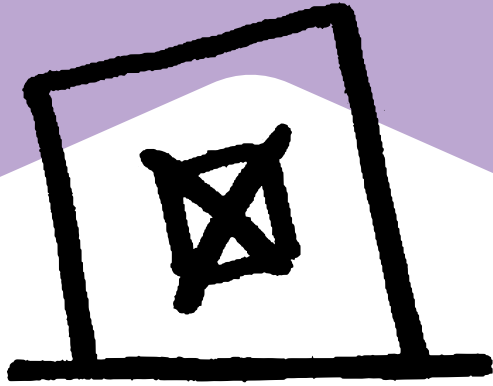# Rising Voices: Youth Perspectives on Political Engagement

Report

Rising Voices: Youth Perspectives on Political Engagement

November 2024

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Munny Purba

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Hi, I'm Munny. I have over six years' experience in working in education, at a range of charities and not-for-profit organisations. I've worked in a variety of roles, including designing and delivering sessions on personal resourcefulness and social action for young people in schools across London, delivering inclusive sex education, and creating and facilitating diversity, equality and inclusion forums. I have recently completed a Masters degree in International Development at the University of Amsterdam, focusing on gender and education, and an undergraduate degree in History, focusing on race and immigration.

As well as having an interest in how we can tackle social divisions through education, I am an avid reader, crocheter and baker. I have recently taken up spinning and have enjoyed getting into fitness.

Foreword

In an age where political engagement and civic participation appears to be in decline, the need to amplify youth voices has never been more pressing. This is why at Cumberland Lodge we are partnering with young people around the country to re-imagine what politics could look like.

This report is the first stage of our project and includes conversations with young people across the UK that have helped us to understand their perspectives on democracy. Their insights are essential for creating a more inclusive and responsive democratic process. Young people are the leaders of tomorrow but, importantly, they are the change-makers of today.

In recognising that young people often feel marginalised in debates that directly affect their futures, we aim to provide a platform for their voices, encouraging them to articulate their hopes and concerns, and fostering a sense of ownership in the democratic process. This engagement not only enriches our understanding of contemporary democratic challenges, but also cultivates a generation equipped with the skills and confidence to advocate for change.

As we navigate an increasingly polarised political landscape, the contributions of young people will be critical in shaping policies that reflect their needs and aspirations. This report captures their thoughts and recommendations, serving as a call to action for policymakers, educators, and community leaders to prioritise youth engagement in our democratic systems.

Munny Purba

Munny

November 2024

Contents

Executive summary

This report synthesises discussions with young people around the UK, exploring their perceptions of government and politics, power and collective action, as well as barriers to engagement in democratic processes and institutions. The report findings will directly inform the development of workshops and resources within the Cumberland Lodge *Youth & Democracy* project, aiming to demystify politics and encourage the meaningful participation of young people.

1. (Dis) trust

A significant theme is the pervasive distrust in government and the political system. Young people expressed disillusionment, believing political leaders prioritise self- and corporate interests over public good. Many articulated frustration with repeated unfulfilled promises, particularly regarding key issues like affordable housing, leading to the perception of political assurances as 'empty promises'. This distrust fosters a sense of exclusion from meaningful political participation, with many young people feeling their votes are disregarded in favour of an 'elite'. Such disillusionment poses a substantial barrier to engagement, as participation is often perceived as futile.

2. Authentic representation

The discussions highlighted a critical demand for authentic representation. Participants conveyed a disconnect between their lived experiences and political structures, arguing that current systems fail to reflect the realities of diverse communities, such as economic inequities, racial discrimination, and limited access to essential infrastructure. Many expressed vexation at tokenistic engagement with politicians, including interactions at school and beyond that felt superficial and performative rather than meaningful.

Young people voiced a strong desire for leaders who not only understand their challenges but also actively advocate for policies that address their needs.

3. Lacking knowledge and confidence

A significant barrier to political participation was a lack of knowledge and confidence. Young people expressed a desire to engage but felt overwhelmed and unsure of where to start. Educational resources related to democracy were often perceived as inadequate, reinforcing feelings of disconnection from political processes.

