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Y Pwyllgor Materion Cyfansoddiadol a
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Bil Senedd ac Etholiadau (Cymru)

National Assembly for Wales
Constitutional and Legislative Affairs
Committee
Senedd and Elections (Wales) Bill

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Tystiolaeth gan dîm ymchwil prosiect
'Gostwng yr Oedran Pleidleisio ar
draws y DU'

Evidence from 'Lowering the Voting
Age across the UK' project research
team

Senedd and Elections (Wales) Bill: Evidence on Lowering the Voting Age to 16

This evidence is presented by the Leverhulme Trust-funded 'Lowering the Voting Age across the UK' project research team. The project is currently undertaking the first study of historical and contemporary debates concerning voting age reform across the whole of the UK and internationally. This holistic research project includes analyses of the implementation and effects of lowering the voting age to 18 in 1969; debates about 'Votes at 16'; the impacts of voting age reform on youth political socialisation and participation; examination of international evidence; and voting rights and transitions to adulthood. Research methodologies include a UK-wide survey of under- and over-18s; interviews with politicians, policy-makers, civil society leaders, and young people; focus groups with diverse groups of 14-24 year-olds; and analysis of archival and contemporary data. The project has clear policy-making and public benefit, and this submission is part of a wider engagement strategy to inform and enrich the growing political debate surrounding the significance of 'Votes-at-16'.

Devolved institutions across the UK have been instrumental in policy-making with regards to voting age reform. We welcome the evidence-led and consultative approach to the issue of 'Votes at 16' adopted in Wales in considering reform of the age of enfranchisement for local government and Welsh Assembly elections. The following submission draws on our research to engage with the general principles of the inquiry undertaken by the Constitutional and Legislative Affairs Committee concerning the Senedd and Elections (Wales) Bill.

Youth political rights and responsibilities: a 'postcode lottery'

For the past twenty years or so, debate about a reduction of the voting age to 16 has proven increasingly prominent in UK politics. The 'Votes at 16' campaign, established in 2003, has found consistent high-profile support within influential youth advocacy bodies and some political parties. All parties in the UK Parliament now support lowering the voting age with the important exception of those currently in government (the Conservatives and DUP). Policy change in England, Northern Ireland, and the UK parliament is unlikely without support from the UK government, which is currently opposed to lowering the voting age. This noted, there is a strong sense of political momentum around the policy, both in Westminster and across the UK. The emergence of an All-Party Parliamentary Group on Votes at 16 indicates that there is growing non-partisan support for

voting age reform in both Houses. Current trends in political party support indicate that 'Votes at 16' is likely to be universally introduced for all UK elections within the next ten years, or sooner.

It is the devolved institutions in Scotland, and now Wales, that have clearly led the way on legislative reform in this area. There is also increasing pressure being applied from some newly devolved City Regional Mayors in England who support the right to lower the voting age within their jurisdictions. However, the effect of this would be to create a fragmented asymmetric set of voting rights across the UK where 16 and 17 year-olds have different levels of civic rights depending on where they happen to live. In the case of Scotland, our focus groups of young people have picked up much resentment and confusion towards electoral arrangements which allowed them votes in Scottish and local elections but not in UK General Elections and, crucially in current political climate, referendums with potentially damaging implications for their level of trust in political institutions.

Recommendation 1: We urge the Commission to engage with the UK government and local, regional, and national legislatures across the UK to discuss implications and effects of current asymmetries in ages of enfranchisement.

Policy Learning from The Representation of the People Act (1969)

Policy-makers and academics in different parts of the UK considering the case for lowering the voting age to 16 have overlooked policy learning from the introduction of 'Votes at 18'. The UK was the first democratic state to universally lower the age of enfranchisement to 18 in 1969. The incentives for lowering the voting age in 1969 were only indirectly related to concerns about formal political participation as there was little difference in voter turnout between younger and older voters. Significant numbers also joined youth organisations linked with the main political parties and trade unions. Voting age reform was more motivated by:

- Increasing concerns about the ideological radicalisation of young people, and their rejection of the orthodoxies of democratic politics;
- Changing social and cultural attitudes during the post-war period towards young people;
- Revisions in the citizenship rights roles and responsibilities of adulthood in areas such as property rights, welfare rights, marriage and civil law rights.

'Votes at 18' was thus part of a wider effort to align responsibilities of adulthood to a single age where possible. There was little political or public division (or indeed debate), possibly due to a lack of strength of feeling, which indicated a widespread acceptance of voting age reform.

Lowering the voting age to 18 has been uniformly accepted as a policy success, although there has been no governmental policy scrutiny to analyse its short or longer-term impacts and effects. Evidence-gathering for 'Votes at 16' has similarly overlooked policy learning concerning the Representation of the People Act (1969) beyond noting its vanguard nature and global impact on ages of

enfranchisement. Our research indicates that there are at least three policy lessons which contemporary policy-makers should consider which relate to the impacts and policy 'overspill' effects of lowering the voting age to 18 in 1969.

