Response from the Office of the Children's Commissioner for Wales

Comislynydd Plant Cymru
Children's Commissioner for Wales

Electoral Arrangements in Wales

A Discussion Document

National Assembly for Wales

Local Government and Public Services Committee

September 2006

The Office of the Children's Commissioner for Wales (CCfW) welcomes the inclusion of participation of young people within the review's terms of reference. However we note with disappointment that there had been no involvement of organisations representing any groups of young people in Wales or any individual young person in Wales prior to publication of the discussion document

The Office of the Children's Commissioner for Wales was established to promote the rights and welfare of all children in Wales. Children's rights are defined clearly by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and this has been adopted by the Welsh Assembly Government as a central part of policy development.

In recent years, a number of initiatives have focussed on the development of participatory structures for children under the age of 18 in Wales, for example the establishment of Funky Dragon the Children and Young People's Assembly for Wales, the statutory establishment of school councils and local youth fora. The All Wales Participation Consortium is also currently developing models of participatory practice. These developments demonstrate a commitment to enabling children and young people to actively participate in society in Wales and to have their voices heard as enshrined in article 12 of the UNCRC.

Within our own organisation, the Office of the Children's Commissioner has two advisory groups which are elected from members of local youth fora of the 22 local authorities in Wales. These advisory groups play a key role in the organisation of the Office of the Children's Commissioner for Wales by:

- o Influencing and advising on the working atmosphere and the approachability of staff in the team
- o Involvement in the recruitment of new staff
- o Influencing and advising on CCfW publications
- o Influencing and advising on CCfW policies
- o Putting forward issues they feel are important for inclusion in the Children's and Young People's Events
- o Helping to organise and run the Children's and Young People's Events

The Office of the Children's Commissioner for Wales would welcome the opportunity to meet with the committee to discuss the key issue of the participation of young people in elections with a particular emphasis on the views of those aged under 18 at present and their views on their future participation in the electoral system.

We have selected a number of questions from the discussion document to respond to and have consulted with a range of children and young people including detailed consultations with our two advisory groups. The Office of the Children's Commissioner for Wales considers that engaging children and young people in decision making processes today is particularly important in assessing what will encourage young people to become active citizens and participate in voting in the future.

We have chosen to focus solely on the following questions as we consider these to be of greatest relevance to children and young people.

Question 7

What forms of electronic voting (e.g. internet, text, at polling stations) could be used in Wales?

What could be the benefits/problems of using the methods you have suggested?

Using electronic forms of voting could be of benefit in that they would reflect the methods of voting that young people currently use in considerable numbers when voting for reality television shows or supporting charity fundraising events, for example Comic Relief. The use of such forms of voting would, in our view, mean that young people would be able to use voting methods familiar to them. Additionally, the use of such technology could reduce the unfamiliar element of the physical act of voting at a Polling Station that may currently dissuade some young people from voting. Accessing Polling Stations in unfamiliar venues and the requirement to take identification documents may be a contributory factor to the low turn out of young people in elections as evidenced in the discussion document.

However, the forms of electronic voting that could be considered for use need careful consideration. Whilst at present text message voting is a common form of voting in television programmes, less than twenty years ago telephone voting was the popular form. There is a definite need to research and explore the views of young people in other countries that have adopted electronic voting methods. Research into the views of young people could provide lessons to be learnt should electronic voting be introduced in Wales.

There are clear concerns that the costs associated with text voting or other forms of voting may prevent some people from being able to vote. A questionnaire sample of 54 young carers revealed that 41% voted in reality television programmes. Almost 20% of those who did not vote reported that cost was the reason. This was an issue that was also cited by young people in the advisory groups, along with the fact that some young people do not own mobile phones. There is a need to consider the equality of access that all sections of society may have to technological methods of voting and the impact on turnout.

Methods of voting by email and over the internet were identified by the advisory groups as an option which might be cheaper than text voting. However, the young people identified potential problems such as access to computers and internet hacking.

