

Engaging young people

Councillor workbook



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Foreword

This workbook has been designed as a learning aid for elected members who want to understand more about how to involve young people in their ward. It makes no assumption about whether you have been a member for some time, or whether you have been elected more recently. If you fall into the former category this workbook should serve as a useful reminder of some of the key approaches involved in the meaningful engagement of young people through your role.

Listening to young people in your local area and representing their interests not only strengthens local democracy, by involving the future electorate, but also delivers many outcomes that councillors seek to achieve.

This guide explores how there is evidence that accountancy and legitimacy is increased amongst decision makers where young people are involved in decision-making.

Often youth engagement results in fresh and constructive decisions that really work for all those involved.

This workbook is designed to serve more as a direction marker rather than a road map and contains signposts to sources of further information and support. It will help you develop your approach to involving young people, and representing their views, in your day-to-day duties.

In practical terms, the document will take at least **two to three hours** to work through. You do not need to complete it all in one session and may prefer to work through the material at your own pace. The key requirement is to think about the issues presented and how the material relates to you, your council and the young people you serve and represent.

Introduction

Throughout the workbook you will encounter a number of features designed to help you think about stress management and personal resilience. These features are represented by the symbols shown below:



Guidance – this is used to indicate research, quotations, explanations and definitions that you may find helpful.



Challenges – these are questions or queries raised in the text which ask you to reflect on your role or approach – in essence, they are designed to be thought-provokers.



Case studies – these are ‘pen pictures’ of approaches used by other people or organisations.



Hints and tips – these represent a selection of good practices which you may find useful.



Useful links – these are signposts to sources of further information and support, outside of the workbook, which may help with principles, processes, methods and approaches. A full list of useful additional information and support is also set out in the appendix of the workbook.

Gaining a fuller understanding of young people in your ward



Defining youth

There are many definitions that can be applied to the term 'youth' but for the purposes of this workbook the application is to young people aged 11 to 22. This accounts for the years when a person is making the transition from being a child to an adult. This is also the period when they move from being able to participate in youth democracy through to mainstream elections.

As a community leader, you are best placed to understand the particular challenges faced by your neighbourhood; including the issues faced by young people in your local area.

This is particularly pertinent for young people, who often feel that as an age group their issues and opinions are taken less seriously at a local level. This is compounded by feeling that they are viewed negatively by other age groups in the community due to unfair media coverage.



Democratic engagement

In this workbook 'democratic engagement' is used to describe young people getting involved in a range of activities – from voting in elections to participating in civic life through volunteering. Young people can be involved in formal and informal activities with others to influence or address local decision-making.

Councillors can challenge this perception through the positive engagement of young people. Councillors can support young people to participate in society and become part of the solutions to the problem – from shaping services to be delivered differently and helping to make public decisions, through to supporting social action where young people have changed their area for the better. Through youth engagement work, councillors can enable young people to improve their local areas and strengthen democracy.



British Social Attitudes 27th report, December 2010

This report found that young people are more likely to feel discriminated against, and are viewed more negatively than older people. Over half (55 per cent) of 18 to 29 year olds reported having been treated with prejudice because of their age in the last year, compared with around a quarter (24 per cent) of 30 to 39 year olds, and just a fifth (20 per cent) of those aged 60 to 69.

www.natcen.ac.uk/series/british-social-attitudes

British Youth Council (BYC) Big listen survey, January 2011

A survey of one thousand young people across the UK found that 82 per cent of young people believe it's important for them to speak up about their local area, and three quarters (75 per cent) want to have a greater influence in decisions made in local areas, on topics such as how the local community is run, and what happens to local services. However, six out of ten young people (60 per cent) told BYC that they feel their views are taken less seriously in local decision-making because of their age.

www.byc.org.uk/resource-centre

Knowing as much as you can about young people in your area is the first step towards understanding their needs and concerns and representing their interests effectively.

Like other age groups in your ward, the young people in your area are likely to be a very diverse crowd. Issues or concerns that may be considered a high priority by one group of young people may not necessarily be shared by other young people.

Seeking to first understand both what issues young people face in your area, through looking at existing data, and the different ways they currently are involved within the local community, can inform how you start or build on creating a meaningful dialogue with young people.

