ROYAL HOLLOWAY UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Partnership for Young London

PATHWAYS TO PARTICIPATION FOR MARGINALISED YOUNG PEOPLE

Kaat Smets, James Sloam and Aine Bennett
in collaboration with **Matthew Walsham** and
Nora Zia from Partnership for Young London and
Louisa Foyle from Pan-London CiCC

SUMMARY

Young people are disillusioned with mainstream electoral politics in the UK and in similar established democracies. Amid what has been described as a 'polycrisis', younger generations do not feel that their everyday challenges are being addressed. This is particularly the case for young people from traditionally marginalised groups such as care leavers, certain ethnic minorities and those from more disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. In the UK and many other countries this results in low levels of youth turnout. In the 2024 UK General Election, it is estimated that less than 40% of 18–24-year-olds voted – compared to around 50% in 2019 and over two-thirds of those over 55 years old – in a low turnout election.[1] Just 22% of 18–34-year-olds from the lowest quartile (DE) social group took part. This constitutes a democratic deficit that we address in this work.
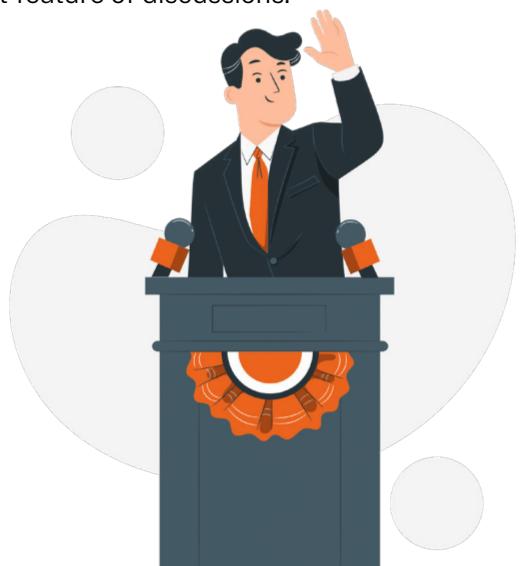
Researchers at Royal Holloway and Partnership for Young London – with the support of the Pan London Children in Care Council – set out to explore these issues by speaking to care leavers and young Londoners from marginalised groups in focus groups before and after the June 2024 UK election. We encouraged the 21 young people, aged 16 to 24, to think about why they (and their friends or peers) might engage or not engage in the electoral process, and suggest possible solutions that would improve participation. At the outset, we were keen to know about the potential negative impact of new voter ID rules on voting. However, led by the discussions with the young people, the study switched focus from *how people can vote,* i.e. the practicalities voting, to *why they might want to vote in the first place, i.e.* the motivations behind voting, which young Londoners considered to be much more important.

Our findings are especially important given the current debate around lowering the voting age from 18 to 16. The research found that the young people we spoke to wanted political parties and politicians to better articulate their youth offer, i.e. what is in it for young people like them. They felt neglected or passed over by the main parties, who ignored the pressing issues they faced in their everyday lives – particularly poverty, low-pay and housing – as well as broader issues they cared about, e.g., the war in Gaza. This led to general distrust of politicians. The young research participants believed that, whilst they were largely ignored by politicians during the election, that this could be improved by better communication and engagement between elections by developing opportunities for meaningful interactions between young people and policymakers. Whilst they could name a few politicians who seemed to do this already, they portrayed most current efforts to engage with young people like them as tokenistic or non-existent. Building democratic knowledge and democratic skills through better civic education in schools and in society more generally was also a prominent feature of discussions.

Our recommendations to turn youth voice into practice, revolve around
1) more in-person and direct engagement with young people;
2) improved civic education inside and outside the classroom;
3) more meaningful engagement and co-creation of policy through more diverse branches of youth councils, political parties, etc.

