
- *I studied modern studies for 3 years and politics for 1 in school so I feel confident in my political knowledge*

### Online response criticisms:

11% of online survey respondents report that they do not or did not feel ready to vote at 16. When asked to give reasons for their answer, general themes emerged including a lack of knowledge on the process and the outcomes of voting, not feeling experienced enough to make an informed decision and peer pressure from family and friends.

**Lack of knowledge on the process and the outcomes of voting:**

- *Not enough political info for young people on platforms such as social media*
- *I struggled with what the details were of voting , I'd never considered it much prior to getting the ballot through the post, and then was left not having enough time to research and make an informed decision so chose not to exercise my right to vote, however now I do regret that decision.*
- *Because I may not fully understand the repercussions of my vote*

**Not experienced enough:**

- *We are not experienced enough in life to be able to form proper political views truly representing what we desire that we would also desire in, for example, 20 years. We may be the future generation, however we still need to make sure we're old enough to fully understand the political system and the changes we want for our social environments.*

**Peer pressure/ influence from family members as a barrier:**

- *While I felt well informed at 16, the majority of people do not. At 16 you are still a child and you are often still very impressionable by propaganda/ peer pressure*
- *Too much pressure from family to vote for something they want*

Many online responses also demanded greater political education in schools. There were suggestions to make political education compulsory, introducing a basic politics course separate from Modern Studies. Some respondents argued that introducing basic political education from a young age would ensure that young people are knowledgeable about the voting process and therefore confident and ready to vote at 16:

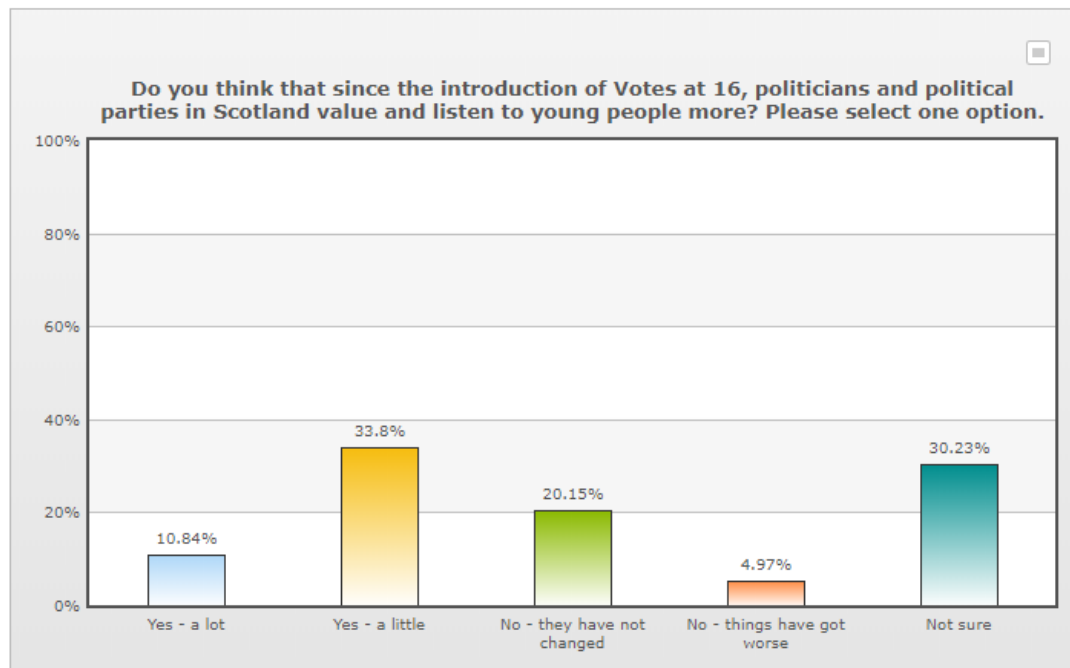
- *I think at the age of 16 I was not politically aware enough to vote, however this is not an issue with age as much as it is an issue with knowledge. Had politics been compulsory in my school, then I think it would have been okay. What is most important to watch out for (to learn a lesson from Austria) is that voters should know about biases, diversity and other issues that affect people besides them. To tackle this, I think the best thing would be if people of all ages, not just young voters, had to take a compulsory training or test on the topics before voting.*
- *Not enough education on politics in the school curriculum*
- *I now know basic politics but only thanks to studying Modern Studies this year at school, I think more pupils should be taught about politics in school, even if it was just an afternoon activity session/talk, so that more people understand what they are actually voting for.*

- *Often politics is hard to understand and isn't mandatory in school. If people were taught the political system from a young age, individuals may feel more knowledgeable & competent when voting and therefore want to play their part*
- *It was never discussed at school and therefore I feel I would be inclined to vote the same as family etc. rather than make my own decision. Schools need to approach this better*

### Workshop findings:

At the workshop, MSYPs took part in walking debates. Several statements were read aloud and MSYPs moved to either side of the room depending on whether they agreed or disagreed. There was also the option to stand in the middle if unsure or to abstain. The first statement was “*Young people in Scotland are sufficiently prepared to vote at 16.*” From this activity, 26% of participants agreed, with 63% disagreeing and 11% unsure. Discussions from this activity support the online responses, in that young people are unsure how to register and there is no education on the practical side of voting. There was also mention that voting can often feel too centralized for other communities.