4. Understanding where power lies

Initially in discussion groups, young people viewed power as something held by politicians, contributing to their feelings of powerlessness. However, they began to recognise the potential for collective power. The insight that "there's power in numbers" underscored the importance of community-driven initiatives. While individual action is valuable, collective efforts can amplify impact and challenge existing systems.
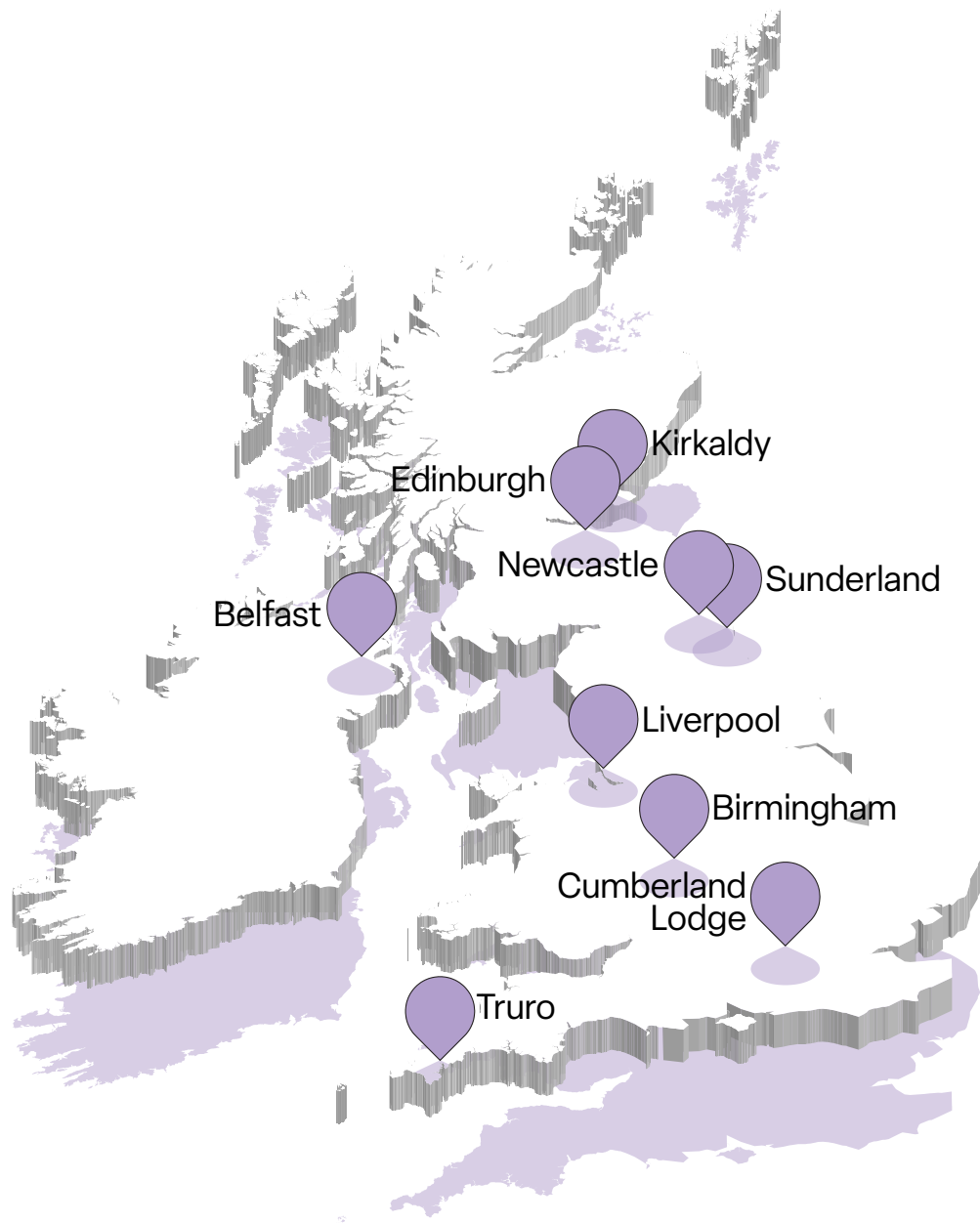
5. Critical issues facing young people

Young people voiced significant concerns about critical issues they feel are neglected by current government policies, leaving their generation vulnerable and under-served. The cost of living and lack of affordable housing stood out as major challenges. Young participants described how rising costs in essentials such as food, housing, and transportation have strained their families' finances, limiting their own future opportunities. Many feel that government inaction on affordable housing disproportionately impacts young people, who are increasingly priced out of stable living conditions.