1   "How Britain voted in the 2024 election" by IPSOS Mori.
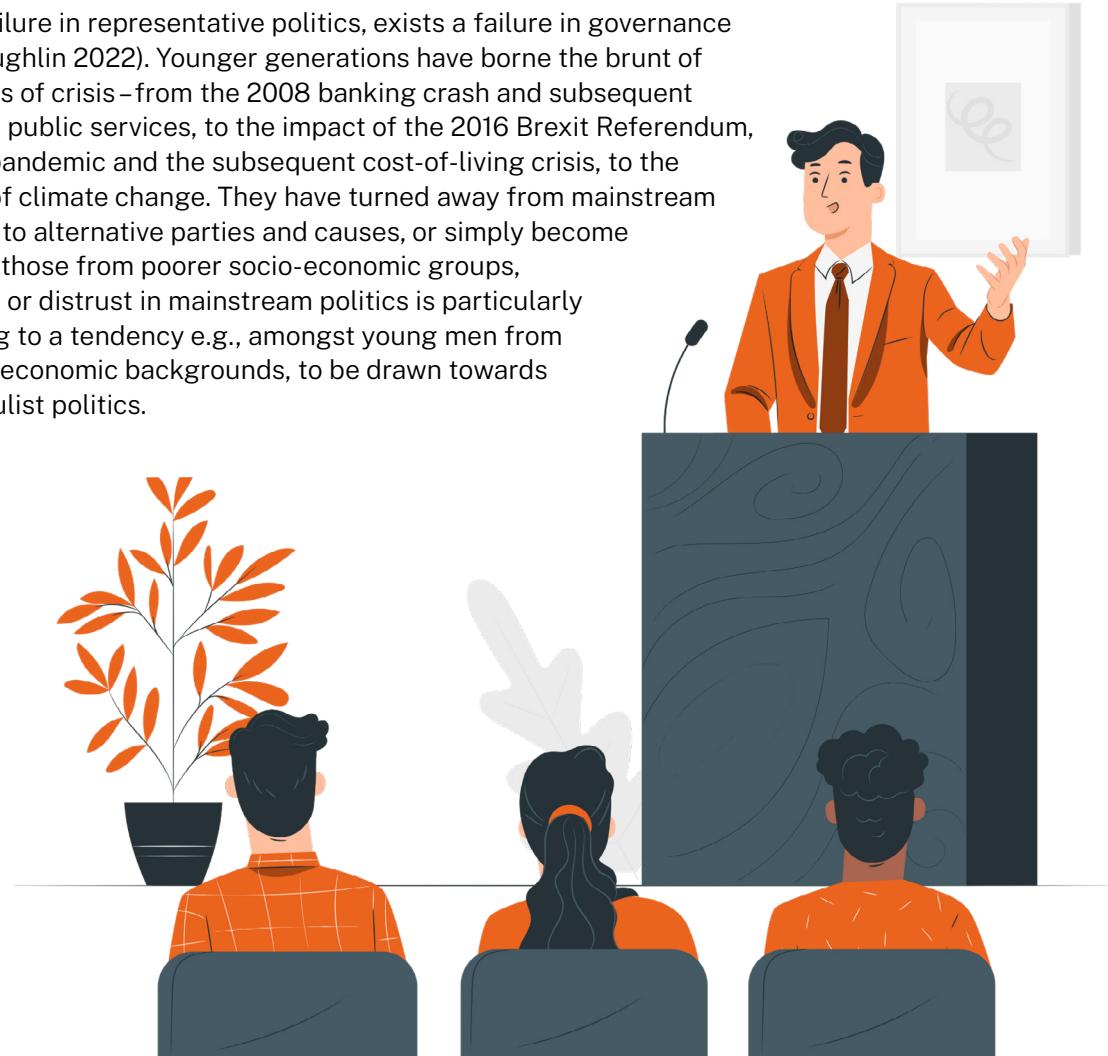
THE ACADEMIC LITERATURE:
THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT AND PATHWAYS TO PARTICIPATION AMONGST YOUNG PEOPLE
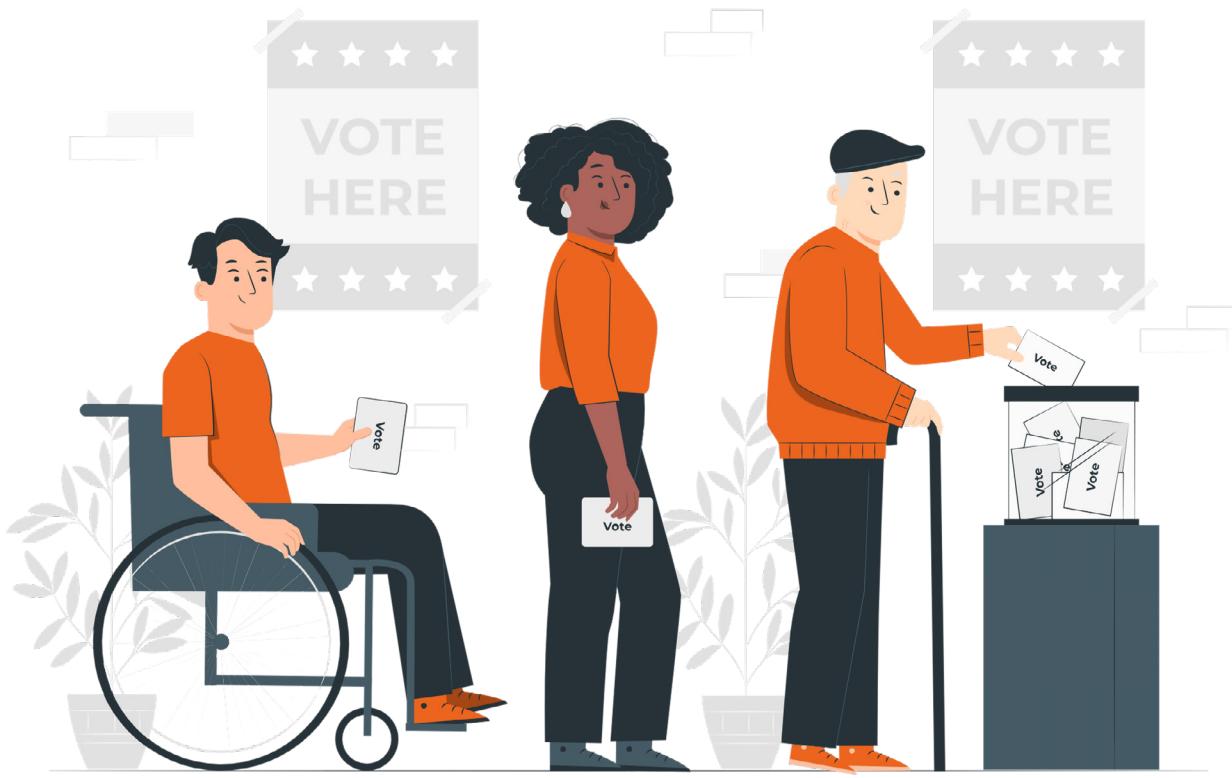
In recent decades, academics and policymakers have paid much attention to the apparent decline in youth participation in established democracies such as the UK. Younger generations are less likely to vote (Smets 2012, Smets and Neundorf 2014) and much less likely to become party members than previous generations of young people or older groups in contemporary societies (Sloam and Henn 2019). There are many reasons for these changes.