Using the data available for your ward

Some council community profile data is available down to a ward level and can act as a good indicator for issues that may be affecting young people in your local area. For example, if there is a high level of free school meal eligibility then this shows that household income is generally low, and therefore it can be deduced that young people in those households may not have the same life experience as a young person from a better-off household. You will also be able to see how national issues on the political agenda, such as high youth unemployment or teenage pregnancy rates, are directly affecting young people in your local area

Mapping youth engagement in your community



Youth representative structures

- There are currently over 620 youth councils across the UK working with all levels of local government. In 2009/10 up to 19,800 young people, mostly between 11 and 17 were active as volunteer 'youth councillors'. Just over half of youth councillors are elected. These were voted for by an estimated 1 million children and young people. The rest were appointed to represent minority groups, other youth organisations, or were general volunteers.
- The UK Youth Parliament has 600 elected MYPs (Members of Youth Parliament) aged 11 to 18, elected in annual youth elections throughout the UK. In the past two years 1 million young people have voted in UK Youth Parliament elections. Once elected, MYPs work with a range of people including their MP, the youth council, schools and councillors on issues important to the youth parliament and their constituents.
- Young mayors are elected by other young people in their area to represent them. There are currently more than 10 young mayor schemes across England. Each young mayor has a popular mandate, a real budget and a clear role. The election process mirrors that of the process for electing adult directly-elected mayors.

(Sources: British Youth Council, 2010, 'Stronger together'; UK Youth Parliament, 2011; Young Mayors Network, 2011)

In any given area there are likely to be many different ways that young people are contributing their ideas, opinions and time to their local community. It is also likely that these young people will be already positively influencing issues affecting young people in your local area.

Clearly not all young people in your local area will be involved in contributing towards local decision-making, and indeed some may experience particular barriers to participation. However, utilising current networks is a good starting place for local representatives seeking to engage with young people in their area.

Youth forums act as a hub for youth engagement



Key ways young people may be involved include:

youth representation structures – young people will volunteer their time as representatives in local youth councils, as young mayors, as members of the UK Youth Parliament, or children in care councils

public participation – young people will also take part in surveys and consultations, and local elections

social participation – many young people will volunteer and be part of groups such as both uniformed groups eg Girl Guides, Scouts, Cadets, Boys' Brigade, and local youth action or charity projects.

Many of the local youth representation structures will act as a hub for how young people are involved in local democracy, and bring together young people from a range of different initiatives and organisations. For example, a youth council may involve young mayors, members of the Youth Parliament, and members of special interest groups.

Mapping what networks of young people are already informing and influencing local decision-making is invaluable to ensure that you can take the next step and work together with them, using their expertise, enthusiasm and energy, to involve other young people and tackle local issues.



Office for National Statistics, neighbourhood statistics

You can search here for detailed statistics within specific geographic areas, for example in neighbourhood regeneration.

<http://tinyurl.com/bv8gswb>

Engaging young people in local elections

There has been growing concern about the lack of interest and involvement of young people in elections over the last 10 years.

The main barriers to voting in local elections for young people are understood to be feelings of a lack of relevance and understanding of government in the UK. Young people believe that the system is not geared to them and their needs. The four key barriers for young people are:

- too much focus on party politics rather than issues
- lacking knowledge about how elections work
- thinking local and national government doesn't affect their lives
- viewing elections as an inconvenience.



Voter registration

56 per cent of 19-24 year olds are registered to vote compared with 94 per cent of those aged 65+

(Source: Electoral Commission, 2011, 'The completeness and accuracy of electoral registers in Great Britain')



The democratic deficit

“Some people are now out of the habit of voting... Younger age groups are much less likely to see voting as a civic duty than older age groups... suggesting

the beginning of a cohort effect, ie a generation apparently carrying forward their non-voting as they get older”.

(Source: Electoral Commission, 2005)

However, lessons can be learnt from the information that increasing numbers of young people under the age of 18 are voting in local youth council, young mayor and youth parliament elections.

Research by the Local Government Group and NFER in 2010 has found that where youth elections are run well, receiving support from the council, such elections report higher turnout than young people voting in general elections.

It has been suggested that this is because youth elections are seen to be:

- issues-based
- simple to understand
- convenient
- relevant
- for and about young people.