Environmental policy was another pressing issue, with frustration over the slow pace of government action on climate change. Participants expressed a sense of betrayal, as they see insufficient urgency from leaders to protect their future, calling for policies that prioritise sustainability and address the environmental crisis more aggressively.

Furthermore, young people highlighted a disconnect between education policies and their lived experiences, noting that policies around school often lack relevance to the realities they face. For instance, they feel that their voices are excluded from decisions around mental health support, bullying, and curriculum content that could otherwise be shaped to meet their evolving needs. These gaps in government action contribute to a deepening sense of disenfranchisement, as young people feel sidelined on issues that profoundly impact them.

These findings highlight a need for initiatives that build trust, enhance representation, and empower young people in political processes. Addressing concerns around transparency and accountability is essential to fostering greater youth engagement. By creating genuine opportunities for participation and improving educational resources, we can help bridge the gap between young people and the political systems that shape their lives, ultimately strengthening democracy in the UK.

Edinburgh

Kirkaldy

Belfast

Newcastle

Sunderland

Liverpool

Birmingham

Cumberland
Lodge

Truro

Introduction

The importance of youth voice in shaping democratic processes has become increasingly evident. As the architects of the future, young people possess unique perspectives that are vital to understanding the complexities of governance, civic engagement, and the sustainability of democracy. However, despite their significant stake in the political landscape, recent research highlights that young people feel alienated and disenfranchised. This is leading to a democratic deficit that can undermine social cohesion and trust in political institutions. A study by the UK Youth Parliament (2023) highlights a significant decline in youth participation, with only 35% of young people feeling their voices are heard in political matters. This is contributing to widespread disillusionment with traditional political structures.

This report explores these dynamics by presenting findings from 12 discussion groups with diverse young people across the UK, aged 13-23, considering their perceptions and experiences of democratic practices and institutions.[1] The report highlights that geography is important as concerns differ across the country, yet there is still an alignment of key concerns, suggesting a generational experience of democratic engagement. By prioritising youth voices, the findings seek to inform our *Youth & Democracy* project at Cumberland Lodge, as well as policymakers, educators, and community leaders, about the perspectives that young people bring to the table.

The recommendations made at the end of this report emphasise the necessity of young people's involvement in shaping policies that directly affect their lives. In an era where new forms of youth activism are coming into conflict with mainstream politics and law enforcement, understanding young people's aspirations for a more participatory political system is critical to fostering a thriving democracy that genuinely represents all its constituents.

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1   To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms have been assigned to all participants referenced in this report.

Findings

Trust in government and politics

Trust in government and the political system is a critical issue for young people, many of whom expressed a deep sense of disillusionment and skepticism about the motives of political leaders, illustrated by Chloe in Sunderland: "They just don't care. They're building their own world." Participants often expressed a belief that political engagement is inherently compromised by the influence of an 'elite' and 'big business', reflecting a broader disillusionment with democratic processes. The ideals of representation and accountability were perceived as hollow, as Chloe noted:

> "The system isn't trustworthy… they're in partnership with big businesses, and Big Pharma. So you're not going to trust the government because they do it for their own self-benefit, not for us, and that is very apparent."

The culmination of these views fosters a sense of political nihilism, where young people may feel it is futile to speak out in a system that favors powerful interests.

This distrust is compounded by the perceived gap between political promises and actual outcomes, particularly around key issues like affordable housing. Participants expressed frustration with the repeated failure of governments to deliver on their promises.

> "It's hard to incentivise young people to vote, because every time that we've had a government, especially in the past 12 or so years, they've always [said] things [like] we're going to make affordable social housing. And it never, ever happens." (Evan, Tayside)

Josh in Newcastle likened political promises to wishful thinking, stating: "It's laughable. They say all these things… half the time it feels like empty promises, like throwing a wish in a well." These beliefs further entrench the alienation that undermines political engagement and civic responsibility.

The perception that young people are excluded from meaningful participation in politics is another major source of distrust. Young people feel they are given the illusion of participation without any real power to influence change. As Jamal in Birmingham put it:

> "It's like a game, they've given us a broken controller and make us feel like we're actually playing in the game, but we're actually not playing at all. It's definitely them controlling everything."

