

Representation of the People Bill: Evidence Submission

Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT)

Introduction

The Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT) is the national subject association for Citizenship education in England. We support teachers, schools and colleges to deliver high-quality Citizenship education across primary, secondary and post-16 phases, and we work closely with policymakers, regulators and researchers to strengthen democratic education.

ACT has contributed formal written and oral evidence to the Government's Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR) and to parliamentary inquiries, including the Speaker's Conference on the Security of Candidates, MPs and Elections. We also commission and disseminate national research on the impact of Citizenship education on young people's democratic engagement.

Citizenship education plays a central role in preparing young people to participate in democratic life. In the context of proposals to lower the voting age to 16 and the wider reforms emerging from the Curriculum and Assessment Review, ensuring equitable access to high-quality Citizenship education is increasingly important.

Evidence from national research demonstrates that where Citizenship education is delivered consistently and by trained specialists, young people show stronger political knowledge, greater confidence in democratic participation and higher intentions to vote.

This submission therefore focuses on the relationship between democratic participation and Citizenship education, and the conditions required to ensure that democratic reforms are supported by effective education provision.

1. The role of Citizenship education in democratic participation

Citizenship education is the subject within the national curriculum designed to help young people understand democracy, political institutions, rights and responsibilities, and the ways in which citizens can participate in public life.

Through the subject, pupils learn about:

- Parliament, government and democratic institutions
- Elections and voting
- The rule of law and human rights
- Media literacy and evaluating political information
- How individuals and groups can influence decision-making

This learning is particularly important in a context where many young people express strong interest in political issues but limited confidence in formal political participation.

Recent national research commissioned by ACT and conducted by Nottingham Trent University and Royal Holloway found that Citizenship education plays a significant role in developing young people's democratic engagement.

The study found that students who had taken GCSE Citizenship Studies were:

- More interested in politics and the news
- More confident in their understanding of political issues
- More likely to believe that voting can influence government
- More trusting of democratic institutions

For example, 63.1% of students who had taken GCSE Citizenship Studies reported an interest in politics compared with 47.3% of those who had not studied the subject.

These findings demonstrate that Citizenship education can play a meaningful role in strengthening democratic literacy and participation.

2. Addressing inequalities in democratic engagement

One of the most significant findings from the NTU/Royal Holloway research is the equalising effect of Citizenship education.

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are typically less likely to participate in formal political processes and often report lower levels of political confidence.

However, the research indicates that studying Citizenship can help reduce these inequalities. The positive impact of GCSE Citizenship Studies was particularly evident among:

- young women
- young people from ethnic minority backgrounds
- young people from lower socio-economic groups

Students who studied the subject showed higher levels of political understanding and democratic confidence across these groups.

This suggests that Citizenship education can help address participation gaps and ensure that democratic engagement is not limited to those with existing social or educational advantages.

3. Demand for democratic education among young people

Research also demonstrates strong demand from young people to learn about democratic issues.

The NTU/Royal Holloway study found that around 90% of young people rated core Citizenship topics as important, including:

- elections and voting
- how government works
- human rights
- how citizens can bring about change
- the role of media and social media in politics

However, many respondents reported that they had limited opportunities to learn about these topics during the previous year, particularly where Citizenship was not taught as a discrete subject.

This gap between young people's interest and their opportunities to learn about democracy highlights the importance of consistent curriculum provision.

4. Curriculum reform and democratic education

The Curriculum and Assessment Review provides an important opportunity to strengthen democratic education.

The Review confirms that Citizenship will have an expanded and strengthened role within the national curriculum, including the introduction of statutory Citizenship at primary level and strengthened provision across secondary education.

These developments provide a framework through which young people can progressively build their understanding of democracy and participation from primary school through to post-16 education.

However, curriculum reform alone is not sufficient. Evidence consistently shows that outcomes are strongest where Citizenship education is:

- taught regularly as a discrete subject
- delivered by trained specialist teachers
- supported by appropriate curriculum time and resources

Ensuring these conditions are in place will be essential if curriculum reforms are to translate into meaningful improvements in democratic education.