**Do you think that since the introduction of Votes at 16, politicians and political parties in Scotland value and listen to young people more? Please select one option.**



Majority of online survey respondents claimed that since the introduction to votes at 16, politicians and political parties in Scotland value and listen to young people a “little” (34%) or “a lot” (11%).

They found politicians and political parties to value young people as part of society and willing to listen and take young peoples’ opinions seriously.

- *They're more eager to attend youth events*
- *I feel like now young people from the age of 16 have just about as many rights as any adult when it comes to making political decisions on Scottish issues, so our voices are definitely more heard.*
- *I just think the Scottish government values that part of its population, as it does with every other demographic. They understand that it is vital to hear what young people have to say.*
- *Yes , I do believe that they are willing to listen and take seriously what we are saying and can hopefully act with our help to achieve what we think is in the best interest with young people's views and opinions in mind.*

### **Online response criticisms:**

25% of online respondents disagreed with this statement. Furthermore, a further 30% were not sure about this issue.

Politicians and political parties may try to listen to young people, but some doubt the sincerity of this, finding this to be tokenistic and question what actions are taken as a result. In addition, some respondents criticised the motives behind involving young people, feeling that political parties use this as a way of gaining more votes. Issues affecting young people were also mentioned as being ignored, including climate change, Brexit, unwanted wars as well as one response referring to cuts to local authority funding. However, there was one response highlighting UNCRC incorporation as a great example of young peoples’ rights taken more seriously.

- *Feels as if we have more of a voice, just that there isn't always the actions to back it up.*
  - *They pay lip service to listening to young people, but when it comes to issues we care about (like climate change, unwanted wars/conflicts or Brexit) they don't actually respect or listen to us.*
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- *There's still tokenism*
  - *YOYP<sup>1</sup> seemed to incorporate the views of Young People more, but it is difficult to say if the politicians and parties value the opinion of young people, or if it is just a face they put on to attract support.*

<sup>1</sup> Year of Young People (YoYP) 2018 was the first themed year to focus on the contribution of a group of people. YoYP2018 aimed to inspire Scotland through its young people, celebrating their achievements, valuing their contribution to communities, and creating new opportunities for them to shine locally, nationally and globally: <https://www.gov.scot/policies/tourism-and-events/major-events/>

- *Cynically, political parties/politicians need votes! They listen to young people because they need political support. Nevertheless, children and young people's rights is further up the political agenda, especially with UNCRC incorporation.*

Some responses also noted that more could be done to show that young people are valued and listened to. The role that organisations play in facilitating discussions between politicians and young people was mentioned, as was the patronising tone that young people can often face, thus discouraging them for getting involved:

- *I think there could be more done to show that government care about young people's issues.*
- *People often patronise young people so many do not even want to give their opinion.*
- *It's been more about organisations encouraging young people to be more involved in politics and therefore meeting politicians and getting their voice heard.*

### **Workshop findings:**

At the workshop, the second statement during the walking debates activity was *"Politicians and decision makers are actively listening to young people in Scotland."* 45% of MSYPs agreed with this statement, 25% disagreed and 30% were unsure. Those that agreed referred to the recent Climate Change Strikes where politicians and decisions makers have been listening, and Scottish Youth Parliament's Annual Cabinet Meeting. Those that voted "unsure" explained that while politicians do listen, to an extent, it is often just tokenistic or to "tick the box." Others also felt that decision makers only talk with people who they think are already engaged.

The third statement during this workshop was *"Young people's voices are given equal weight to adults."* During this debate, 17% agreed, 61% disagreed and 22% abstained. Some MSYPs felt it depended on the issue, whilst those that disagreed argued that young people are still stigmatised as "stupid" and therefore their voices are often dismissed.

The fourth statement was *"Young people in Scotland are having an effect on Scottish and UK politics."* 88% of MSYPs agreed with this statement, 6% disagreed and 6% abstained. For those that agreed, one MSYP noted *"we've fundamentally changed the political environment. Must listen to us or they know they'll be voted out."* Those that disagreed or abstained from this statement noted the difference between Scotland and UK, some arguing that young people have had an effect in Scotland but not on a wider UK level. From this discussion, a final question was posed to the group, *"Who do you feel represents you?"* These responses were very mixed, one MSYP noted *"My MP represents me better than my MSP"* while another said *"Scotland engages and is closer to us than Westminster."*



**Adulthood Timeline Task:**

Another aim of the workshop was to establish whether votes at 16 has influenced young people in Scotland's understanding and experience of transitions to adulthood. As an activity, MSYPs were given an "adulthood timeline" that indicated some key markers in transitioning into adulthood, e.g. the right to vote, consent to own adoption, get married, hold a driver's licence etc. MSYPs were asked to add in other events or social markers they felt were part of transitioning into adulthood. The following responses were considered by MSYPs to be key markers:

- Vote in SYP elections
- Stand as a SYP candidate
- Join a Political Party
- National Insurance Number
- Begin high school
- Leave school
- Serve on a jury
- Drink alcohol
- Being given an adult passport
- Buy a house/ get a mortgage
- Consent to sex
- Join the army

**Contact and visit us:**

Should you wish to meet with us or update us on how the findings will feed into your work, please do not hesitate to get in touch with us using the details below.

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