1) Political Participation

Turnout of 18-24 year-olds has been consistently lower when compared to older age groups since voting age reform was introduced in 1969. It has also dramatically fallen in absolute terms. It reached its lowest point in the 2001 general election, when only 39% of 18-24 year-olds voted, and in 2005, when youth turnout was 23% lower than the overall turnout figure. Although there has been some slight improvement in turnout of this age group since then, non-participation of 18-24 year-olds in UK general elections has proven higher than all other age cohorts in every general election since the lowering of the age of franchise. Similar issues with regards to the absolute and relative turnout of 18-24 year-olds have been evidenced in local elections across the UK and, since their creation, devolved national and regional legislature elections. Furthermore, youth membership of political parties, trade unions, and other politically participative organisations has significantly declined since 1969.

The evidence thus far from Scotland regarding the impact of voting age reform is mixed. *The Expert Panel on Assembly Electoral Reform* noted the very high turnout of 75 per cent in the Scottish independence referendum of newly enfranchised under-18s, much higher than the 54 per cent of 18-24 year-olds who reportedly voted. It also cited research indicating that 16 and 17 year-old voters were as engaged, informed, and autonomous in their participation as older voters, and were more interested and keen to participate in politics when compared with young people in the rest of the UK. There has been little discussion though as to why turnout of under-18s in the 2014 referendum was 10 per cent lower than the average of 85 per cent. Moreover, claims that the introduction of 'votes at 16' in subsequent elections in Scotland has encouraged an increase in overall turnout comes with caveats. While 16-17 year-olds are voting at a higher rate than 18-24 year-olds, it is the increased participation of older voters that has made the most significant contribution to overall turnout levels rise.

Recommendation 2: Consideration should be given to historical and contemporary impacts and effects of voting age reform in the UK in relation to the wider causes and consequences of youth political participation or non-participation.

2) Youth Democratic Socialisation

During the passage of the 1969 act, very few politicians identified the need for civic or political education to instil young people with the requisite political knowledge and skills to vote. Campaigns in the 1970s and 1980s to introduce statutory provision of political education in England and Wales garnered some interest, but eventually were undermined by partisan political concerns about the potential indoctrination of young people – a matter which may well influence current debates in Wales too. Citizenship education was introduced across the UK,

including Wales, in the late 1990s. Devolution meant however that the form and resonance in the respective national curricula differed considerably. *Citizenship* was a discrete statutory subject within the English National Curriculum, whereas in Wales and Scotland it was delivered via cross-curricula and whole-school approaches. Our research highlights that citizenship education can have a significant positive impact on youth democratic socialisation when delivered well. However, there is a common lack of curriculum time, trained teachers and resources, and developed focus on political education in Wales and across the rest of the UK. This means many young people do not receive significant political education during their primary and secondary education.

Voting age reform implemented for the Scottish independence referendum provided significant but bespoke opportunities for newly-enfranchised voters to learn about politics and engage in political debate. No systemic approach was adopted to ensure that all 16-17 year-olds were offered such opportunities due to the lack of a national citizenship education programme. Local authorities and schools/colleges thus determined what political education initiatives were undertaken, with some noting a lack of sufficient expertise in terms of teachers and resources, and concerns about potential accusations of political bias. Since the referendum, the Scottish Government and a number of non-government organisations have sought to improve the quantity and quality of political education in Scottish schools and colleges. At present though, there is no universal programme of political education to supplement voting age reform, meaning the first cohorts of 16-17 year-old voters have not had consistent opportunities to learn about politics and gain the necessary skills to votes.

Recommendation 3: Consideration should be given to the first cohorts of newly-enfranchised voters in Wales who will not have opportunities to engage with or benefit from the planned introduction of political education initiatives.

3) Age Thresholds and Transitions to Adulthood

The effect of lowering the voting age in 1969 in establishing 18 as the age of adulthood has proven contentious and contested. Until the beginning of the twenty-first century, the threshold for ages of majority established in the late 1960s remained remarkably static. Successive acts have facilitated the lowering and equalisation of the age of consent at 16 for homosexuality and heterosexuality throughout the UK. The introduction of the Children Act 1989 appeared to confirm that policy-makers considered 18 the legal age of adulthood as it compelled local authorities, courts, parents, and other agencies in the United Kingdom to promote the safeguarding and welfare of all young people under 18. Support for this can be found with recent legislative changes related to statutory education in England and Wales and various public health age minimums which seem to coalesce around 18. Conversely, since the late 1990s, advocates of 'Votes at 16' have identified a range of economic and social rights and responsibilities which are realised at 16 years of age, such as paying tax, consensual sex and marriage, and military service, which they argue are sufficiently significant markers of adulthood to be complemented with the right to vote.

Our research indicates that 18 remains the age where the vast majority of rights associated with adulthood coalesce and are realised, and that there is a general *upward* trajectory in ages of responsibility. Many of the rights realised at 16, such as joining the Armed Forces or getting married (in England and Wales), are conditional and require parental consent. This noted, some responsibilities, such as paying of income tax and the criminal age of responsibility, can precede the age of 16. In 1985, the House of Lords ruled that young people in England and Wales under the age of 16 were able to consent to their own medical treatment without parental consent or knowledge if deemed to have sufficient capacity to make this decision.

