

Response to the Consultation on the electoral administration and reform White Paper - Written evidence

Dr Christine Huebner (Lecturer, University of Sheffield), Dr Katherine A. Smith (Research Fellow, University of York), Dr Thomas Loughran (Lecturer, Lancaster University), Dr Jan Eichhorn (Senior Lecturer, University of Edinburgh), and Dr Andrew Mycock (Reader, University of Huddersfield)

This submission builds on evidence from original research carried out as part of the UK Democracy Fund-funded project 'Making Votes-at-16 work in Wales' led by Dr Christine Huebner¹ and the Leverhulme Trust-funded project 'Lowering the Voting Age across the UK' led by Dr Andrew Mycock.² The research project generated evidence on the lowering of the voting age to 16 in Wales and how young voters aged 16 and 17 experience and participate in elections, based on focus groups with diverse groups of young people aged between 16 and 22; election diaries kept by young people in the weeks around the 2021 Senedd elections; interviews with politicians, policy-makers, representatives of Welsh youth organisations, electoral registration officers, and youth workers; and analysis of survey and archival data.

We welcome the consultation and the opportunity to submit evidence. Our submission is made with a view to electoral administration that supports and benefits the participation of 16- and 17-year-old first-time voters and young voters throughout their transitions into adulthood. This submission is in response to the questions 1 (on general principles), 3, 8, 11, 12 (on an all-Wales database and voter registration), 45 and 46 (on supporting voter participation).

General principles for electoral reform

In response to Question 1

1.1 Evidence from research with young people in Wales supports principles for electoral reform that centre on, in particular, equity and accessibility as well as on improving citizen experience and simplicity. Focus groups with 16- and 17-year-olds showed that first-time eligible voters face a number of barriers to turning out to vote in elections and that, as a consequence, some perceive voting as complicated and inaccessible.³ In particular young people who do not receive much family support in overcoming these barriers often reported dropping off their journeys from first-time voters to developing a lifelong habit of participation, leading to inequalities in youth voter engagement.⁴

1.2 Efforts for electoral reform should additionally follow a principle of long-term responsiveness. Our focus groups demonstrate that often young people feel that the electoral process (and its role within the political system more generally) is not sufficiently responsive to their needs and priorities. Young people have expressed the opinion that they are engaged with in a superficial and top-down manner.⁵ Embedding the principle of responsiveness would ensure these concerns are prioritised within future planning.

¹ Huebner, C., Smith, K., Mycock, A., Loughran, T. & Eichhorn, J. (2021). *Making Votes-at-16 Work in Wales: Lessons for the Future*. Nottingham: Nottingham Trent University. Accessible at http://www.ukvotingage.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Huebner-et-al_2021_Making-Votes-at-16-work-in-Wales.pdf

² Loughran, T., Mycock, A., & Tonge J. (2021). *The 'Welsh Way' to Votes-at-16*. University of Huddersfield.

Accessible at <http://www.ukvotingage.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/The-Welsh-Way-to-Votes-at-16.pdf>

³ Loughran et al., (2021), p. 8.

⁴ Huebner et al. (2021), p. 14.

⁵ Huebner et al. (2021), p. 12. See also Loughran et al., (2021), p. 9.

1.3 Narrative plays a key part in demonstrating the 6 proposed principles, plus the proposed seventh, responsiveness, to first-time voters and in establishing voting as a normalised habit. Conceptualising youth voter engagement as a ‘journey’ from first-time eligible voter to developing long-term habits of participation⁶ allows reform efforts to address barriers to voting strategically and with targeted interventions to respond to young people’s changing needs as voters, instead of being responsive to the immediate context of electoral engagement only.

Recommendation:

1A. Add responsiveness as a 7th principle for electoral reform to embed in reform efforts that electoral processes are a form of two-way exchange between citizens and political actors (both politicians and administrators), something that is particularly important for young people whose needs as voters will often be changing over time.

