



The British Youth Council's response to the Department of Communities and Local Government 'Unlocking the talent of our communities'.

As the national youth council of the UK, the British Youth Council (BYC) is a youth led organisation for young people across the UK (In our eyes a young person is anyone age 26 and under). We link up with our community of member organisations and network of local youth councils to empower young people, so that all young people can play a role in making decisions about the things that matter; locally, nationally and globally. BYC believes young people should be supported to exercise their right to have a voice on issues that they are passionate about and participate in decisions that affect them.

BYC welcomes the Government's recognition in this consultation process that there can be lessons learnt from voluntary action and the ways people currently organise themselves to secure change in their communities. As an organisation celebrating 60 years of young people campaigning, empowering and inspiring, BYC would like to offer its experience of engaging young people in civic society to inform this consultation process.

The role of Government in encouraging and supporting citizens to be active.

BYC welcomes the Department of Communities and Local Government's (DCLG) recognition that "sometimes people feel the barriers are too high, or the incentives too low, to spend their time and talents on building communities" ('Unlocking the talent of our communities', 2008: 8). BYC would also like to highlight the importance of helping *young people* to overcome these barriers so they can develop the enthusiasm, skills and confidence to play an active role in their community throughout their lifetime.

Empowering citizens to inform and influence.

The Government's 'Aiming high for young people: a ten year youth strategy for young people' acknowledges "while some young people proactively engage in local decision-making, many will need help from adults and older teenagers, including professionals and volunteers, to develop the confidence and motivation to take part" (2007: 31). In our experience the key way to encourage people to become active is through increasing their awareness that taking such action is relevant to their lives, providing targeted activities and developing their confidence that they can take part.

BYC is currently running a two-year programme 'Inform and Influence', with the support of the Electoral Commission. This programme aims to increase awareness amongst young people of local, national and European democratic processes and increase their confidence in participating in all aspects of political decision-making. The programme

also endeavours to increase the number of young people who register to vote and the likelihood that they will vote.

As part of the 'Inform and Influence' programme BYC organises 'Young People and Your Democracy' events. These events are designed to encourage young people who are not in education, employment or training to speak out on what they feel is important and get involved in politics. At 'Young People and Your Democracy' events around a hundred young people gather at their national democratic institution, whether this be the Houses of Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly or Northern Ireland Assembly, to learn about how it works and meet their elected representatives.

These events work to challenge the image of politics for young people. Moreover, they challenge the preconceptions young people might hold that politics is nothing to do them. Simply talking with their elected representatives allows young people to speak their minds on issues that they come to realise are political, and about which they care very much. At the 'Young People and Your Democracy' event in Westminster on March 25th 2008, 45% of the young people involved felt that they learnt something and 63% found the event interesting.

Working to help citizens overcome barriers to getting active.

Removing barriers to active citizenship for young people and enabling them to get active has the potential to create a life-long interest and involvement in active citizenship.

BYC recently undertook a research project on how to encourage young people to get active in their communities through volunteering entitled 'Overcoming Barriers to Volunteering'. This work was supported by the Cabinet Office. The premise behind this research was to aim to understand the barriers to young people's participation in volunteering; in particular barriers to those who are statistically less likely to engage in formal volunteering, such as young people from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups and young disabled people.

BYC surveyed almost 400 young people to find out what they thought were obstacles to volunteering. The majority of respondents (32%) said that 'time' was the biggest barrier. This was followed by 'knowing what is available' (27%). However, the 'smallest' barriers for respondents were the image of volunteering (41%) and cost (20%).

To break down these barriers, BYC has submitted recommendations to the Cabinet Office based on this consultation. It was recommended that:

- Volunteering opportunities for young people need to be advertised widely; in a variety of accessible formats and that this advertising needs to be in congregation points for young people as well as in web-based communities.
- There needs to be a promotion of the benefits of volunteering to both the individual and society.
- Opportunities for accreditation and skills development should be offered.
- There must also be a good support structure in place to help new volunteers feel appreciated and comfortable, particularly for young disabled people.
- Current young volunteers can be encouraged to act as mentors for new volunteers and as role models to young people who are not currently involved.

BYC also emphasised the importance of consulting young people. To find out how young people can be encouraged and supported to get active in their communities we need to ask young people how they want to get involved and how they want to make an impact through being empowered.

Foreseeing the future of active citizenship.

BYC believes that a well-delivered statutory Citizenship education can be really important in improving young people's understanding of living in and engaging with democracy. The involvement of Citizenship in the key stages 3 and 4 curriculum has been a significant move by the Government to give young people the knowledge to engage in politics.

However, BYC would recommend that the Government needs to work to ensure that citizens not only feel more informed about citizenship but also that they feel they can engage in democracy processes. As it is noted in the DCLG's 'The Community Power Pack' positive "perceptions of empowerment" are as important as there actually being "objective empowerment" with opportunities to get active. People need to have the enthusiasm and confidence to act in their own right (DCLG, 2008, 'The Community Power Pack': 15). From our experience with engaging young people, BYC would ask the Government not to underestimate the effect face-to-face interaction with active citizens can have on those who are less active - whether these are MPs, local councillors or young people who are actively campaigning on a local issue in a youth council. Such interaction helps challenge people's sense of detachment and supports the development of enthusiasm and confidence to get involved themselves.