There would clearly be a need to address security issues in relation to any proposed electronic voting procedures in order to provide assurance that votes cast by such methods are reliable and that the voting process could not be corrupted or changed. The advisory groups also voiced these concerns.

Question 8

Could alternative venues be used as polling stations? (e.g. supermarkets, post offices etc)

The use of different venues, for example supermarkets and leisure centres could encourage young people to vote in greater numbers especially where there was easy access to such venues either by walking, cycling or public transport. However, it is important to note that the provision of alternative venues may not automatically increase turn out on its own. Young people do not always gather and meet in formal settings such as supermarkets and leisure centres and so there is a need to explore the underlying issues which may cause the reported low turn out of young people in elections. This can only be done through working with young people and gaining their insights into their current low participation rate in elections.

A suggestion made by one of the advisory groups was to make venues more attractive to young people, with information stands and "freebies" aimed at young people.

Question 9

Why do so few young people in Wales vote?

Please give any examples you have come across (leaving out any personal details)

The turn out of young people in elections has been identified as low in Wales and this may be attributed to many factors, many of which were highlighted in the recent Power Inquiry. The report of this inquiry stated clearly that '*We believe that any reform to encourage young people to engage politically will be very severely limited in its effectiveness while the current constitutional, party and electoral arrangements remain in force.*' The inquiry's report highlighted that a number of areas which it had considered need to be addressed to encourage a greater proportion of young people to vote. The inquiry recommended that the age of majority be reduced to sixteen for a number of reasons including the fact that some young people who leave school at sixteen may be tax payers for a number of years before they have the opportunity to vote in a general election. It would be interesting to see to what extent this recommendation is taken forward and explored in consultation with young people in Wales.

An understanding of the political system and how voting can actually influence decision making processes at a local, regional, national, UK and European level is a key element for young people. The inter-relationships between the many legislative bodies that can affect young peoples' lives are extremely complex for most people to understand. For example, the National Assembly for Wales has powers in relation to devolved matters such as health and education whilst other matters are non-devolved such as asylum seekers and policing. This complexity within the system may lead to confusion for many young people and could contribute to the feeling that participation in elections may not affect their daily life and therefore they may choose not to vote. The relevance of the political process to daily life may be a key factor in the low turnout of young people in elections. Members of the advisory groups stated that they found the political situation confusing and were unclear on which bodies held which powers. They were also unsure about whether they thought voting actually changed things

Whilst mass non-political campaigns such as Make Poverty History and demonstrations against conflict overseas may capture the imagination of young people, the appeal of voting for politicians who appear not to be in touch with those that they represent (and young people in particular) may lead to a feeling that politics is irrelevant to young people. There appears to be a need for politicians and political systems to engage with young people, including those below the age of majority to uncover the major issues that affect their lives and how politicians and policies can address these issues. The Office of the Children's Commissioner for Wales runs an advice and support service and issues brought to this service help inform our input to the reform of policy. The areas of education and health are amongst the most frequent topics raised.

Interaction between young people and politicians is a key aspect of developing interest in voting and therefore the ways in which interaction takes place between young people and politicians should be considered. Currently, there is a political backdrop in which young people are expected to show respect to others and yet they are seemingly not shown respect by others. This can lead to a feeling of alienation for young people from the rest of society and may result in some young people being reticent about voting whereas actually, if they were to vote, they may contribute to changing the focus of the system onto the issues that affect them. However, this may only come about if political bodies are willing to engage with young people in the development of policies and strategies that may address the concerns of young people in Wales today. Research has shown that many people are happy to be involved in direct campaigning which may not involve direct contact with traditional political systems. There is a clear need for politicians to address how young people's commitment, indicated by involvement in direct campaigning, can also be channelled into an involvement in affecting change through the electoral process.

At a conference to discuss the Power Report, a breakout session focussed on *Politics, Citizenship Education and Young People.* The participants in this sessions found that the following three elements are essential in engaging young people in the political process. These are:

Knowledge - children and young people need support in understanding politics, processes and the party system.