Simplify electoral registration and the introduction of an All-Wales database

In response to questions 3, 8, 11, and 12

2.1 One of the largest barriers to young people’s participation in elections currently is voter registration. Focus groups with 86 young people from across Wales showed that many of the 16- and 17-year-olds first eligible to vote in 2021 were not aware of the need to register to vote, did not receive or not open official communication on registering to vote, or were not able to register to vote without additional support (e.g., not knowing that they needed National Insurance numbers).⁷ Disparities in the level of support young people received from family members and in the approaches local councils chose to welcome young people to the vote led to big differences in the number of young people registered to vote in different local areas and ultimately to inequalities in voter participation among 16- and 17-year-olds across local areas and families.⁸

2.2 The introduction of automatic voter registration and an all-Wales database would have a positive impact on the electoral process for young voters and contribute to the long-term success of Votes-at-16 in Wales by offering opportunities to remove this barrier to electoral participation as well as one source of inequality in voter registration, geographical inequality. An all-Wales database could further play an integral role in ensuring young people are supported and do not need to register to vote throughout their transitions into adulthood, as it allows young people to stay on the electoral roll and to look up if and where they are registered to vote once they move out of the parental home.

2.3 Concerns about the protection of personal data for under-age 16- and 17-year-olds, or alternatively, the maintenance of multiple electoral rolls, have been raised by EROs in connection with Votes-at-16.⁹ Automatic voter registration and the introduction of an all-Wales database could simplify the administration of multiple electoral rolls, because people can be automatically placed on the ‘minors’ electoral roll when 16 and then transferred to the main electoral roll at 18. This would improve data security and make the management of elections especially for 16- to 18-year-olds more efficient.

⁶ Huebner et al. (2021). Young People’s Voting Journeys. An interactive infographic for each stage of young people’s voting journeys. Accessible at <http://www.ukvotingage.co.uk/votingjourney/>.

⁷ Huebner et al. (2021), p. 10.

⁸ Ibid., p. 10. See also Barker, M. & Flint, R. (5th May 2021). Welsh elections: At least 35,000 young people not registered to vote. BBC News. Accessible at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-56919775>.

⁹ Loughran et al., p. 7.

2.4 Registration of students whilst enrolling at universities offers an additional way to capture young eligible voters, though with a relatively high administrative burden on students (when coupled with enrolment this falls into a period that is traditionally busy and overwhelming particularly for new students), university staff, and EROs. As a singular measure, it is late to address young people as voters (who may be eligible to vote in Welsh elections well before going to university) and will likely lead to increased inequality in voter participation, as the practice does not address young people who choose not to go to university. The introduction of an all-Wales database would require that only students who move to Wales for higher or further education register to vote (as Welsh students would already be on the electoral roll), limiting the administrative effort required to implement this student voter registration and balancing its impact on inequality.

2.5 Potential negative impacts of automatic voter registration and an all-Wales database will be a lack of awareness among 16- and 17-year-olds of their enrolment and eligibility to vote and the confusion around the differences in registration processes for different elections, notably Welsh vs. UK-wide and PCC elections. Our research finds that the parallel administration of Senedd and PCC elections in May 2021 caused substantial confusion among first-time voters, who did not understand the differences in electoral administration.¹⁰ Similar confusion is likely after the introduction of automatic voter registration and young voters may not know that they need to register for elections not covered by Welsh legislation.¹¹

2.6 Any pilot project of automatic voter registration before an all-Wales rollout should therefore include awareness raising measures to ensure 16- and 17-year-olds are firstly, aware they are registered and eligible to vote and secondly, recognise the differences in electoral administration for Welsh and UK elections. Pilots should test what kind of awareness raising programmes are more likely to encourage young people to be aware and able to use look-up functions to check their registration and, ultimately, to vote in Welsh elections. It could be piloted how effective it is for schools and colleges to host formal events recognising young people who were placed on the electoral roll.

Recommendations:

- 2A.** Remove practical barriers to voting that are specific to newly enfranchised voters by introducing automatic voter registration and an all-Wales database, incl. an electoral roll for minors and automatic transfer to the main electoral roll at age 18;
- 2B.** Introduce registration for further and higher education students as an additional measure, addressing only students who have not previously been placed into an all-Wales database, e.g., because they moved to Wales to go to university or college;
- 2C.** Before an all-Wales rollout, pilot awareness raising measures to ensure 16- and 17-year-olds are aware they are registered and eligible to vote, and only in Welsh elections.