When discussing who "them" refers to, they pointed to politicians and government officials, whom they see as out of touch with the realities faced by their communities. Many expressed irritations with bureaucratic hierarchies that prioritise established interests over the needs of youth.

The metaphor of a "broken controller", as expressed above, reflects a deep-seated hostility among young people in the UK regarding their exclusion from meaningful political participation, and resonates with wider research on youth disenfranchisement. A 2024 IP-Pad Youth Survey UK, in conjunction with Royal Holloway, University of London, found that 49% of 16 to 21-year-olds were dissatisfied with democracy, with 16 to 18-year-olds the most dissatisfied (52%).[2] A 2021 study by the UK Parliament's Youth Select Committee found that over 70% of young people felt politicians did not listen to their concerns, reinforcing the idea that youth voices are sidelined in political decision-making (UK Parliament's Youth Select Committee, 2021).

This disillusionment extends to the voting system. Promise in Birmingham noted:

> "I feel like we vote, but our votes don't actually go in. I think it's the people who are higher than us, their vote goes in."

This skepticism about the efficacy of voting reinforces the idea that the system is rigged in favor of those in power.

This pervasive distrust, compounded by a sense of futility, creates a significant barrier to youth engagement in politics. Young people feel as though they are merely choosing 'the best out of a bad bunch' rather than being able to participate in a system that genuinely reflects their needs and interests. As Sophie in Sunderland concluded: "You're trying to fix a small part of a very broken system."

This disengagement poses substantial implications for the health of democracy in the UK. Research from the British Youth Council shows that young people who feel politically marginalised are not only less inclined to vote but are also less likely to engage in any political activity (British Youth Council, 2022). In the 2019 General Election, only 47% of 18 to 24-year-olds turned out to vote, in stark contrast to the 74% turnout among those over 65. In the 2024 elections, a University of Exeter study found that under 30s were the group most likely to say they hadn't voted. Under 30s from poorer households were the least likely to vote.[3] This systemic exclusion of young voices risks creating a self-reinforcing cycle of disillusionment, where the voices and needs of young citizens are underrepresented, driving further disengagement from democratic processes. Addressing this disconnect is critical to building a representative and resilient democracy that speaks to the aspirations and concerns of future generations. ***Efforts to include young people must move beyond symbolic gestures and create platforms where they have tangible influence in shaping policies that impact their futures.***

2   https://www.ippad.eu/post/youth-survey-uk

3   https://theconversation.com/young-people-led-surge-for-smaller-parties-but-no-reform-youthquake-says-uk-election-survey-234394

Without addressing these deep-seated concerns around transparency, accountability, and the integrity of political systems, it will be difficult to build the trust necessary to encourage greater youth participation in democratic processes.

Representation

Representation within the political landscape contributes to trust-building. Many participants expressed a deep sense of disconnection between their lived experiences and the political systems designed to serve them. They noted that current political structures often fail to reflect their realities, especially regarding regional and local issues. Rebecca in Newcastle succinctly highlighted this disconnect:

" "It's rich people that have come from rich backgrounds (...) most people in the UK aren't rich (...) they don't represent us at all."

In communities facing economic hardship or social exclusion, young people often feel their concerns are overlooked as politicians prioritise broader national agendas that disregard the specific challenges their communities encounter. The perceived privilege of political leaders suggests that they are detached from everyday struggles, leading to a lack of empathy towards those they are meant to represent. As Tommy in Newcastle noted:

" "At the end of the day, they're never gonna have to worry about, like, where the next food shop is coming from, or rent, or anything like that."

Going further, a key point made by participants was a desire to have leaders who not only share similar identities or protected characteristics but also understand their day-to-day

realities. As Jamal in Birmingham noted, while representatives can often live in a community, "they're not a part of the community. They're not in touch with it." There is a felt need for representation that also shares an understanding of socio-economic struggles or lived experiences that align with the challenges of the communities politicians serve. As Grace in Birmingham put it:

" "I feel like it should be people who have the same reality as well, not just the same race."

In other words, it's not just about seeing politicians who look like them, but about having representatives who genuinely understand their concerns and can authentically advocate for solutions. This need for relatability further reinforces the perception that current political systems are out of touch with the real-world issues that matter most to young people.

