Referendums (Scotland) Bill written submission on Lowering the Voting Age to 16 from
Dr Andrew Mycock, Dr Thomas Loughran (both University of
Huddersfield) and Professor Jonathan Tonge (University of Liverpool)

Franchise

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. The following submission draws on our research to engage with the general principles of the call for evidence undertaken by the Scottish Government as part of the introduction of the Referendums (Scotland) Bill. It focuses on the extension of the franchise outlined within the Bill (as introduced).

For the past twenty years or so, debate about a reduction of the voting age to 16 has proven increasingly prominent in UK politics.

It is the devolved institutions in Scotland, and now Wales, that have clearly led the way on legislative reform in this area. The voting age was first lowered to 16 in the UK for the Scottish Independence Referendum held in 2014. The referendum witnessed a very high turnout of 75 per cent of newly enfranchised under-18s, much higher than the 54 per cent of 18-24 year-olds who reportedly voted. The Scottish Government subsequently lowered the voting age to 16 for local, national, and some referenda in 2015. Since then, 16 and 17 year-olds have been enfranchised to vote in the 2016 Scottish parliamentary elections, and the 2017 Scottish local elections. They have not been franchised however for the 2015 and 2017 UK general elections or the 2016 European Union referendum.

The Welsh Assembly has passed legislation and plans to lower voting age to 16 for local and national elections in 2021. The devolved legislature in Northern Ireland does not as yet have the power to lower the voting age. It did however pass a motion in 2012 supporting the introduction of ‘Votes at 16’. 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. 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. 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.

The effect of the bespoke and piecemeal introduction of ‘Votes at 16’ across the UK has created a fragmented asymmetric set of voting rights across the UK. Put simply, 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:** In preparation for future referendums, we urge the Scottish Government 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.

**Youth Democratic Socialisation**

Citizenship education was introduced across the UK, including Scotland, in the late 1990s. Devolution has meant 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 Scotland and across the rest of the UK. This means many young people do not receive significant political education during their primary and secondary education.

Empirical evidence is limited in terms of the extent to which lowering the voting age to 16 would politically incentivise young people to vote. In Scotland, the 2014 independence referendum saw an exceptional turnout of 75 per cent of under-18s, who voted in significantly larger numbers when compared with the 54 per cent of 18-24 year-olds (Electoral Commission, 2015). Voting age reform implemented for the Scottish 2014 independence referendum provided significant but bespoke opportunities for newly-enfranchised voters to learn about politics and engage in political debate. Research by Dr Jan Eichhorn and his team of researchers based at the University of Edinburgh, and other academics, has highlighted that 16 and 17 year-old voters were as politically engaged, literate, and autonomous in their participation as older voters during the referendum. Voting age reform in Scotland has had a marked positive effect on youth political interest and activism when compared with young people in the rest of the UK. In a significant number of schools, colleges, universities, and communities, young people were offered and took up opportunities to learn about and discuss the referendum. Eichhorn’s research has confirmed that 16 and 17 year-olds who were provided opportunities to engage and participate in debates about the referendum were more likely to vote.
There are however a number of issues which have been largely overlooked but which raise questions in terms of the success of the introduction of ‘Votes at 16’ in Scotland. There has been scant consideration as to why the turnout of under-18s in the Scottish independence referendum was 10 per cent lower than the average of 85 per cent. Although 16 and 17 year-olds voted in considerably more number than their closest voting age cohort (18-24), there has been a marked lack of analysis as to why – after a two-year campaign – there was such a difference in the turnout of younger and older voters.

Although subsequent local and national elections in Scotland have encouraged a slight increase in overall turnout, this is linked more to the ongoing resonance of the independence question amongst older voters rather than the impact of voting age reform (Electoral Commission, 2017). In 2019, the average age of the Scottish Parliament’s elected representatives has risen to 51. It is early days but as yet voting age reform has not encouraged a change in political culture in Scotland to incentivise younger voters, with policy-making still disproportionately focused on older voters.

No systemic approach has been adopted in Scotland to ensure that all 16-17 year-olds are offered such opportunities due to the lack of a national citizenship education programme. Local authorities and individual schools/colleges determine what political education initiatives are undertaken. Research 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, Education for Scotland, 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 2:** Consideration should be given to how all newly-enfranchised voters in Scotland will have equal opportunities to learn about, engage with and participate in future referenda in Scotland. Particular attention should be given to the provision of political education in schools and colleges, and developing networked opportunities for young people to stand for election in youth councils and represent their peers.

**Votes at 16: Wider issues for consideration**

Our research showed that the level of support for ‘vote at 16’ among young people in Scotland and the rest of the UK 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 increases 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 3:** The preparations for future referenda in Scotland must include 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.