



RESPONSE TO IMPROVING ELECTORAL REGISTRATION PROCEDURES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

'Yes. What if you're homeless? I don't have an address, how am I meant to vote when I turn 18?'

'It does matter if young people vote, if young people don't vote now they won't vote later.'

October 2009

Introduction

Include Youth promotes best practice with young people in need or at risk. We achieve this through the development and promotion of resources, the provision of training, information and support of practitioners and organisations. We also undertake activities aimed at influencing public policy and policy awareness – both locally and nationally.

Amongst the young people at risk with whom, and on whose behalf, Include Youth works are young people from socially disadvantaged areas, those with a learning disability, those with special needs, those who have been truanting, suspended or expelled from school, those from a care background, those who had a negative parenting experience, young people who have committed or are at risk of committing crime, misusing drugs or alcohol, undertaking unsafe sexual behaviour or other harmful activities, or of being harmed themselves.

Include Youth runs the Young Voices project, a participation project for young people who have been involved or are at risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system, with the aim of supporting these young people to become involved in decision-making processes which impact on their lives. Currently the Young Voices Project supports young people in custody (Hydebank Wood YOC and Woodlands) as well as in the community.

Include Youth manages the LACE (Looked After Children in Education) Project which is a multi-agency partnership with the aim of promoting better educational outcomes for children and young people in care.

The Give and Take Scheme aims to improve the employability and increase the self esteem of young people in need or at risk from across Northern Ireland. The Scheme works with approximately 135 young people from a care or criminal justice background. The Scheme aims to support young people to overcome particular barriers that prevent them from moving into mainstream training or employment and towards independent living. 75% of people on the Scheme are care experienced. The Scheme provides essential skills training (ICT, English and maths) to all of the young people.

In addition, Include Youth runs the YOYO Practitioners Forum, which draws together professionals from a range of statutory, voluntary and community organisations working directly with young people in need or at risk, and meets on a quarterly basis.

General Comments

Include Youth welcomes the publication of this paper and is pleased to have the opportunity to make this response. Include Youth are committed to engaging in this consultation process because we believe strongly that the young people we represent should be encouraged to become involved in political processes. Sadly, the majority of the young people we work alongside feel powerless to make decisions on everyday activities and have a general sense of powerlessness about many aspects of their lives. Their experiences of being sidelined and not listened to by adults means that they have largely disengaged from participating as equals in society. This has implications for their experiences in education, training, employment and family life. It is important that those individuals charged with improving electoral registration are aware of the views of these most vulnerable and disenfranchised young people.

We welcome the overall thrust of the paper which suggests that there is a real willingness to take steps to make it easier for young people to register. We are completely supportive of any attempt to increase young people's interest in the voting process. This paper has given us an opportunity to engage with our young people on their general views on voting and more broadly, their opinions on politicians and the political process. It has also shed some light on the practical barriers that exist to young people registering.

In preparation for our response our Include Youth consulted with a group of young people aged 14 – 16 years old currently held in Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre, a group of 16 and 17 year olds currently held in Hydebank Young Offenders centre, a group of over 18 year olds involved in Young Voices community group and a group of young women aged 16 – 20 years from Young Voices North Belfast project.

Specific Comments

We have not responded to all the listed questions in the consultation document, but rather have limited our comments to those topics which have most relevance to young people. We appreciate that some of the issues raised fall outside the remit of this consultation paper and of NIO responsibility, but we are keen that those making decisions about electoral registration are fully aware of the general views of the young people we work with on these important issues. We see this as context setting for any debate on improving the voting turnout from young people. Include Youth intend to produce a report, covering topics outlined in this response but also broadening the debate out to consider young people's general views on politics and most importantly on our local politicians. We can provide the NIO with the full report if required. We will also be disseminating our findings from this consultation and the broader report to other relevant bodies, including the Chief Electoral Officer, the Electoral Commission, the Electoral Office and NI Assembly members. The following subjects were consulted on:

- Three month residency requirement
- Awareness raising of politics/ voting process within school setting
- Knowledge of voting and registration processes

1 Three Month Residency

As the consultation document acknowledges the existence of the three month residency requirement dissuades young people from voting as they are less likely to have a permanent residence and the necessary documentation to prove it. The young people we consulted with confirmed this view.