When young people are invited to engage in political conversations, they frequently perceive these efforts as tokenistic rather than genuine attempts to include their voices. Many expressed frustration at being consulted for appearances' sake, feeling that their contributions often go unheard or are unvalued. Owen in Belfast noted:

" "There've been times we've met with politicians (...) and it's like for their social media (...) to make themselves look better."

This sense of a lack of genuine engagement reinforces the belief that their perspectives are irrelevant in larger political discussions, as Chloe in Liverpool suggested:

" "They'll come here and they'll speak to us, but they're not coming here to listen; they're coming here so they can go back to wherever they came from and be like, 'oh, I spoke to a young person'."

Tammy in Sunderland emphasised the necessity for politicians to engage with young people on a personal level, suggesting that they "remove the labels" and "don't even do any politician stuff". They advocated for more casual interactions, like playing a game of football, to create authentic connections and engage with young people "on their level". By meeting youth "as an actual human being" before introducing political topics, politicians can foster trust and rapport, encouraging more meaningful discussions about the issues that matter most to young people. As Chloe noted:

> " "You need to sit down and find stuff to relate on, and I think people would be more interested in wanting to learn more. But if it is just lecture style, you'll lose them."

A poignant sentiment was shared by Jack during the discussions in Tayside, Scotland, who noted that "communities don't take young people seriously." This observation underscores a pervasive belief among youth that their concerns are often dismissed as part of a 'woke agenda'. Such a perception can stifle engagement, as younger people feel older generations shy away from discussing issues they are passionate about. This dynamic not only reinforces the notion that youth voices are undervalued but also contributes to a broader culture of disengagement, where meaningful discussions about important topics are sidelined due to fear of controversy or misunderstanding.

The significance of establishing real connections in representation cannot be overstated. When young people perceive politics as disconnected from their lives, it intensifies feelings of disenfranchisement and disengagement. On the other hand, when they feel seen and heard, they are more likely to cultivate an interest in political processes and civic engagement. Building trust through authentic relationships empowers youth to actively participate in democratic life, fostering a sense of belonging in political spaces that have historically excluded them.

To address these barriers, political leaders can prioritise genuine engagement with young constituents, moving beyond tokenism to create an inclusive environment where youth voices and issues are understood, valued, and influential.

Barriers to engagement: Lack of knowledge and confidence

A significant barrier to youth engagement in democratic processes identified during the discussions is a widespread lack of knowledge and understanding of effective participation. Rather than being apathetic, many participants expressed a strong desire to engage in political life but felt overwhelmed and uncertain about where to start. This sentiment highlights a broader trend in which young people view democratic systems as inaccessible and, at times, actively discouraging. Josh in Newcastle remarked: "How am I supposed to vote when I turn 18 when I know nothing about it?"

Educational experiences related to democracy and civic engagement, local and national governance, were often inconsistent or insufficient, failing to equip them with the necessary tools to navigate political systems effectively. This knowledge gap was connected to a sense of helplessness, leading many to believe that participation is beyond their reach. Liam in Sunderland pointed out:

> " "Most people our age aren't educated on [democracy and politics]. It's restricted knowledge. We're given the impression that we can't do anything about it anyway, so just don't worry."

The complexity and opacity of governmental structures, combined with the absence of clear pathways for engagement, foster the perception that political participation is not intended for them. This disconnect is illustrated in the suggestion for establishing a youth council. While such councils, as well as

the Youth Parliament, already exist in many locations around the country, the lack of awareness about them underscores a fundamental flaw in outreach and engagement efforts. Olivia in Birmingham stated:

> " "If we were to have some sort of youth council, maybe people who are, I don't know, unemployed, that know real-world issues, can come together and have some sort of power and say."

In addition, while many expressed a desire to participate, they often felt ill-equipped due to insufficient skills and resources, as well as lacking opportunities to question politicians and engage in political debate. There was a pervasive lack of confidence among young people that hindered their engagement. As Ruby in Liverpool pointed out:

> " "Because if I don't know how to fix something, how would I help to change it (...) but if I knew how to help, then I would."

Without the opportunities to develop essential skills for discussing political issues or advocating for their views, many young people were left feeling uncertain about articulating their thoughts and engaging in meaningful conversations about democracy. Rebecca in Newcastle noted: "It's all these big fancy words (...) and I don't know what they mean and how to use them." This perceived inadequacy perpetuates a cycle of disengagement.