We agree with the conclusion of the Expert Panel that there is no single age at which a young person takes on all the responsibilities and rights of an adult citizen. Moreover, this issue, as they noted in their final report, should not on its own determine whether the voting age should be lowered or not. Our research indicates however that it is important that newly enfranchised voters might understand the importance of the vote within a wider context of their transitions to adulthood - and not a definitive marker of adulthood itself. Survey work undertaken has revealed that the majority of both under- and over-18 believe that 18 is the age when adulthood begins. Many argue that the period between 16 and 21 years of age is transitional and distinct from youthhood and adulthood. Such tensions in how adulthood and citizenship are understood are thus important in terms of the cohesion of the electorate. Differences in the accrual of citizenship rights and responsibilities, and in contributions to the public purse via various forms of taxation, when compared to the vast majority of already enfranchised voters might present potential new tensions which influence how the collective legitimacy of electorate is understood. There is potential for a 'two-tiered' citizenship to emerge whereby 16 and 17 year-olds are seen by some as different or even 'second-class citizens'.

Recommendation 4: The relationship of political and other rights and responsibilities associated with transitions to adulthood and the cohesion of the electorate should be considered in more detail prior to voting age reform.

Recommendation 5: Enfranchised 16 and 17-year-olds should be encouraged to feel their membership of the electorate is both legitimate and valued by older voters and those seeking to democratically represent them.

Votes at 16: The Local Dimension

It is likely that the first elections in Wales including 16-17 year-olds will be the 2021 local government elections. We have undertaken research as part of the Kirklees Council Democracy Commission (<http://www.democracycommission.org.uk>) on voting age reform and local democracy. The findings from a survey of 366 14-17 year-olds living within the Kirklees area, conducted during the summer and autumn of 2018, revealed that nearly 1 in 2 (48.8%) favoured lowering the voting age to 16 for all elections in the UK, while 28.8% of respondents favoured lowering the voting age for local elections only. Less than a quarter of respondents (22.4%) supported the voting age remaining at 18. Focus groups indicated that some

young people are committed to lowering the voting age for local elections but remain doubtful about the policy at a national level.

Moreover, our research showed that the level of support for 'vote at 16' among young people is strongly related to their level of political interest. We would expect young people who are interested in politics to be more likely to be in favour of lowering the voting age as they would feel more knowledgeable and prepared to vote. This noted, stark differences in support for the policy does raise some issues. Lowering the voting age is often framed as a key policy in addressing inequalities in turnout between relatively advantaged older and disadvantaged younger groups of voters. It is also argued that it will increase levels of political interest and engagement among politically apathetic young people who we know from previous research are more likely to belong to those disadvantaged groups. There is a potential danger that lowering the voting age to 16 in isolation may actually increase 'the engagement gap' by empowering already empowered young people while doing little to address these underlying inequalities. It is hard to argue that 'Votes at 16' alone can address this issue.

Recommendation 6: Political education initiatives must support young people to learn about and gain experiences of participation in local democracy.

Recommendation 7: The implementation of 'Votes at 16' must be accompanied by measures and substantial efforts to ensure more disadvantaged and less-engaged groups are specifically encouraged to turnout. While political education is vital, this also required a broader shift in political culture regarding political parties' engagement with young people from differing backgrounds.

Shifting Public Opinion

Our two-year research project on the voting age involves examining attitudes towards change among 16-17 year olds and the existing 18+ electorate. Working with the polling company, *Survation*, we have analysed opinion among more than 2,000 people under- and over-18. There is extensive support for lowering the voting age to 16 amongst under-18s, with 71% in favour, and only 12% opposed. There is evidence that 16 year olds are more supportive of votes-at-16 than 17 year olds. Those from higher income households are very supportive, whilst those in public housing or where the main income provider is unemployed are less so, whilst still offering majority support. Among the existing electorate, 42% support such a change compared to 40% opposed. That more adults now favour lowering the age of franchise than reject the idea is very significant. In its last major study of the issue in 2003, the Electoral Commission's *The Age of Electoral Majority* report found that 83% of adults believed 18 to be the correct minimum age of voting. It appears that public opinion may have substantially shifted.

The relationship with party support is as one might expect. Labour voters are strongly in favour of lowering the voting age, with Conservatives and UKIP strongly against. Plaid Cymru and Liberal Democrat voters are in favour but less supportive than Labour voters. Age seems to be driving most of the variance. There are also significant social effects. Wealthier households are far more likely to support votes-

at-16. Those in poorer households are more likely to oppose than favour. Education follows a similar pattern with recipients of Higher Education most supportive. The overall message is that the votes-at-16 campaign has won the backing of 16-17 year olds and is doing far better than was once the case among the existing electorate.

Recommendation 7: We encourage engagement with the concerns and anxieties of younger and older citizens who might not support voting age reform at present.