First, the values and priorities of younger voters have changed (Serra, Sloam and Smets, forthcoming). Generally speaking, younger generations are more socially liberal than older generations. Second, young people reach the social markers of adulthood later in life. This means issues around e.g. wages, childcare and house-buying, become important at different times compared to previous generations (Smets 2016). Third, young people favour issue-based forms of engagement, e.g., participation in social movements such as the Climate Strikes or Black Lives Matter, rather than tying themselves to broad party platforms (Sloam and Henn 2019).

Political parties have found it difficult to engage with this new generation of voters who are diverse both in their values and in their democratic profiles. Today, less than 1% of 18-24-year-olds are members of political parties (around 50,000 young people across the country).

Alongside this failure in representative politics, exists a failure in governance (Sloam and O'Loughlin 2022). Younger generations have borne the brunt of successive waves of crisis – from the 2008 banking crash and subsequent decade of cuts in public services, to the impact of the 2016 Brexit Referendum, to the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent cost-of-living crisis, to the gathering crisis of climate change. They have turned away from mainstream electoral politics to alternative parties and causes, or simply become disengaged. For those from poorer socio-economic groups, non-participation or distrust in mainstream politics is particularly prevalent, leading to a tendency e.g., amongst young men from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds, to be drawn towards extremist or populist politics.

It is important to recognise that there are very large intragenerational differences in youth participation. Young people who go on to higher education vote and participate in other forms of civic and political engagement as much as older adults. Conversely, young people from lower socio-economic groups and marginalised backgrounds are much less likely to vote or engage with politicians and public officials and so their voices are rarely heard (Sloam 2016).

As these groups are unlikely to vote, they are more likely to be ignored by politicians, and become more disillusioned with politics – and so, the vicious circle continues. Young people learn about politics through their parents, through their peers and in education (Neundorf and Smets 2017; Smets 2021; Serra and Smets 2022). Importantly, civic education classes have been shown to compensate for a lack of political socialisation at home (Neundorf, Niemi and Smets 2016).

