

The Belfast City Youth Council (BCYC) is the Youth Participation Structure for Belfast City Council, made up of members aged 13-18 (or 21 if they have a disability or are care experienced). Views/stances/thoughts/opinions shared in this written evidence reflect only those of the Belfast City Youth Council and its members who provided their feedback, and not those of Belfast City Council, its employees or elected members. This evidence is an entirely youth led piece of work.

(Clause 1) We would like to begin by saying that we strongly support the introduction of the Representation of the People Bill, particularly its clause around lowering the voting age to 16. However we would like to note that we are disappointed that these changes will most likely not be in place in time for the next local and Assembly elections in Northern Ireland. The Belfast City Youth Council has spoken before in support of lowering the voting age to Councillors from Belfast City Council's People and Communities Committee, and many of our members have campaigned for the voting age to be lowered independent of the Belfast City Youth Council and we commend them for this work. We believe that by lowering the voting age there is an incredible opportunity to engage our generation politically, however we believe without the introduction of good quality, politically unbiased, factual civic and democratic education across all four nations of the UK, this opportunity may be lost. When discussing this, many members shared this sentiment, with one member saying - "I can understand to some extent the concerns that lie around immaturity and lack of political education, but in my opinion there are many adults who are also politically ignorant yet this doesn't mean they can't vote. Focus needs to be placed on introducing unbiased adequate political education in schools, so that by 16, teenagers are able to place a fully informed vote". As we understand that education is a devolved matter, we implore the Government to ensure that if there is any introduction of democratic or citizenship education in England in line with the voting age being lowered is followed across all the four nations and that there are opportunities for engagement with the Northern Ireland Department for Education, we also explored the idea of a potential four nations Civic Education Strategy, which we think could help the four nations to all be in line when it comes to ensuring every young person in the UK is ready to vote come the next election, and also ensure this includes education on devolved powers. This is particularly important in nations where there are devolved powers, as every young person in Northern Ireland needs to also know how our Assembly and Executive function in practice as well as the Westminster Government.

(Clause 47) We also welcome permitted Voter IDs being expanded, however we feel that there should also be an inclusion of Student IDs as acceptable voter ID across the UK as many young people will have these, and we particularly welcome the introduction of digital versions of ID being permitted however we must ensure that young people who experience digital poverty are not disadvantaged by this. We also propose that in Northern Ireland, the Translink YLink Transport discount card becomes an acceptable form of Voter ID as it can only be applied for 4 weeks before a 16th birthday and is photographic and identity has to be verified when applying for one.

(Clauses 17-25) We also support the clause around Automatic Voter Registration, as we discussed ourselves as young people how difficult it can sometimes be even for us who are incredibly politically engaged to register to vote or understand how to, what age you are eligible at and many of us have noted our families and peers sharing the same sentiments. We also would wish to see some of the proposed automatic voter registration pilots being

rolled out in Northern Ireland. We also welcome the proposed changes around the electoral register canvass in Northern Ireland.

We note that for young people in Northern Ireland changes made in Westminster can feel somewhat irrelevant to our daily lives, and we call for further engagement of young people across the UK as these changes are brought in, as we cannot leave young people unprepared for voting. We are thankful for this opportunity to submit written evidence and would be happy to engage further if needed.