Relevance - there is a recognition that young people are more interested in issues than wider party politics. Politicians need to act on this and engage in dialogue with young people on single issues.

Interaction - it is vital that participation in between elections is increased. There needs to be more opportunities for young people to actually engage with their elected representatives.

Through the use of a questionnaire completed by 54 young carers in Wales, it was found that 41% know someone who votes, of which over two thirds were parents or other family members. Interestingly one young carer said that they knew that Trish Law (an independent Blaenau Gwent candidate) voted, highlighting the awareness of the political process of that young person. Of the 54 young carers, 48% voted in school council elections, with reasons for doing so including:

For things to be changed in my school

Because I wanted to

Because it's my right

To improve things

However 52% stated that they did not vote in school council elections with reasons for non-participation including:

I don't know how and don't know if my school has one

Didn't want to

When asked whether they would vote in elections for the House of Parliament or The National Assembly for Wales, 52% stated that they intended to do so. Reasons for this included:

Because it's important

Because I want to have my say

Over 40% of those who stated they would not vote said that they did not want to or were uninterested in voting. Some stated that they did not understand how to vote or the political system. This was backed by findings from detailed consultation with the advisory groups, during which the young people said they did not know how to vote and were surprised at the complexity of the process. Although many of the young people in the advisory groups were unsure about whether they would vote or not when they reached 18, a majority felt that voting was important, voicing reasons such as "stopping unpopular, bad people getting into power" and "ensuring the country is run as efficiently as possible". However, some did feel that "…one vote does not make a difference".

Question 10

Are young people given enough information in schools to make an informed decision abut how they are going to vote?

The paper submitted to the committee by the Department for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills of the Welsh Assembly Government indicated that awareness of political structures and the voting process is included within the National Curriculum in Wales. However, as this is included within Personal and Social Education (PSE) and this area of study is not statutorily assessed, there is no measure as to how successfully and consistently these areas are taught within schools. Where PSE is delivered by non-specialist teachers the success of teaching these quite complex matters may depend greatly on the skills and personal knowledge of individual teachers. Therefore, the delivery of political education may be inconsistent across Wales and young people may have varying levels of knowledge in relation to the political process. It is interesting to note that the Citizenship Foundation has recently published a guide to the UK constitution for pupils aged 15 and above. Speaking about the guide, Lord Falconer, Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs said, '*there is, without doubt, a general disconnection between citizens, the political process and the constitutional structures of the UK.*' The young people in the advisory groups said that

learning about voting in schools would be useful as it would help them to make informed choices, give them more confidence and encourage them to vote. However concerns were raised about PSE lessons and their effectiveness, with the young people stating that lessons about voting should be fun and interactive.

In the responses given by 54 young carers, 37% stated that they were taught about voting in school with comments from some, such as "sometimes", "briefly", "not much". When asked whether being taught about voting would help them to decide whether to vote at the age of 18, 70% stated that it would positively help them. The young carers were asked for their ideas as to what could influence young people to vote in greater numbers. A wide variety of responses were received, including financial rewards for voting or other non-financial rewards. However, 11% gave responses that indicated that understanding the process and the impact of voting would impact on participation, with 5% stressing the importance of making issues more relevant to young people. Advisory group members suggested that young people needed to be made more aware of politics and political issues through advertising campaigns. They suggested that young people should be given incentives to vote such as free student cards and other "freebies". They proposed that everyone should automatically be put on the electoral roll when they are 18 to simplify the process.

Part Two

This section of the response from the Office of the Children's Commissioner for Wales has been produced as a result of working with the two advisory groups of the office. Issues around voting were explored with the advisory groups in workshop sessions. These sessions allowed the advisory group members to express their views on electoral arrangements in greater detail. Their comments throughout the workshop sessions were gathered by members of the team of the Children's Commissioner for Wales. These comments have been summarised below under a series of headings.

This summary provides an overview of the rich and diverse comments made, and it may be that the committee may wish to engage further with this group of young people or others to explore these initial thoughts and ideas in greater detail.