Despite the distancing of young people from politics, there is evidence to show that young people – including over half of those from poorer socio-economic groups – are keen to become more involved in decision-making at the local level, which is promising for the rejuvenation of urban democracy (Sloam and Henn 2024). This optimism was reflected in our findings. Despite the failure of representative politics and public policy for young people from these backgrounds, they were still keen to become engaged and were actively seeking or asking for policymakers to make the effort to engage with them in a meaningful way – that would make a difference. Recent evidence shows that the amplification of youth voice with such marginalised groups has the potential not only to increase participation and build a more inclusive democracy, e.g., through the co-creation of policy with relevant citizens, but also to increase the effectiveness and sustainability of public policy. This would start to create virtuous circles of trust, engagement and participation in democracy amongst those communities where it is most needed.

OUR FOCUS GROUPS:
## ISSUES RAISED BY OUR YOUNG PARTICIPANTS
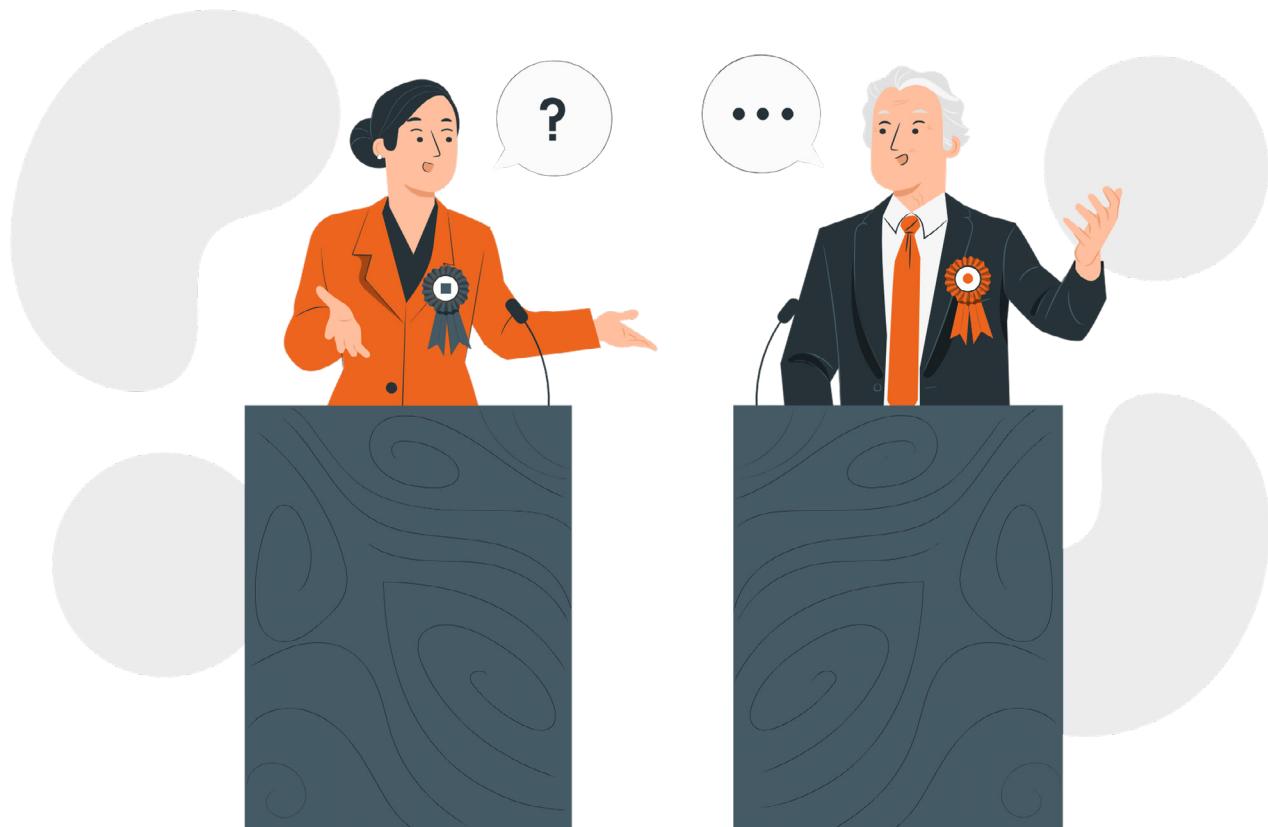
1. Lack of a youth offer

To kick off discussions we asked participants about the 2024 General Election and their views on voting, the parties and politicians. Despite often admitting that they did not "want to sound negative", the sense among the young people we spoke to was that **their vote did not matter or make a difference**. Some saw this view as being confirmed by the results of recent elections that had not reflected dominant youth opinion, such as the Brexit Referendum. This impression was accompanied by a concern that alternative forms of political engagement, such as petitions, "didn't really do anything".