5. Workforce capacity and specialist teachers

Teacher expertise plays a critical role in the quality of Citizenship education.

Research shows that students are more likely to develop political understanding and civic confidence when lessons are delivered by trained Citizenship specialists who are confident facilitating discussion of political and social issues.

However, workforce capacity remains a challenge. Previous research has found that less than a quarter of teachers delivering GCSE Citizenship Studies have specialist training in the subject.

Expanding Citizenship provision, particularly with the introduction of statutory primary Citizenship, will require:

- investment in specialist teacher recruitment
- increased initial teacher training capacity
- subject-specific professional development for existing teachers

Without this investment, there is a risk that expanded curriculum entitlement will not translate into high-quality classroom experiences for pupils.

6. Ensuring effective implementation

For democratic education to be delivered consistently across schools, it must be supported by the wider education system.

Evidence submitted by ACT to previous inquiries highlights several structural barriers to consistent Citizenship provision, including:

- limited inspection focus on the subject
- variation in curriculum time allocated to Citizenship
- the subject's status within school accountability measures

Department for Education data indicates that only 776 schools currently offer GCSE Citizenship Studies, meaning that access to the qualification remains uneven across England. This has implications for the consistency of democratic education provision in schools. The geographical distribution of these schools is illustrated in the following map.

Source: Department for Education, Key Stage 4 Performance data (2024–25).

<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-performance/2024-25>

Map of schools offering GCSE Citizenship Studies:

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?hl=en&mid=1kgycuBPb1DnoUK1R7CP7RTIZYe8KWK0>

In particular, proposals to reform Progress 8 may have implications for GCSE Citizenship Studies. The subject is not currently included within the proposed Humanities category, which risks weakening its status within school accountability frameworks.

While GCSE Citizenship Studies remains a recognised GCSE qualification and Citizenship is a statutory national curriculum subject, its exclusion from Category A risks weakening the subject's status within the accountability framework used by schools, colleges and multi-academy trusts.

Evidence from previous reforms suggests that where subjects are not recognised within key performance measures, they are more likely to be marginalised in curriculum planning, staffing and timetabling decisions.

This has direct implications for the successful implementation of Votes at 16. If GCSE Citizenship Studies is deprioritised within Progress 8, fewer pupils may have the opportunity to study the subject in depth during Key Stage 4 – precisely at the point where structured learning about elections, voting and democratic participation is most impactful.

ACT is currently gathering rapid evidence from teachers and school leaders to understand the likely impact of the proposed Progress 8 changes on GCSE Citizenship Studies. This evidence will inform our ongoing discussions with the Department for Education, ministers and officials.

If Votes at 16 is to be supported by effective democratic education, accountability measures must align with curriculum ambition. Recognition of GCSE Citizenship Studies within Progress 8 would send a clear signal that the subject is valued as a core component of a broad and balanced education and as essential preparation for democratic participation.

Ensuring that Citizenship is recognised within inspection, accountability and workforce planning will be important in securing consistent provision across schools.

Conclusion

Citizenship education plays a vital role in supporting democratic participation.

Evidence from national research demonstrates that studying Citizenship strengthens young people's political understanding, confidence and willingness to engage in democratic life.

At a time when the education system is undergoing significant reform, there is an important opportunity to strengthen democratic education and ensure that all young people have access to high-quality learning about democracy and participation.

Ensuring consistent Citizenship provision, investment in specialist teachers and alignment with curriculum reforms will be essential in supporting this goal.

References:

Henn, M., Sloam, J., & Nunes, A. (2025). [*Young people and citizenship education: The impact of studying GCSE Citizenship Studies on young people's democratic engagement and participation.*](#) Nottingham Trent University, Royal Holloway University of London and the Association for Citizenship Teaching.

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