'Young people often don't have many things if any that have their name on them.'
'Young people don't keep statements with their name on them to prove who they are.'

This requirement is particularly difficult for young people whose lives are often chaotic and whose housing situation is ever fluid and unstable.

'Yes. What if you're homeless? I don't have an address, how am I meant to vote when I turn 18?'

'Yes - I haven't had the same address for longer than 3 months in over 2 years, unless you count here [YOC], so I couldn't vote.'

Many of the young people did not engage in this question and were apathetic as to whether this requirement should be changed or not. For some, it appeared to have no influence on whether they would vote or not as they had already completely disengaged from any interest in voting from the outset.

'Wouldn't affect me one way or the other, I wouldn't vote anyway.'

'Wouldn't make any difference to me – I'm not registered because I don't want to just.'

This would suggest that while changing the requirement would encourage some young people to vote for others further awareness raising needs to take place to increase interest in and benefits of voting.

For those young people in the Young Offenders Centre, not being able to vote while in prison is a rule which they feel should be changed. They are adamant that they should have the right to exercise their democratic right while in prison.

'Aye, of course you should – we're still human beings, we should still have a say.'

Include Youth would support the removal of the three month residency requirement for registration in Northern Ireland.

2 Awareness Raising of politics/ voting process within school

The young people were not particularly keen on the idea of schools becoming more involved in transferring information on the voting and registration process, as they viewed it as a 'boring' topic and not something that should take up a lot of precious class time. They were open to the idea of teachers briefly telling them about the topic and then leaving it up to those pupils who wanted to know more to approach the teacher for more information.

'No as too much going on in school and boring.'

'Yes but a short session or do more informally – advertised in school and the classroom and then if interested speak to teachers who can point you in the right direction.'

Others were more taken with the idea of schools becoming involved, in particular on informing pupils about the voting and registration process.

'Aye, they should tell them how it works.'

One young person in the Juvenile Justice Centre strongly believed that politicians should be in schools telling young people who they are and that they stand for. He felt that this more direct approach would increase the interest in voting of many young people.

'Posters mean nothing, they should go round schools, communities, speak to young people, tell them what they do, what politics is all about, instead of just, "Vote for me!", but you don't know who they are.'

Include Youth supports the steps taken in 2008 which added Secondary Schools to the list of specified authorities that the Chief Electoral Officer is able to request information from for registration purposes. We support any schools initiatives which encourage more young people to vote. We therefore also support amending the 2008 regulations to extend the list of specified authorities to include Further Education Colleges. We would also ask that consideration be given to how to reach out to those young people not currently in mainstream education, those in alternative education projects and those within the criminal justice system.

Include Youth supports the 'Being Heard' project conducted by the British Youth Council and the Northern Ireland Youth Forum and funded by the Electoral Commission, designed to provide democracy training to young people not in education. We would support the continued funding of this project and others like it which are designed to encourage young people to vote.

We note the proposal to transfer responsibility for promoting political awareness in respect of registration from the Electoral Commission to the Chief Electoral Officer. We would like clarification on whether this will alter the Electoral Commission's role, promotion and support to awareness raising projects amongst young people.

3 Knowledge of Voting and Registration Processes

(i) Registering to Vote

The young women from North Belfast knew only the briefest of information on voting, such as the need to enter a booth in a polling station to make your vote, but they were not aware of the details of the registration process. The young people from

the Young Voices community group, all of whom were over 18 years old had mixed knowledge about registration. Only one person was able to volunteer the correct information about filling out a form which was delivered to your house and picked up a week later. One other young person believed that you had to be 18 to register. Similarly, only one of the young people from the Woodlands group and one from the Hydebank group knew how to register. The other young people had various ideas about how registration took place.

