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# Votes at 16 and Youth Political Engagement: Young People in Kirklees

Helen Gleaves

A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in  
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MSc by  
Research in Politics and International Studies.

The University of Huddersfield

May 2019

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## **Abstract**

This study explores the attitudes of young people aged between fourteen and eighteen years old in Kirklees on whether the voting age should be reduced to sixteen. It involves a mixed-methods approach in which both an online survey and individual focus groups are used to assess whether these young people would feel confident in their political knowledge to vote, whether they believe that lowering the voting age would redress the current state of youth political disengagement, and whether they think that certain rights and responsibilities that are related to voting should be lowered to sixteen.

This study revealed that slightly under half of the young people surveyed supported lowering the voting age to sixteen. Further to this, it found that a majority of young people in Kirklees believe that lowering the voting age would improve young peoples' levels of interest in politics. However, most young people reported a lack of confidence in their level of political knowledge and felt that they needed to be taught about politics in school in order to vote competently. In terms of adult rights and responsibilities such as being able to drink or drive at sixteen, most young people wanted these legal minimum ages to remain at eighteen, and especially opposed reducing the age of candidacy to sixteen despite being supportive of lowering the voting age.

The thesis makes an important contribution to research on voting age reform by focusing on local democracy in England. This provides an original lens to understand ongoing debates about 'Votes at 16' across the United Kingdom and elsewhere.

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## Introduction

Discussion around lowering the voting age from eighteen to sixteen years of age has gained traction particularly over the last couple of decades, and an official 'Votes at 16' campaign was launched in January 2003. Currently, most mainstream UK political parties (excluding the Conservative Party and the Democratic Unionist Party) support the extension of the franchise to sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds, with the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party including the policy in their 2017 general election manifestos (Johnston & Dempsey, 2018).

The proposition of 'Votes at 16' has been frequently invoked by organisations, charities, academics and politicians alike as a potential remedy to declining national turnout rates, reflecting the increasing problem of youth political disengagement. However, it is unclear whether allowing sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds to vote would change the status quo of low turnout and disengagement. Moreover, there is scant consideration of the correlation between political and other economic, social, and cultural rights and responsibilities associated with youth and adult citizenship. Finally, there is a lack of engaged consultation with young people themselves about the opportunities and challenges of lowering the voting age.

A notable but often overlooked feature of most post-war democratic systems has been the informal consensus whereby eighteen years-old is seen by most states as the appropriate age for citizens to be allowed to exercise their right to vote in state-sponsored elections and referenda. However, deliberations over whether the voting age should be lowered to sixteen for some or all UK elections has become an established feature of British politics in recent years, reflecting anxieties amongst a growing number of politicians, academics, and other commentators about levels of political disengagement amongst young people.

Voting age reform to enfranchise sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds in sub-state elections has already been undertaken across other parts of the UK. In 2012, the Scottish Parliament set the minimum age for voting in the 2014 independence referendum at sixteen. It is noteworthy that 75% of those newly-enfranchised young voters chose to vote in the referendum. 'Votes at 16' has since been introduced for elections to the Scottish Parliament and Scottish local elections (Birch et al., 2015). Both the Northern Ireland Assembly and the National Assembly of Wales also support allowing sixteen- and seventeen-year olds the right to vote in local and sub-state national elections.

The Wales Act 2017, recently passed by the UK parliament, has empowered the Welsh Assembly to undertake voting age reform if it so wishes (Welsh Government, 2017).

Elsewhere across the British Isles, the Isle of Man has had its minimum voting age set at sixteen since 2006, a move which the British islands of Jersey and Guernsey followed in 2007 (YCC, 2009b). In July 2017, Oldham and Royton West MP, Jim McMahon, was successful in his application to present a Private Members Bill in Parliament to “reduce the voting age to 16 in parliamentary and other elections; to make provision about young people’s education in citizenship and the constitution; and for connected purposes” (Parliament.uk, 2017).