The intersection of knowledge and confidence is critical; without a foundational understanding of democratic systems and the skills to engage effectively, young people may feel overwhelmed and hesitant to participate. Many expressed fears of being dismissed or ridiculed when voicing their opinions, further exacerbating insecurities.

Addressing these dual barriers of knowledge and confidence requires targeted initiatives that educate young people about democratic processes while empowering them to engage actively. The desire for meaningful participation in political discourse exists for young people but there is a need for accessible structures, and clear communication for how to access those structures. By providing resources, mentorship programmes, and practical engagement opportunities, the gap between desire and action can be bridged, fostering a generation that feels equipped to influence the democratic landscape.

Changes to the political system

Participants highlighted significant regional differences in democratic transparency and accountability. Young people from Northern Ireland noted that different electoral systems, such as proportional representation, can be a crucial factor in facilitating more direct engagement with decision-makers. As Owen suggested:

> " "It's very easy for us to get time with our decision makers (...) we have proportional representation in our legislature, which allows for more dynamic conversations."

Geographically, Northern Ireland decision-makers are concentrated in Belfast which also facilitates easier access. Young people in this group were also supported by a local Youth Forum that empowers political literacy. As noted in previous sections, when young people feel they can engage directly with decision-makers, it enhances their investment in the political process.

The contrast with the UK's first-past-the-post system becomes clear in participants' frustration with it, as it tends to limit representation and discourage voters from feeling that their voices matter, particularly those aligned with smaller parties or in 'safe' seats.

As Sophie in Sunderland stated: "our system kind of undermines what democracy should be." Some participants expressed a desire for a political framework that allows for genuine representation of diverse viewpoints. Sophie went on to say:

> " "This country is not meant to be a two-party system, but it is a two-party system because our system's not directly proportional."

The acknowledgment of a flawed system highlights how structural inequities can lead to disenfranchisement, again tying into the broader disillusionment with democracy. When young people felt their choices were limited it diminished their sense of agency and investment in the political landscape.

A generational shift was evident in the level of comfort with digital solutions. Advocacy for electronic voting resonated with a desire for greater accessibility. As Jake in Tayside, Scotland remarked:

> " "Electronic voting means you can do it from anywhere in your house or when you're out (…) rather than your closest voting place is like 12 miles away."

Participants also called for lowering the voting age to 16, reflecting a broader recognition of youth agency. The question from Josh in Newcastle, "Why is it that just because you're not legally classed as an adult, you can't have a say on the world you are going into?", encapsulates a critique of arbitrary age-based restrictions on political participation. This perspective not only challenges traditional notions of maturity and responsibility, but also emphasises that young people are often faced with adult challenges and should therefore have the right to influence decisions affecting their lives. This is particularly important as we grapple with issues such as climate change, where young people will be most affected. The call for inclusion aligns with research indicating that young people, when engaged

meaningfully, can bring fresh perspectives and energy to political discourse (British Youth Council, 2023; UK Parliament Youth Select Committee, 2021; UNDP, 2021).

Participants suggested changes to mandatory education to include practical life skills, such as taxes and voting, over traditional subjects deemed irrelevant, underscoring a broader concern about civic education. Rebecca in Newcastle aptly remarked:

> " "No one's going to ask you about the Ten Commandments (…) but 45 minutes about how taxes, National Insurance, and voting works would be more useful."

There is a critique in statements such as this that current educational frameworks fail to prepare students for real-world challenges. **By prioritising relevant skills, participants argue for a system that empowers them with the knowledge necessary to navigate civic responsibilities effectively.**

Furthermore, **the desire for more direct democracy, as articulated in calls for new voting systems or participatory models such as citizens' assemblies**, reflects a yearning for structures that genuinely represent diverse values and opinions:

> " "So if we can't have direct democracy, let's at least have people come together who represent every single different value, every single different opinion." (Sophie, Sunderland)

This advocacy for broader representation through assemblies signals a collective recognition that true democracy requires inclusivity at all levels, ensuring that every voice has the opportunity to be heard and considered.

Power and collective action

Power emerged as a central theme during the discussions, with many participants initially viewing it as something exclusively held by decision-makers. At the outset, young people expressed a sense of powerlessness, believing that meaningful change was largely controlled by politicians and those in authority. As Tammy in Sunderland explained:

> "It always leads back to [politicians] and whether they want to do it or whether they don't want to do it. So we don't have the power; they have the power. We've just got to appeal for them to listen."