Councillors can address barriers to young people getting involved in elections by ensuring young people understand how to vote and feel that it is relevant for them to do so.



Turnout amongst young people in elections

Evidence suggests that the turnout of young people voting in general elections is lower than the average for the population.

- 44 per cent of young people aged between 18 and 24 voted in the general election in 2010, compared with the overall turnout of 65 per cent (Ipsos Mori, 2010).

There is a consistently lower proportion of young people participating in voting at general elections in comparison to the national average, with less than half of young people aged 18 to 24 years having voted.

(Source: Local Government Group and NFER, 2010, 'Re-engaging young people in voting: differences in actions and attitudes between youth and local and national elections')



Getting young people in the habit of voting

In Lewisham the young mayor's project began in 2004 to mirror the direct election of the Mayor of Lewisham. The office of the young mayor in Lewisham works closely with the electoral services team at the council to achieve this.

The elections are promoted and held in every secondary school and college in Lewisham. All young people resident or attending a school in the borough aged 11 to 18 can vote. Youth workers engage with young people through youth events, school assemblies, class talks and community events to promote awareness of the election and to encourage young people to stand as candidates and to vote.

On polling day, the council's electoral services team run the election in exactly the same way they do for the adult elections. Ballot boxes, voting booths and electoral staff are stationed at each secondary school and college in the borough for the duration of the school day. The count is held the following day, again with the support of electoral staff, and young people assist in this process. The culmination of the process is the results ceremony where the new young mayor, deputy young mayor and young advisors are announced. Elections now take place during 'local democracy week' each year and voter registration, for 16 to 18 year olds, is promoted at the same time.

The partnership approach between electoral services and the participation workers at the office of the young mayor has been critical to the success of this approach. Voter turnout at the most recent election in October 2010 was high at 49 per cent.

(Source: Lewisham young mayor's project, The Young Mayors Network, 2010)

The benefits of youth engagement

Creating ongoing dialogue between young constituents and elected representatives is crucial to ensure that young people have the opportunity to have their opinions considered and their views taken into account in matters that affect them.



Young people's right to be heard

The UK Government ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1991 which asserts that:

“States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.” Article 12 UNCRC

Elected representatives therefore have a duty to actively consider the views of children and young people in their work, and to create a culture where those views are forthcoming and given due weight.



Understanding children's rights

Children are guaranteed a wide range of human rights through a series of human rights instruments. More information about these is available here:

<http://tinyurl.com/cb3qdow>

A clear explanation for children and young people of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is available here: www.tagd.org.uk

However, youth participation does not simply reflect the interests of young people; at its best it enhances the community as a whole. It ensures services work for the people they are commissioned for, engages young people with the political process, and introduces a sense of responsibility and regard for others opinions and needs.



The benefits to children and young people of involvement in decision-making

A report by the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England has highlighted how children and young people gain considerably from involvement in decision-making. For example, being a member of an active school council or youth forum means that some children are ideally placed to develop their confidence and public speaking skills. As a result, they have a number of opportunities to negotiate and think through problems from different angles and to use their own initiative.

More generally young people said how participation not only enables more children to have their say, but it also helps ground decision-making processes in the lived reality of children's lives, and consequently better informs the outcome of decisions.

Children argued that they were more likely than adults to creatively problem-solve because their young age afforded them a unique perspective. They also stated that they had a right to be involved in decision-making processes and accessing this right made them feel respected, valued and active citizens in a shared community.

<http://tinyurl.com/ckp76qp>



Valuing young voices

A report produced in partnership by the Local Government Group and the National Youth Agency on strengthening democracy found that youth participation strengthens outcomes by:

- improving service delivery
- leading to development of new appropriate provision
- improving community cohesion
- improving personal and social confidence in young people
- improving skills of young people
- improving the political literacy of young people
- saving councils money.

<http://tinyurl.com/bvyjnt7>



Engaging young people with disabilities in service design

Shropshire Council carried out a participation project with young people aged 13 to 19 with moderate to severe disabilities to gain their views on the kinds of services they would like.

Establishing effective communication with the young people was critical to the success of this project and so a two year time period was agreed for the consultation work. It was decided that developing scrapbooks was the most effective way for the young people to express their interests, likes and dislikes to adults and decision makers.