The young people's sense of alienation from politics was exacerbated by the perception that politicians did not come from their communities, whether demographically, or in terms of not having lived or spent time in their constituency: "my MP doesn't even live in my constituency… It's good to have a first-hand experience about what life's like but she hasn't."

They cited **hostility in the media and from party leaderships towards politicians** they did feel represented by as further putting them off other politicians. This was paired with a **common distrust in politicians and the reliability of their commitments**. Yet, there were also some examples of MPs who engaged with them very effectively:

> "Rosena Khan, she's very swift – with local issues she's on it – she doesn't give false promises – she's very real, she's so authentic… she really cares… she's an MP but she also works as a doctor… I feel really represented – she's willing to learn, she's willing to break barriers".

Unlike in the example above, **politicians and parties were generally viewed as being very opaque** – not saying what they stood for or, in the worse examples, making promises they did not keep. The sense of limited influence and disaffection with politicians both contributed to a dominant view that the **policies politicians supported did not represent the young people's views or concerns**. One said: "I have MPs that look like me, but do they represent my views most of the time? No." In response to the question 'What would politicians need to do to get your vote?', one participant responded:

> "Give us money please [some laughter] … seriously, for example, it's really good if a party says that they'll get rid of aged minimum wage – it's not appropriate that 16-17-year-olds get paid £5/ hr".

We note that the minimum wage has been raised and somewhat equalized in the first Labour budget, but that this was not communicated to young people during the campaign. In addition to existential economic issues, it was also felt that the main parties were out-of-touch with people like them by ignoring (or even encouraging) the rise of the Far Right, structural racism, and the conflict in Gaza.

2. Politicians do not engage with young people in a meaningful way

The young people's impression that politicians "don't care", are "performative," or see politics as "a game", was matched by a **demand for more direct and meaningful engagement by politicians with young people**. At present the young Londoners we spoke to felt very much like outsiders: "It's like I'm in the spaces, but I'm still outside knocking the door"; "They have to realise; we are the next generation."

There were problems with both quantity (lack of) and quality (meaningful nature) of efforts to engage with young people. Several participants raised the importance of in-person events where politicians listened to young people locally and answered their questions. Some raised the concern that such events happened less often due to funding cuts for community spaces such as youth clubs and libraries:

> "because of the Tories and the cutting of funding to youth groups… there's nowhere for young people to go to… that would be our first interaction with local MPs… they haven't got that connection with their MP knocking on their door or visiting their youth group or local school… I don't think they're doing that as much anymore…"

Yet, other participants who had met MPs in-person felt they were not interested in talking to young people; that the politicians rebuffed their attempts to engage; or that they gave them the bare minimum of their time: "They don't have time for us. He [the MP] made a pit-stop and then it was over."

Indeed, even those of our participants who had experience of youth representation, such as participation in local youth councils or the Youth Parliament, expressed frustration that they were not listened to by people with decision-making powers. They often felt patronised, undermined and ignored by politicians and staff members with whom they interacted. As a result, they were sceptical of the benefits of youth roles without any real power to make changes.

> "That's such a big thing where they'll be like "as a young person, we're so impressed that you're coming up with these ideas!" But are you actually going to do my ideas? No!"

Participants sometimes compared the election campaign with their experiences of engaging with policy-makers and politicians between elections. This often led to negative experiences – of their voice not being listened to or of tokenism. One young woman movingly spoke of her experience:

> "as a care-experienced person there's hardly anything they do to support us…. I keep going to events on care-leavers… and they keep saying that we're one of the biggest problems… He [a former Cabinet minister] promised he was going to do something for care leavers… he said it will all be announced in the budget, just you wait…. I watched the budget for the first time, hopped down with a cup of tea…and I was thinking where's care leavers, when's it going to come up, when's it going to come up… for me, it was really heart-breaking, because we already don't have a support system. And, for someone to give us… we're always promised big promises – they always crumple down on us."