This sentiment was echoed by others, such as Matt in Birmingham, who felt their voices and efforts were often dismissed, especially compared to those with more privilege:

> "I have to be real (…) if you were to see one of us on the news, that's just a long statistic. They don't really see us as someone that can make a change."

However, as discussions progressed, groups began to explore the deeper meaning of democracy and the potential of social movements. A shift in perspective began to emerge. Several participants recognised that, while they may not have institutional power, they could wield collective power. Aria in Liverpool articulated this realisation:

> "There's power in numbers, and we are the numbers. People just need to know that they can do something about it."

This recognition of collective power also linked to discussions around civil disobedience. Some participants pointed to protests and riots as an extreme but powerful way to make their voices heard, as Jamal in Birmingham pointed out:

> "There's a lot of ways to be heard, and riots are one way (…) because, at the end of the day, that's the proof that we're technically in control (…) if we locked it all off, the system's done."

This view was not unanimous, but it underscored the feeling that when individuals unite, they have the ability to disrupt systems.

The insights from participants regarding community-driven initiatives and solidarity reveal a profound understanding of the dynamics of collective action. Ed in Cornwall noted:

> "As a collective, if we all are transparent about how we all think and what our perspectives are, we can come together and start something, start a movement."

This statement underscores the belief that open communication and shared understanding, transparency and collaboration among community members can be catalysts for organised, strategic action that results in meaningful change.

However, the practicalities of how to unite a community around shared values and common goals was a barrier for many young people when it came to putting their aspirations into action. The sentiment expressed in the quote from Jake in Tayside, Scotland, "You're one guy (…) I can't do it alone as one guy", captures the sense of isolation that can accompany attempts at activism. The acknowledgment of personal limitations emphasises a broader theme of the necessity for community support, and a realistic understanding that to address systemic issues effectively requires more than a single person.

While young people acknowledged that ultimately, it may still "all go back to [the politicians]", the recognition of the potential for collective action was an important shift. It reframed their

relationship to power; not solely as something external and out of reach, but as something that emerged when they mobilised together, and that could challenge systems and amplify their voices.

Munny leading the youth focus group at YMCA Tayside (image courtesy of YMCA Tayside).

Recommendations

The findings of this report confirm what has been highlighted in much existing research: young people in the UK feel disconnected from the political system, with low levels of trust and engagement (Electoral Commission, 2023). As we continue in the *Youth & Democracy* project to explore ways to engage young people in democratic processes and institutions, it is also necessary to address the systemic barriers identified in this report and ensure young people's voices are heard (British Youth Council, 2021).

Based on our findings, as well as research conducted by other youth organisations and academic sources, several key recommendations emerge that could enhance young people's political participation:

- **Enhance political literacy:** There is a pressing need to develop accessible and comprehensive political education programmes and material that focus on foundational knowledge as well as practical skills. These programmes could incorporate engaging and relatable content that resonates with young audiences, ensuring that the curriculum reflects their lived experiences, aspirations, and concerns. The work of both *Shout Out UK* and the *Politics Project* is illustrative; utilising interactive methods such as workshops, simulations, podcasts and real-world case studies that enrich the learning experience, making political education not only informative but also inspiring.

- **Foster genuine engagement** in political processes by moving beyond the tokenistic. Establishing platforms that facilitate genuine dialogue, initially building rapport and trust, can help bridge the gap between young people and decision-makers. Initiatives such as council open days, community forums, and shadow boards can ensure that young voices are not only heard but valued in governance. For instance, the *Crown Estate Youth Panel* facilitates the direct engagement of 13 16 to 20-year-olds with decision-makers in the organisation, contributing to their strategic

direction as well as place-based developments. Similarly, the *Merton Council Young Inspectors*, comprising 17 to 24-year-olds, support the local authority by evaluating services offered to young people and amplifying the voices of young residents. By providing meaningful opportunities for participation, these initiatives enable young people to influence policy decisions that directly affect their lives, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility within the democratic process.

- **Reform electoral systems:** Advocating for electoral reforms that enhance representation and inclusivity is essential for fostering political engagement across all generations, including young people. Implementing measures such as proportional representation, electronic voting, and lowering the voting age could significantly increase youth participation in the electoral process. These changes can ensure that political structures reflect the diverse perspectives and needs of young people, creating a more equitable political landscape that encourages their involvement.