During the consultation it was identified that young people wanted a wider range of respite opportunities which were better designed around their needs and interests. New service specifications were designed and endorsed by councillors, offering a number of different tendering opportunities which encouraged a wider range of providers to create more diverse opportunities for children and young people with disabilities. The most important issue illustrated by the consultation, was to ensure that services could be individually tailored to the specific needs and interests of children and young people.

(Source: Local Government Improvement and Development, 2011)

There are several examples of council overview and scrutiny committees (OSCs) benefiting from seeking the views of young people about their experience of services planned and delivered for their age group. By hearing from young people about what they value in their community and about their aspirations for the future, OSCs are able to strengthen the evidence-base about what matters to young people, helping those who plan and deliver public services to make judgements about the best ways to achieve short-term savings and longer term improvements.



Involving young people in scrutiny

Westminster Council has created a scrutiny group made up entirely of young people, consisting of eight to 15 young people aged between 16 to 19, supported by staff from youth services and the member services scrutiny team. This panel was running until early summer 2011, reporting back to the full children and young people policy and scrutiny committee.

Facilitators have run a session on local services, asking how the young people perceive Westminster and what their positive and negative experiences are of living in the borough. From the feedback, they were able to prioritise issues they might want to investigate. Officers are now identifying ways to develop a wider network to keep all young people up to date about the panel's work.

Cllr Ian Adams, Chairman of the children and young people policy and scrutiny committee, says "we've been consistently impressed by the quality of input when young people have participated or provided evidence to scrutiny sessions, so we thought it was high time for them to be given a chance to set their own agenda for scrutiny. Young people are often more informed than they are given credit for and can offer valuable alternative viewpoints on key issues".

(Source: Centre for Public Scrutiny and Local Government Group, 2011, 'Tomorrow's people? A guide for overview and scrutiny committees about involving young people in scrutiny')

To create an open dialogue between young people and elected representatives is therefore not only an obligation set out in the UNCRC and other frameworks, but a pragmatic course of action for councillors to ensure that services reflect local need and that the voters of the future respect and value their democratic rights.



Exercise 2 – the benefits of youth engagement

Referring back to Exercise 1, consider how you could engage young people to tackle the issues you know their age group faces, and what benefits this would bring.

Issues facing young people	Benefits of engaging young people	What I can do

Creating meaningful youth participation

Defining youth participation

'Participation Works', a partnership of six national children and young people's agencies that enables organisations to effectively involve children and young people in the development, delivery and evaluation of services that affect their lives. It defines youth participation as set out below.

"Participation is a fundamental part of citizenship. It is the process by which children and young people can influence decision-making which affects their lives to bring about positive change".

"Participation is not solely the act of expressing an opinion and having that opinion taken seriously, but of being able to construct that opinion freely through accessing information and meeting and debating with others".

The Participation Works website is a good place to start when you are looking for more detailed information on how to involve and engage young people.

<http://tinyurl.com/c2mcr2s>

In the resource section there is also a series of 'How to guides' which present practical approaches to inclusion in different work areas.

<http://tinyurl.com/blua43a>

Meaningful youth participation is created when young people are treated as equal actors in decision-making and involved from the start of the process. Tokenism (when young people appear to be given a chance to be represented, but have little choice about how they participate and limited or no influence in decision-making) can actually be detrimental to youth engagement.

A good way to ensure meaningful youth participation with young people in your local area is to be guided by these principles.

- Involve young people from the earliest possible stage of any initiative.
- Ensure young people understand what the project or the process is about, what it is for and their role within it. Establish ground rules with all young people at the beginning.
- Work to create transparent decision-making structures so young people know who is making what decision.
- Guarantee that all young people will be treated with equal respect.

- Remember that participation should be voluntary and that young people should be allowed to leave at any stage if they have other commitments.
- Give young people feedback on what changes as a result of their input.

A way to consider whether your youth engagement is meaningful is through exploring the 'Ladder of participation'.

This was developed by sociologist Roger Hart as a tool for thinking about young people's participation. Each rung of the ladder represents a different level and stage of participation. Rung 8 is the highest level of participation and rung 1 represents the opposite of that: manipulation.

