

Representation of the People Bill Committee Submission

April 2026

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The Children's Commissioner supports the extension of the franchise to 16-year-olds. Extending voting rights to children not only gives them a tangible say in the democratic process, but also has the potential second order impact of ensuring greater consideration of children in the decision making of political parties by providing a greater incentive for them to do so.

The Commissioner has long been concerned about the voices of children in the democratic process, and it is her duty under the Children and Families Act 2014 to promote the views and interests of children. As noted in the Children's Commissioner's report *The Big Ambition*: 'Without the proper structures in place to consult with [children], it means when it comes to elections, manifestos, promises from their local MPs or councillors, their opinions are too easily ignored.'¹

As part of her ongoing work to protect and promote the rights of children and ensure that their voices are heard, the Children's Commissioner will be conducting the third mass survey of children of her time in office: *The Big Future*. This will be launching on May 8th, 2026, and she will be conducting interviews with children across the length and breadth of England to ensure their views are fully represented in her advocacy and policy work. This survey will, for the first time, be asking specific questions regarding preparedness to vote, and will ensure that future engagement from the Children's Commissioner regarding young people and voting will be more fully representative of the views of England's children.

The status quo

Right now, children do not feel listened to. When the Children's Commissioner surveyed children in 2023-2024 for her survey *The Big Ambition*, only 22% of children agreed that people who run the country listened to what they had to say. More children disagreed with this statement (40%) than any other statement in the survey.

¹ Children's Commissioner for England, *The Big Ambition*, 2024, available at: [The Big Ambition | Children's Commissioner for England](#)

As a girl of 12 responding to the survey wrote: “The government should listen to the views of children more and consider their opinions”. Votes at 16 goes some way to rectifying this.

Children should have their voices heard without being saddled with adult responsibilities. Thus, politicians and state bodies will continue to have a duty, both moral and under the UK’s obligations under the UNCRC, to continue to engage with children and with the Children’s Commissioner to ensure that children’s voices are heard and taken seriously when making decisions that impact them.

Long-term impacts

There is reason to believe that lowering the voting age will have long-term implications for voter turnout. Existing studies indicate that lowering the voting age from 18 to 16 has an impact on turnout, in that 16- and 17-year-olds have higher turnout than 18-year-olds.² The best test case for this, given geographic and cultural similarity, is Scotland, where voting eligibility has been 16 for Scottish parliamentary elections since 2014. Here, turnout is higher among 16- and 17-year-olds than 18-year-olds.³ Political scientists have pointed to a Scottish “follow-through effect” – that those who are enfranchised and exercise their right to vote at a younger age have slightly higher rates of turnout over the long term.⁴

Education

If we want the next generation to fully participate in public life, we must make sure they have the knowledge and confidence to understand how democracy works, how to weigh up the information they see online, and how to engage respectfully in political debate.

² Zeglovits and Aichholzer. ‘Are People More Inclined to Vote at 16 than at 18? Evidence for the First-Time Voting Boost among 16-to 25-Year-Olds in Austria’, 2025, *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 24, 351–361

³ Eichhorn and Hueber, ‘Votes at 16 in Scotland: Political Experiences beyond the Vote Itself’, 2020, In Eichhorn J., Bergh J. (eds) *Lowering the Voting Age to 16: Learning from Real Experiences Worldwide*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

⁴ Eichorn and Hueber, “*Longer-Term Effects of Voting at Age 16: Higher Turnout Among Young People in Scotland*”, 2025, *Politics and Governance*, 13, Article 9283

Research from the Electoral Commission indicates that the existing state of political education in schools is insufficient. 30% of UK 11-17-year-olds surveyed reported that they had been taught about politics in the past year at school.⁵

The Children's Commissioner gathered the views of her 16- and 17-year-old Youth Ambassadors on what should be done to get 16-year-olds ready to vote. Most stated about the specific and strong need for greater democratic education, and a selection of their views are below:

“Better education around voting, especially better materials to educate young people with SEND on voting - through PSHCE curriculum”

“Better political education and better awareness of the different parties you can vote for and what they stand for.”

“Make sure that children learn the basics about politics (different houses, parties & what they stand for, key figures, current affairs etc.)”

There was also reference to a sense of a chilling effect within schools. Existing guidance around political impartiality appears to potentially result in teachers being afraid to address political questions in classrooms. This culture seems unlikely to foster quality political education, as observed by the Commissioner's Youth Ambassadors:

⁵ Electoral Commission, *Young People's Views on Politics and Voting*, 2026, available at: [Young people's views on politics and voting 2026 | Electoral Commission](#)

“More political education within schools. Teachers are too scared to say the wrong thing when it comes to politics so it's not really talked about.”

“More in-depth discussion at schools around politics as I feel because schools are supposed to be neutral they avoid the topic of politics altogether so children are unsure as to how to vote or who to vote for and that their voice matters.”

Children in care, care leavers, and children in secure settings

Children in care will require support to engage with democratic processes, and in particular with registering to vote. Children in care may or may not live in areas that they feel particularly connected to, and as such should be properly supported in registering to vote in the area that they feel connected to.

In keeping with wider support (including, for instance, personal advisor support), support offered to children in care should be extended to all care leavers up to the age of 25.

Children in secure settings will face significant difficulties in voting. Children on remand are excluded from Release On Temporary License, so there is currently no process for them to get approval to leave their setting to go to a polling station.

It would be theoretically possible to consider adapting Special Purpose Licences to include voting, but this would likely mean significant logistical burdens upon the secure estate.

As such, a practical view is that the Government must ensure that children can vote by post or proxy and ensure that secure settings are supported in both encouraging them to exercise their democratic rights and offering them help in doing so.

Children who are in secure children's homes, or in future other relevant accommodation, under section 25 of the Children Act, or who are deprived of their liberty under the inherent jurisdiction, as well as

children in inpatient mental health settings, should be supported to attend polling stations in person wherever possible.

The Government should also uphold the rights of children who are sentenced to custody, particularly those whose sentences will conclude before they turn 18. All sentenced children must be supported to register to vote, and the Commissioner believes that those children who will leave custody before they turn 18 should have the right to vote, recognising the critical importance of early democratic engagement.

The Government must ensure that these children are supported in registering to vote before the deadline.



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