

Webinar

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Youth Work and Votes at 16: Supporting Young People to Vote

Date: 20th November, 2025 12.00pm to 1.00pm

Presentation by Dr Carole Pugh- responses from Dr Andy Mycock and Charlee Bewsher

Governments don't treat young people fairly.

I want to do more, but adults don't support me.

It's just about votes it's not about making the world better.

Politicians don't understand what life is like for me

Things are at a high level, government should stop

I need look out for myself because the government won't.

I only get involved with issues that are relevant to my life.

I look out for myself because the government won't.

I'd like to be more involved in my community, but there are limited things I can do because of my age.

I want to do more but don't

I've never met a politician, I don't know if I trust them.

People don't listen to young people, so what's the point.

Problems, it's not about

Politics is just about winning votes it's not about making the world better.

I'm not interested in issues

Youth work plays a significant role in young people's political socialisation

- 4.4 million young people regularly engage in youth work (UK Youth, 2022).
- Many come from under resourced areas (NYA, 2025), are less likely vote and often disengage from formal citizenship education
- Findings from USA research indicate the role the informal conversations play in young people's political socialization (Roholt et al, 2007)
- Also shaped previous lowering of the voting age to 16 in Scotland and Wales
- **BUT** Policy debates about political socialisation predominantly focus on role of formal school education



About the research

Addresses a gap in knowledge about the role of youth work in supporting political socialization in England.

- Focus groups with 89 young people (aged 11-22) and 21 youth workers
- Participant observation of 56 youth work sessions at 4 youth projects in a northern city (Jan-March 2020/ April 2021 – Dec 2022)
- Projects included:
 - voluntary sector, commissioned and local authority provision
 - open access projects and targeted youth voice projects



Young people's understandings of political citizenship

- Formal politics
- Getting involved
- Issues
- National/legal citizenship
- Protest and campaigns
- Rights, respect and responsibility

These reflect broader repertoires of political participation and lived citizenship identified in research (see Kallio et al, 2020; Pickard, 2019).



Youth work addresses political citizenship

Young people saw youth work as giving them access to:

- Opportunities to get involved and volunteer
- Informal experiences of democratic processes
- Knowledge and experiences of rights, feeling respected, and taking responsibility
- Knowledge and experiences of formal political processes
 - Meeting politicians and local decision makers, formal voting in some projects



'Youth worker 1: There is a limit on how much we can actually support them with political development. We can support them to be good citizens, to understand different things, to have a voice, to get involved, to partake in democracy

Youth worker 2: If they want to have a political debate, we wouldn't see that as part of what we do. (Local Youth Voice project)

Youth work faced barriers

- Getting involved ✓
- Rights, respect and responsibility ✓
- Formal politics ?
- Issues ?
- Protest ✗



Youth workers unsure about remit

'I don't know where I've got this, but we shouldn't really educate [young people] about politics' (Youth worker, commissioned open-access youth provision)

But I do definitely think there needs to be room to talk about party politics in its entirety. (Young person, regional youth voice network, June 2022)

Maybe we should bring it up and be like if you could vote, who would you vote for? Actually start those conversations and start them thinking now before they get to voting, and they are like, 'I wish I'd have learned this'. (Youth worker, open-access youth and community project, February 2020)

Both young people and youth workers felt that restricting conversations about political issues impeded youth work's capacity to support political socialisation.



Youth workers lacked knowledge to facilitate political citizenship conversations

I guess I've always thought I don't know enough to feel comfortable educating them. Whereas we understand about the sexual health side of things, and we understand about racism, or we understand about culture (Youth worker, commissioned open-access youth provision, June 2022).

This reflects the implementation and expertise gap identified in formal citizenship education

Also mirrors limited training and resources that restrict schoolteachers' capacity to effectively deliver the citizenship curriculum.



Youth workers felt that conversations about protest were not allowed

As we packed up, one youth worker talked about a protest that young people had done against the Rwanda immigration scheme ... they said it would be hard to support this from within their paid role (Participant observation, May 2022)

However, young people see protest as a relevant, accessible and effective way of engaging in political citizenship (Pickard, 2019)

I think this [the school strike for climate action] ... is one of the biggest ways that I got into proper politics. So, I think that it's special to a lot of young people, especially young people because it's been the only way that they could get involved in politics. (Young person, regional youth voice network, March 2022)

Restricting conversations about protest does not reduce young people's participation (Pickard & Bessant, 2017) but means they are less well equipped to critically understand or evaluate their engagement (Brocklehurst, 2015).



Recommendation 1: Policy that supports Votes at 16 needs to cross sectors and departments

Integrating formal and informal approaches in democratic education policy is essential to accompany the enfranchisement of 16-17 year-olds if all newly enfranchised young voters are going to feel sufficiently politically socialised, engaged, and literate to vote for the first time



Recommendation 2: Clear policy for youth work about political education.

There is a need for clear national guidance, like the guidance available for schools (Department for Education, 2022) that outlines youth work's remit around political education.

Youth work organisations need to develop policy and curricula that clearly establish the approach that youth workers can take to discussions and activities that support political socialisation.



Recommendation 3: Education, training and resources are needed.

Equipping young people for political citizenship should be included in all initial youth work education and training.

CPD packages need to be developed to help youth workers handle political discussions effectively.

Democratic education resources need to be developed and disseminated to youth workers to support work around democratic education and political socialisation.



Recommendation 4: Democratic education needs to address protest

Consideration should be given to how protest is discussed with young people to provide opportunities for them to think critically about the political engagement opportunities available to them.



Further information about the research:

Pugh, C. (2025) Reconsidering the approach to political citizenship in youth work in England, *Youth and Policy* Available at <https://www.youthandpolicy.org/articles/political-citizenship-in-youth-work/>

Pugh, C. (2025) Youth work and political education: Maximising opportunities to support young people's political socialisation, York St John University; <https://doi.org/10.25421/yorks.j.29617010.v1>

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Responses

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Charlee Bewsher



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