Roger Hart's ladder of young people's participation



Rung 8: young people and adults share decision-making

Rung 7: young people lead and initiate action

Rung 6: adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people

Rung 5: young people consulted and informed

Rung 4: young people assigned and informed

Rung 3: young people tokenised

Rung 2: young people are decoration

Rung 1: young people are manipulated

Note: Hart explains that the last two rungs are non-participation

Adapted from Hart, R. 1992. 'Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship'. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre

Each one of the ladder rungs can be described as followed:

Rung 8: young people and adults share decision-making. This involves young people-initiated, shared decisions with adults. This happens when projects or programmes are initiated by young people and decision-making is shared between young people and adults. These projects empower young people while at the same time enabling them to access and learn from the life experience and expertise of adults.

Rung 7: young people lead and initiate action. This step is when young people initiate and direct a project or programme. Adults are involved only in a supportive role.

Rung 6: adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people. Occurs when projects or programmes are initiated by adults but the decision-making is shared with the young people.

Rung 5: young people consulted and informed. This occurs when young people give advice on projects or programmes designed and run by adults. The young people are informed about how their input will be used and the outcomes of the decisions made by adults.

Rung 4: young people assigned but informed. This is where young people are assigned a specific role and informed about how and why they are being involved.

Rung 3: tokenism. When young people appear to be given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about what they do or how they participate.

Rung 2: decoration. Happens when young people are used to help or 'bolster' a cause in a relatively indirect way, although adults do not pretend that the cause is inspired by young people.

Rung 1: manipulation. Happens where adults use young people to support causes and pretend that the causes are inspired by young people.



To see 'Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship' by Roger Hart in full visit:

www.unicef-irc.org/publications

Each time you are engaging young people you should consider the purpose of the engagement, what level of influence you are seeking, and so which is the most appropriate rung for that activity.

In addition to understanding the principles of meaningful youth participation it is also important to consider what barriers some young people might encounter when trying to have their say. Often young people find the following factors prohibitive:

- not enough spare time to get involved
- don't know how to find out about getting involved
- not got the right skills/experience
- not being able to stop once involved
- worries that they might end up out of pocket
- worries that they wouldn't fit in with other people involved
- illness or disability
- feeling too young to have a say.

Bearing these barriers in mind and coming up with tailored solutions, such as vouchers to come to an event, is crucial when considering how to engage young people to inform your work.



Engaging with young people need not necessarily be expensive or time consuming, especially with the new opportunities presented by technologies such as online survey media and social networking. There is obviously a need to prioritise child protection, but still there is significant potential in this area. An example of the use of social media is: Local Government Group, 2010, 'Local by Social How local authorities can use social media to achieve more for less'. <http://tinyurl.com/d7tqdhg>

Consider times when it might be good to meet with young people. Remember young people's commitments in school and term times as well as their potential dependency on public transport or childcare facilities for any children they may have.



I'm a councillor – get me out of here!

'I'm a councillor, get me out of here!' is an online event to get young people engaged with local democracy. It is designed to enable councillors to find out about how young people feel and what concerns them. It is also an educational experience to support teachers delivering the citizenship curriculum.

Councils sign up to the event and put forward five or six councillors, to compete to be the 'youth champion' for their area. The councillors publish a manifesto online and for two weeks, including local democracy week, young people can ask questions and then vote on the councillor they want to be their champion.

The method of communication is intended to appeal to young people; the programme is in the style of reality TV, which is very popular with young people. Live chats are scheduled, so young people know when a councillor will be online and so that they can post questions and receive immediate responses. This can be scheduled to take place during a planned citizenship lesson. In Scarborough it has also been used as part of English lessons, to promote debating skills.

Thirty two councils participated in this programme during local democracy week 2008 as part of the citizenship curriculum. During the two weeks 6,961 questions were asked by young people.

Young people said, it made them feel important and listened to. 84 per cent of young people said that their understanding of what a councillor does was better or much better than it was before; 87 per cent said they learned something about the council that they did not know before.

For many councillors it enabled them to hear and understand the concerns of young people. Many were impressed by how interested young people are in local issues and enjoyed their focus on solutions rather than problems.

One councillor said, "the live chat was one of the most challenging things I have ever done as a councillor and really worthwhile."

(Source: Local Government Improvement and Development, 2011)

Put it into practice

This workbook has looked at the reasons for involving young people in decisions which affect them, what structures may be already in place that give the views of children and young people a platform as well as what is meant by meaningful participation.