- **Support youth-led Initiatives:** It is vital to encourage and fund initiatives that empower young people to lead discussions on political issues and engage actively with their communities. Providing resources, mentorship, and support for youth-led organisations and grassroots movements, cultivates a culture of active citizenship. This support can include grants, training programmes, and networking opportunities that enable young leaders to address the issues they are passionate about and effectively mobilise their peers. *Northern Ireland Youth Forum* presents a great example of how embedding democratic language and practice into the culture of an organisation can encourage grassroots participation and inspire genuine youth-led initiatives.

- **Increase trust in government:** Rebuilding trust among young people in the political system requires a commitment to transparency in government operations and decision-making processes. Implementing open government

initiatives, regular public consultations, and accessible channels for feedback can help create a more accountable and approachable political environment. By actively involving young people in discussions about policies that affect their lives, the Government can demonstrate its commitment to serving the public interest and reaffirm its role as a trustworthy institution.

By implementing these recommendations, there is the potential to cultivate a political environment that nurtures active citizenship and empowers young people to engage meaningfully in the democratic process. The insights gathered from our youth groups highlight the necessity of adapting our political systems to reflect the aspirations and realities of young people, ultimately fostering a more inclusive democracy from local to national scales. This approach not only encourages young people to participate but also enriches the democratic process with their diverse perspectives and innovative ideas, ensuring a more representative, responsive, and resilient political future.

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Appendices
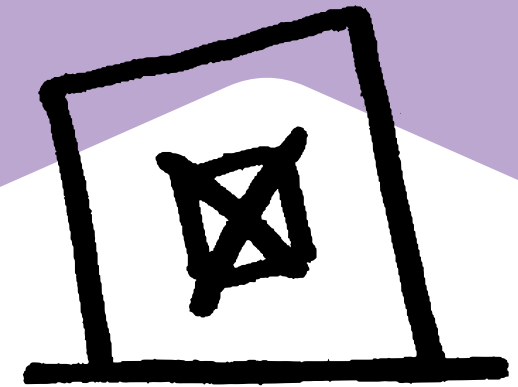
Appendix I: List of focus groups

Focus group location	Partner organisation	Age range	Socio-economic background (SEB)	Group size
Belfast, Northern Ireland	Northern Ireland Youth Forum	15-21	Rural/Urban; Mixed SEB	4
Truro, Cornwall	Cornwall Youth Council	13-20	Primarily Rural; Mixed SEB	10
Handsworth, Birmingham	Bringing Hope	14-22	Urban; Mixed SEB	12
Birmingham City Centre	West Midlands VRP	16-21	Urban; Mixed SEB	3
Sunderland	NE Youth	15-22	Urban/ Suburban; Mixed SEB	12
Gateshead, Newcastle	NE Youth	13-20	Urban; Mixed SEB	17
Glendale, Liverpool	Vibe UK	12-18	Rural/Urban; Mixed SEB	10
Halton, Liverpool	Vibe UK	14-21	Urban; Mixed SEB	4

Focus group location	Partner organisation	Age range	Socio-economic background (SEB)	Group size
Upton, Liverpool	Vibe UK	15-22	Primarily Urban; Mixed SEB	10
Northwood, Liverpool	Vibe UK	13-17	Rural/Urban; Mixed SEB	5
YMCA Tayside	YMCA	15-23	Primarily Urban; Mixed SEB	10
YMCA Kirkcaldy	YMCA	13-18	Rural/Urban; Mixed SEB	4

We can't change what we don't understand. That's why, in a world of extreme inequality and political polarisation, we believe it's not our differences that divide us, but our inability to recognise, discuss, debate and respect those differences.

Cumberland Lodge is an educational charity and social enterprise that exists to empower young people to lead the conversation around social division. Providing them with the skills, perspective and confidence to question, challenge and understand some of the most complex social issues of our time.

Set in the heart of Windsor Great Park, this is a space for challenging conversations. An open door to new perspectives. Where great minds don't always think alike. A place where a multi-generational, intercultural, cross-sector programme of conferences, talks and events means that people from all walks of life, can come together to be seen, heard and understood. A space for common ground. Where open dialogue can close divides. And the leaders and change makers of the future can learn how to agree to disagree, better – creating a more peaceful, open and inclusive society, one conversation at a time.

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