'You write on this wee card thing, don't you?'

'You go down to the brew?'

'You fill in a form?'

'You get fined up to £100 if you don't fill it in, don't you?'

None of the young people who took part in this consultation had registered, or were aware that they had been registered to vote. The reasons for not registering were as follows:

'No – why would you want to be, what's the point, it's not going to change anything.'

'No – to be honest I just couldn't be arsed, I don't care enough about it, not really, I just don't want to, why would you, what's the point.'

'No – I think like me, there's a lot of people who don't understand it all [politics], and then lots of politicians don't follow through on what they say they'll do, they're just in it for the money and for the fame.'

While many of the young people were able to describe the **promotional adverts recently screened on TV** encouraging people to register to vote, they were not convinced that this campaign alone would increase registration numbers. The campaign appears to have been successful in getting the message across that it is important to register but what it does not do is tackle the widespread scepticism about politician's motives.

'They just want our money, to pay for a second house, a new car – that's why people don't vote, an advert is not going to change that.'

(ii) Views on Voting

On the whole the young people **did not see the point in voting** and those who were not yet eligible to vote were not particularly excited about the prospect of being able to vote.

'Why put forward what doesn't matter to young people.'

'What would I vote for ... I just couldn't be bothered, no one's going to listen to me.'

They **do not think their vote would make a difference to the lives of young people or other marginalised groups**. There appears to be a sense that politics is something that happens out there, relates to other people, primarily people who are already well-off, employed, in permanent housing and secure family situations etc., and that these are the groups whose interests are represented and have some personal investment in voting.

'Because their vote counts, they get what they want from politicians, they get listened to, they have money.'

'Cos I don't think people would care about young people anyway, I don't think it make any difference to us.'

'To them [politicians] it would be just another vote, that's all they'd care about – it would be the same with the senior citizens, politicians would lie to them to just to get a vote.'

'They don't do anything for young people.'

'It's a waste of time.'

The perception that **voting is a wasted activity** came through in everything the young people said.

'They're not going to listen to us anyway.'

'It won't change anything.'

'Why vote? It never makes a difference.'

'It won't matter, nobody is going to listen to the vote.'

*'I don't give a f*** about voting.'*

The young people were asked **what would need to change to encourage them to vote**. They largely are looking for **increased accountability and honesty from politicians and evidence that things have actually changed for the better**. In particular, they would like to see a concerted effort made by the politicians to understand and relate to issues that matter to young people. For the young people we spoke to those issues are the difficulties they have faced in the care system, the lack of youth provision in their areas, segregated education and the general lack of respect given to young people in communities today.

They also suggested that young people could become more involved in the actual practicalities of the voting process and be seen to be more visible, taking a role perhaps in manning polling stations.

'Have young people manning polling stations.'

Sadly, some young people were adamant that nothing could change their mind about not wanting to vote.

'I wouldn't vote at all, I just wouldn't bother, nothing would make me.'

Concluding Comments

It is highly significant that none of the young people who engaged in these discussions had either registered to vote or had ever cast a vote. There is an element of lack of information about the technicalities of the registration process and the stringent identification requirements acting as a barrier to young people registering but the larger stumbling block appears to be the complete lack of engagement in the voting process and its end result. These young people already hold deeply jaded views on politicians and given their current stance it is hard to see how there will be any increase in the numbers of them registering to vote. While the steps suggested in the consultation paper may indeed increase the numbers of some young people registering and voting, they will not alone be enough to attract the most vulnerable of our young people into exercising their democratic rights. We do support those proposals within the paper which are intended to make it easier for young people to register and we welcome the NIO's commitment to increasing the numbers of young voters. However, as we have already said much of the power to truly impact on voters numbers lies in the hands of our politicians, and we will endeavour to make sure that they are made aware of this group of young people's views.

Include Youth

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