It is important now to look at how these can be utilised and developed in your local area and in the work you carry out as a representative in your community.



Young people and councillors shaping rural transport services

Young people in Wiltshire worked with the council Youth Development Service to organise a transport conference to bring together young people, decision makers and local transport providers to identify transport problems and seek solutions. In particular they focused on the ages at which young people were required to pay full fare, as this varied between different bus companies in the county. This meant that many young people had to pay the full fare to attend their full-time education courses. Standard fares for under 18s were announced at the conference as the culmination of five years campaigning work by young people.

Elected members were positively influenced by the conference and as a result the council cabinet made £100,000 available to area boards, to respond to transport issues for young people.

Melksham area board held a participatory budgeting meeting, where six groups of young people presented their ideas on ways to improve transport and access for young people. Elected members delegated the budget-making decisions to the people attending the participatory budgeting session (young people, community members and adult representatives). The attendees awarded the money to the most promising ideas.

The commitment and persistence of young people, supported by youth workers, to work for change over this extended period of time enabled good communication and relationships to be built with decision makers so that young people's views were listened to and taken seriously.

(Source: Local Government Improvement and Development, 2011)

Next steps

The case studies and examples in the workbook have shown that in order to progress youth participation in your local area it is important to evaluate where youth participation is at present. Through the exercises you have considered the structures and opportunities already in place for children, young people and adults to come together in the community to take collective interest and decisions in matters which affect them as well as considered ways of taking youth participation forward.

It is also constructive to evaluate your individual skills-set and think if there are any areas for personal development that you would like to pursue in this area. There are organisations that offer courses, literature and support on youth participation which may be of value to you. Details can be found in the Appendix.



Exercise 5 – where do you go from here?

As a way of actively putting these next steps together use this space to construct a personal development plan.

- What new skills you want to develop?
- What visits or conversations are you going to plan to engage with young people in your area?
- List any courses or events you might be interested in undertaking.
- Put dates of when you might be able to schedule these actions into your work in order to create a timeframe for action.

Summary

This workbook will have given you an overview of what is meant by meaningful participation, and how this can benefit society, strengthen local communities and improve outcomes for children and young people.

Youth participation can also engage young people with the democratic process and engenders a sense of responsibility and civic participation.



Here are some quotations about children, young people and participation that encapsulate some of the key ideas behind this workbook.

“The more we increase the active participation and partnership with young people, the better we serve them. ... And the more comprehensively we work with them as service partners, the more we increase our public value to the entire community.”

Carmen Martinez

“The young, free to act on their initiative, can lead their elders in the direction of the unknown... The children, the young, must ask the questions that we would never think to ask, but enough trust must be re-established so that the elders will be permitted to work with them on the answers.”

Margaret Mead

“Rather than standing or speaking for children, we need to stand with children speaking for themselves. We don’t need a political movement for children... [we need to] build environments and policies for our collective future.”

Sandra Meucci

“Learn from the people, plan with the people, begin with what they have, build on what they know.”

Lao-Tzu

Appendix – sources of further information and support

Publications

Local Government Group and NYA, 2010, 'Valuing youth voices, strengthening local democracy: the contribution made by youth engagement'.

Centre for Public Scrutiny and Local Government Group, 2011, 'Tomorrow's people? A guide to overview and scrutiny committees about involving young people in scrutiny'.

Centre for Public Scrutiny and Local Government Group, 2010, 'Get the S factor: Get involved in scrutiny! Guide for young people'.

NFER and Local Government Group, 2010, 'Re-engaging young people in voting: differences in actions and attitudes between youth and local and national elections'.

Websites

Participation Works
www.participationworks.org.uk

British Youth Council
www.byc.org.uk

UK Youth Parliament
www.ukyp.org.uk

Local Government Association, Youth Engagement in Democracy
<http://tinyurl.com/c52buyc>

Young Mayors Network
www.ymn.org.uk

Electoral Commission resources developed with and focused on young people
www.dopolitics.org.uk



Local Government Association

Local Government House
Smith Square
London SW1P 3HZ

Telephone 020 7664 3000

Fax 020 7664 3030

Email info@local.gov.uk

www.local.gov.uk

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For a copy in Braille, larger print or audio,
please contact us on 020 7664 3000.
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