BYC is encouraged by the Government's recognition that there needs to be a "greater sense of 'active citizenship' and harness [of] new technology to facilitate greater civic participation and political involvement at the local level" (DCLG, 2008, 'Unlocking talents in our communities': 8). However, it needs to be recognised that young people's ideas of 'active citizenship' and the ways they engage in this through new technology are constantly changing and developing. An interesting discussion of this "remixing of citizenship" can be found in the final report of the Carnegie Young People Initiative, 'Empowering Young People'. This reported that "much of what is offered to young people in the name of 'active citizenship' lacks appeal because it seems to be remote from their everyday experience and disconnected from the levers of power" (2008: 14). Instead of creating "'politically cool' web-based strategy" the Government needs to consider how young people are more interested in new forms of participation such as taking part in demos, signing petitions and boycotting products. BYC's own campaigners have the option of being part of a virtual online team; they can support campaigns through emailing elected representatives and adding their signatures to online petitions.

Reviving involvement in local civic and democratic roles.

The Government should continue to target young people for inclusion so they are able to develop their own way of being active in British society. BYC welcomed the announcement of the Youth Citizenship Commission (YCC) as a response to the 'Governance of Britain' green paper published last year. This will provide an important

way for young people to input what citizenship and involvement in democracy means to them and how they would like to get involved.

BYC also supported the announcement of a proposed consultation, led by the YCC, on whether the voting age should be lowered to 16. Votes at 16 has been an important campaign for BYC for over ten years and we are a member of the Votes at 16 Coalition. In 2008, to celebrate 60 years of BYC a '16 at 60' campaign is also being championed to call for the voting age to be lowered to 16.

BYC believes that currently preventing 16 and 17 year olds from participating in elections sends a message that the political views of young people aren't valid, and that voting isn't the way to make a difference. Many young people are currently deprived of democratic participation in elections until they are 23. In addition, in regions where the voting age has been lowered, such as Austria and Jersey, there has been an emphasis on how enabling 16 and 17 year olds to vote in regional elections is a way for young people to remain involved in their communities at a time when many may be transient due to entering employment or higher education. BYC believes that young people being able to feel that someone is listening to them through their vote will go a long way to renew young people's confidence and interest in British politics.

BYC is looking forward to the opportunity presented by the Youth Citizenship Commission for a public debate on lowering the voting age and whether this would increase democratic involvement.

BYC would also like to point out the critical role that local youth councils play in bringing young people's voices to the fore of community decision-making. Youth councils enable young people to meet local politicians and decision-makers, participate in consultations on issues affecting young people and campaign to bring about change in their communities.

BYC welcomed the Government's support of youth councils and forums as a way of involving young people in decision-making and promoting the voice of young people at a local level and in wider services in 'Aiming high for young people' (2007: 32). BYC hopes the important role of youth councils continues to be recognised in the Empowerment White Paper.

Working to improve local public services.

BYC believes that public services should actively engage all the young people they aim to serve. Young people should be involved at the local level to allow them to be represented and to make their voices heard. Young people must have the right to scrutinise service providers to ensure they get a fair deal. Involving young people not only improves services that serve young people, but also benefits the young people participating in this local decision-making through giving them skills and experience in participatory decision-making.

Through support from the Government and third sector organisations such as Participation Works, local government across the UK has more information available on how to support young people's participation in public decision-making. However, there remains a variation across local authorities about the impact and the sustainability of this involvement and variations in the levels of commitment and styles of engagement.

In addition, past research by BYC and NYA for the Department of Education and Skills has found that young people are more likely to be involved in decision-making at the level of generating ideas about existing and new policies or services, rather than be involved in service delivery and monitoring and evaluation ('Mapping Children and Young People's Participation in England', October 2004).

High levels of commitment to increasing participation by young people in decision-making at a local level need to be matched by equally high levels of action. BYC would suggest that this consultative process on Empowerment continues the work of outlining what concerted action at local and national level is needed to improve young people's participation to in turn improve local public services.

Strengthening local leadership.

BYC supports the aims of the DCLG to encourage strong and visible local leadership as well as providing more opportunities for communities to influence decisions. For there to be the development of strong local leadership the talents of young leaders need first to be developed. BYC would also like to stress the role local youth councils and youth forums can have in nourishing these skills for young people.

BYC has welcomed the announcement by the Department of Children, Schools and Families of £6 million to encourage more young people to develop and use their leadership skills to benefit their communities and has expressed interest in the proposal of a National Institute for Youth Leadership within 'Aiming high for young people'.

Summary.

To conclude, BYC would like to input into this consultative process by highlighting the need to equip citizens with the skills and confidence to play a more active role in their community when they are young people. Young people are the foundations on which these steps to empower British citizens need to be built.

Young people need to be involved in this consultative process and in shaping the White Paper in order to ensure that the paper recognises and understands what young people see as 'active citizenship' and how they want to improve their communities. Otherwise plans will be detached from what young people want to see happen in their future.

From our experience of 60 years of working with young people BYC knows that many will need help to develop the confidence and motivation to take part. As the Government has recognised before, BYC would like to reiterate the vital role youth councils can play in providing a forum in which young people can learn these skills.

BYC has advertised the chance to respond to this discussion paper or hold an event to discuss these issues, as suggested in the Community Power Pack to our members, which include local youth councils across the UK. BYC looks forward to the publication of the White Paper in summer 2008.

For more information on any element of this response and BYC's work please contact BYC's Policy Officer, Helen Deakin via email at Helen.Deakin@byc.org.uk or telephone on 020 7022 1974.