There was also discussion of the **poor efforts to communicate with young people during the campaign – especially through social media** – which one of the groups described unanimously as 'cringe'. One young Londoner explained how efforts to engage with youth often failed:

> "so those communications are not tailored at all to young people… hence, why there's a lack of participation… you could have the best event for young people… but if your marketing and advertising is not up to scratch then inevitably, you're not going to receive the number that you would like… or the input that we need."

The young people reacted very disapprovingly to negative campaigning through social media, which seemed like game-playing or point-scoring – so much so that even some of the politically engaged young people ignored the messaging from their preferred party. They valued authenticity, positive communication about the issues, and admired politicians going out of their comfort zones to gain the attention of people through social media, e.g., Ed Davey and the Liberal Democrat campaign.

It was noticeable that young people also **want to be part of the solution** to more positive interactions with policymakers, who need to value their voices in the shaping of policy: "Rather than trying to buy us into a vision [at election time] we don't believe in, let's help create that vision."

3. Poor civic and political education

Beyond meaningful engagement with politicians and policymakers, the young people also highlighted **the role of education as a pathway to political participation** (which is very much supported by the academic literature).

Several young people were scathing in their assessment of the quality of civic and political education they received at school. They wanted a comprehensive, "unbiased", and locally specific curriculum that started from the basics: "who's the mayor, who's the PM, what is the basic structure of Parliament, your local council, who are the local councillors?" A few participants wanted to learn more about decision-making processes, both within local authorities and Parliament. Some were as critical of schools as politicians – arguing that there were resources available that teachers were under-utilising and that they struggled to find out where to access information.

> "Knowledge is power, but it's like they don't even give you that knowledge... unless you specifically study it there isn't a lot of political education... it looks really complicated unless you try and simplify it yourself... it's something I struggled with until I did a bit of research."

Participants expressed frustration that as a result, they had to seek out political knowledge for themselves, such as whether they were eligible to vote in specific elections:

> "It's as if it's intentional to make sure that people don't know what's going on. Even if you try and find information, it's difficult."

They often found official sources of information opaque, confusing, or that it was difficult to locate the information they needed. Some told us that they instead had to turn to alternate sources, such as political campaigns or organisations. Others said that the **inaccessibility of information**, for example the length of party manifestos, prevented them doing more of their own research. They highlighted concerns about accessibility of information, for example, for people with dyslexia, or with low digital literacy.

While some participants did credit individual teachers with inspiring their interest in politics, more often they attributed it to discussing politics with their families, even where this led to differences of opinion. This appeared to be especially influential for families with a history of migration, as their discussions covered national and international politics. Others talked about the influence of friends and peers, particularly when it came to sharing resources online. They also spoke of sharing political content on social media themselves, whether to ask friends for their opinion, share resources, or to share their point of view.

The failings in education and inaccessibility of information contributed to a widespread impression that many young people were uninformed about or uninterested in politics. Some recounted anecdotes of friends not knowing who the Prime Minister was, but also expressed a frustration at other young people not engaging in politics on a local level:

> "they don't even know what a councillor is, who your local councillor is, what ward you're in, who's your local MP. They literally know nothing."

There was also a feeling that **civic and political education** could be achieved more broadly **outside the classroom**. For example, local politicians could be proactive in explaining their roles and capabilities:

> "If politicians were more honest about what they can actually do, it restores faith in the political system as voters, because it's those false promises that everyone's talking about... I'm a local authority, this is what I can do; I'm an MP, this is what I can do..."