Supporting voters to participate in elections

In response to questions 45 and 46

3.1 Adequate voter information presents a barrier to the electoral participation of 16- and 17-year-olds. In our research, several young people reported deciding not to vote, because they did not feel they had enough information to confidently make a political choice.¹² As first-time voters, many 16- and 17-year-olds are likely to not yet have established patterns of

¹⁰ Huebner et al. (2021), p. 24.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 11.

¹² Ibid., p. 11.

partisanship. This highlights the need to ensure that young voters are adequately informed about candidates and political parties' positions and policies. Youth workers stressed the need to have a place, e.g., one online platform, where young people (and the groups that work with them) can gain authoritative information about candidates and party platforms.¹³ An online voter information platform could address this issue by presenting information about candidates and party platforms in ways that are relevant to young voters.

3.2 Information on any voter information platform must be presented in an accessible way and in a language which provides clarity and highlights issues that are relevant to young people. Candidates and political parties are best placed to supply voter information directly to a platform. However, our research in the context of the 2021 Senedd election showed that political parties were not able to deliver voter information in ways that was adequate for and relevant to most 16- and 17-year-olds. Youth engagement workers criticised the lack youth-specific voter information materials from political parties.¹⁴

3.3 Therefore, candidates and political parties who submit information to an online voter information platform should be supported by a dedicated board of young people, for example through existing structures and members of the Welsh Youth Parliament. Information can be co-produced by candidates/political parties and this board of young people, ensuring it is relevant to and adequate for most young people. The board of young people could further review submissions for their relevance to and understanding by young people and would have the power to ask for resubmissions and clarifications in cases where this failed.

Recommendations:

- 3A.** Introduce a voter information platform providing authoritative information about candidates and political parties' positions and policies in one easily accessible place online that allows young people to access this information in an accessible way with adequate language and formats;
- 3B.** Instate a young people's board that supports candidates and political parties with the submission of adequate information, by co-producing voter information, reviewing submissions, and that has the power to ask for resubmissions.

Modernising Welsh elections - Advance voting

In response to question 66

4.1 Advance voting and the opportunity to vote in schools and colleges can alleviate some practical barriers to voting for 16- and 17-year-olds giving them additional opportunities to turn out to vote, though it is important to acknowledge that young people face other barriers to voting that are not addressed by either of these measures (see 2.1 and 3.1). The sizable effect of these measures, in particular of advance voting, may be small and should be evaluated carefully before an all-Wales rollout.

4.2 Research finds that young people who did not have a family member encourage or accompany them to the polling station often reported not having turned out to vote in the 2021 Senedd election.¹⁵ Opportunities to vote in schools, in particular when they are incorporated

¹³ Huebner et al. (2021), p. 12.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁵ Huebner et al. (2021), p. 14.

into the school day, can address this issue for 16- and 17-year-olds who are in full-time education by providing an additional opportunity and a familiar environment to vote in.

4.3 In the context of the 2021 Senedd election, a number of 16- and 17-year-olds further referred to pressures from the timing of school assessments as a barrier that kept them from turning out to vote.¹⁶ Advance voting, particular when it is sensitive to scheduled exam diets, can give young people further opportunities to turn out to vote, although it is unclear how many young people face this barrier and would take up advance voting opportunities.

9 January 2023

Name

Dr Christine Huebner¹, Dr Katherine A. Smith², Dr Thomas Loughran³, Dr Jan Eichhorn⁴, Dr Andrew Mycock⁵

Organisation (if applicable)

¹University of Sheffield, ²University of York, ³Lancaster University, ⁴University of Edinburgh, ⁵University of Huddersfield

Email address

c.huebner@sheffield.ac.uk

Responses to consultations may be made public. To keep your response anonymous (including email addresses) tick the box.

¹⁶ Huebner et al. (2021), p. 14.