Knowledge of political systems and voting
Young people in the advisory groups said that they did not know much about voting or about the political system in Wales and the UK.
>"…I don't know much about voting and I don't really care what happens…"

The young people were unsure about the different levels of government and which bodies were responsible for what. They were also unaware of the procedures of how to vote and surprised at their complexity.
>"I thought it was more simple!"
>"I'm nearly 18 but I wouldn't know I had to go on the electoral roll"

Learning about voting in schools
Most of the young people in the advisory groups thought that young people should learn about voting in school, saying it would enable them to make informed choices and encourage them to vote. They stated it would be useful to learn about it, as this was information they could make use of in adulthood.
>"…I don't know anything about voting and I'd like to know about voting because maybe then I could vote and I'd know what I was voting about and it would give me a chance to express my opinions."

Concerns were raised about PSE lessons and many of the young people said they were boring and they didn't learn much. They felt that lessons concerning voting, elections and politics would have to be fun and interactive because they felt people learn better that way.

Why young people don't vote
Around half of the young people in the advisory groups said they thought they would vote when they reached 18, with the other half saying they wouldn't or they weren't sure. Those who said they wouldn't or were unsure stated reasons such as:
- not knowing enough about politics
- not knowing enough about how to vote
- that one vote doesn't make a difference
- that the system is confusing
- not knowing who to vote for

Interestingly, most of the young people thought voting is important (even if they weren't sure if they would vote when they get to 18) stating reasons such as:
- stopping unpopular or bad people getting into power

• ensuring there is a representation of what people actually want
• making sure there isn't a dictatorship
• ensuring the country is run as efficiently as possible.

"…I still know it makes a difference because your voice gets heard"

Those who thought voting isn't important said:
• it's boring
• it doesn't interest them
• one vote doesn't make a difference
• don't know enough about it.

"I don't really know anything about it, well not much, and one vote wouldn't make a difference"

"…I don't know much about it, so it doesn't interest me."

Interestingly, some of those who said politics was boring and didn't interest them went on to have an in-depth discussion about Britain's involvement in the war in Iraq.

Some of the young people felt that politicians and political parties did not listen to them or represent their views and that they should stick to their policies more and do what they promise to do.

"…they're not going to listen are they?"

"…they should stick to their policies more… people would trust them more then"

Ideas to encourage more young people to vote

o Texting
The young people commented that with texting you cannot always be certain that only one vote has been sent. They stated that some people have more than one mobile phone while some don't have mobile phones at all. They also identified cost as a potential problem.

o Email/Internet voting
The young people suggested that email/internet voting could be cheaper, but identified potential problems relating to internet hacking, and access to computers.

o Advertising
The young people suggested that large advertising campaigns (print and TV) should be used in the run up to elections to explain to young people the reasons why they need to vote and to focus on political issues and to get people "...hyped up and caring about different things." They also suggested that politicians should go on a reality TV show like Big Brother, so young people could get to know them and see if they liked them:

"You know we were talking [about] Big Brother, maybe they should put all the politicians into a house [like that] and then we'd all get to know them, see if we liked them, see if we agree with what they're saying and then you'll get millions more votes."

o Venue
The young people suggested a young person friendly venue with lots of information relevant to young people such as UCAS information and information on car insurance; and incentives such as student cards and other freebies. They felt it would be a good idea for there to be a separate place for young people to vote. They thought it was important that people didn't have to queue, as this might put people off.

- o Timings

  The young people felt that holding elections on a weekday was better than a weekend. They suggested that people should be given paid time off work (a couple of hours) to go and vote; and that polling stations should be open for 24 hours to allow time for everyone to vote.
- o Electoral Registration

  The young people did not know how to vote and said the process seemed complex when told about it. They suggested that people should automatically be put onto the electoral register when they become 18 to simplify the process.
- o No votes

  The young people suggested that ballot papers should include a box people could cross if they didn't want to vote for any of the candidates. They felt this would provide valuable statistics on the number of people who didn't want to vote for the candidates.