Deliberative spaces to learn about politics were seen as a possible solution – the chance to sit and chat about issues in open spaces: "a lot of my friends have different views on different things and straight away there's a little clash instead of just talking... if they can have a civil conversation, it's just more engaging to talk about stuff."
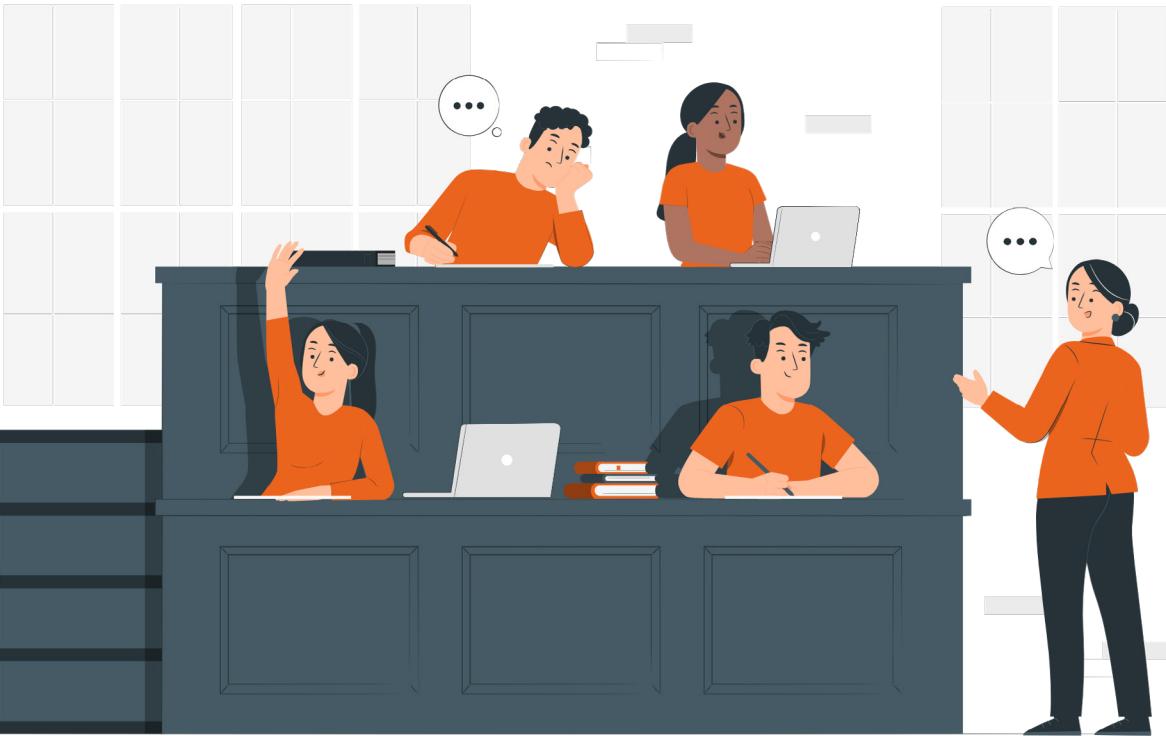
OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:
A YOUTH-CENTRED APPROACH TO REJUVENATING DEMOCRACY

We focus on action in schools given the opportunity to reach out to a broad audience, as well as on the role of politicians, especially with the potential introduction of Votes at 16 during this Parliament. Based on the suggestions of the young people we worked with and our analysis of their contributions, we recommend the following for embedding best practice and providing guidelines for policymakers:

1. More in-person and digital direct engagement with young people where they feel listened to and that their opinions could contribute to policymaking.

a) Policymakers to commit to a step-change in visits to schools to discuss a relevant policy issue or how to engage in (local) democracy (these visits might be facilitated by civic society groups). This also helps address the perceived lack of a youth offer by putting policymakers into direct contact with young people.

b) Campaigns to encourage youth participation in elections to focus on why as well as on how to vote. This need not challenge the non-partisan nature of youth turnout drives e.g., #Votebecause campaigns where participants state their personal reason for voting.

c) Communications to highlight how youth priorities have been addressed (such as housing, mental health and crime) subsequent to elections, and asking for further youth input on how to improve policy in practice (i.e. closing the feedback loop).

2. Improved civic education including coverage of political institutions; decision-making processes; and key issues.

a) Provide incentives to schools to provide lessons on civic and political participation, which can be supported or partially outsourced through civil society organisations and universities, e.g., politics departments.

b) Guidance on minimum expectations of learning about civic and political participation to schools in their areas. These guides might be created centrally or with the help of civil society and higher education institutions.

3. Meaningful engagement, e.g., through the co-creation of public policy with diverse groups of young people, with real potential impact on outcomes.

a) Local councils should ensure that their youth councils are sufficiently diverse (especially by ethnicity, gender and social class). Political parties ought to do the same for their youth branches.

b) Young representatives should be individually mentored by a member of a relevant policy team.

c) Youth representatives should be encouraged to undertake research e.g., with civil society partners, to develop a youth agenda for their area with a view to receiving an official response from stakeholders.

d) Policy-makers should receive training on working with children and young people as partners.

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