Debates about lowering the voting age have rarely engaged with local democracy in England. Some local authorities have sought however to engage with the issue of voting age reform. This research into the ‘Votes at 16’ debate seeks to build upon research undertaken as part of the Kirklees Democracy Commission whose June 2017 report provided a strong recommendation for trialling votes at sixteen in local elections. The report also supported the commissioning of research to engage with young people under eighteen years old across Kirklees regarding the complexities of voting age reform.

This research project will show that just under half of young people in Kirklees support lowering the voting age to sixteen, however a majority favour lowering the voting age at least for local elections. It will also show that young people are not confident in their knowledge of politics and want political education in the curriculum, and that young people would prefer the rights and responsibilities related to voting to remain at eighteen.

### *Research questions*

This study explores the attitudes of young people living in Kirklees on whether the voting age should be reduced. It aims to assess whether young people below the age of eighteen would feel sufficiently politically literate, experienced, and confident to vote in elections, and related to this will explore their satisfaction with the current state of political education. It will also explore how they understand the right to vote within the wider context of their framing of the rights and responsibilities of youth and adult citizenship. This study therefore seeks to find evidence for the following:

1. Do young people under the current age of enfranchisement support lowering the voting age to sixteen?
2. Do young people feel they possess the required levels of political literacy, skills, and experiences to vote?
3. Do young people think that extending the franchise to sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds will redress youth political disengagement?

4. Where do young people think that the attendant ages of responsibility which underpin transitions to adult citizenship should fall?

### *Structure of the thesis*

This thesis will begin with a review of key literature which firstly outlines the historical context for lowering the voting age, drawing on various commissions and key themes shaping debates about voting age reform. This will be followed by a discussion of the methodological approaches adopted, highlighting the mixed-methods approach involving both quantitative research (an online survey) and qualitative research (focus groups).

The next chapter is an analysis of the data collected within focus groups and through the questionnaire, structured in relation to the research questions. The first section will cover young peoples' attitudes towards lowering the voting age for all elections, for lowering the voting age for local elections, and will also discuss the relationship between level of interest and support for lowering the voting age, and between age and support for lowering the voting age.

The second section aims to find out whether young people feel that they possess the skills necessary to vote. This section will consider young peoples' perspectives on maturity; on their level of interest; their level of knowledge; and their opinion on the current standing of political education. The third section of the analysis seeks to find out whether young people think that lowering the voting age to sixteen will get young people interested in politics and voting, and where young people think that the attendant ages of responsibility which underpin transitions to adulthood should be set—including legal ages such as the minimum drinking age, and whether they think sixteen year olds should be able to stand for election.

The final section is a discussion which considers the evidence presented and highlights three main discoveries from the research. The first is that slightly under half of young people support lowering the voting age. The second point is that young people feel that the current state of political education is inadequate, and in particular that they are unsatisfied with their knowledge of local politics. The third and final point is that young people do not tend to see a connection between lowering the voting age and other key rights and responsibilities.

The conclusion to this thesis will highlight the value of the contributions of this study, such as its unique sample and its focus on the local element of the debate which is largely neglected in the literature. This section will also go through the limitations this research has encountered. It will discuss how this piece of research could be pushed forward, such as clarifying young peoples' reasons for their preference of the voting age to be lowered just for local elections

and will also discuss how this research could be taken further afield. The study will therefore demonstrate that just under half of young people in Kirklees support lowering the voting age to sixteen, that they are unsatisfied with their lack of knowledge of politics, and that they believe that related rights and responsibilities should remain at eighteen.

## Literature review

This research begins with an extensive literature review which seeks to provide a context for discussion around lowering the voting age in England and has helped to shape the analytical framework of this thesis and identify gaps in the current literature. It includes a historical context of the campaign to lower the voting age focusing on reports and commissions which have explored the topic in detail; examples of countries which have set their voting age at sixteen; an exploration and evaluation of secondary sources on youth political disengagement; and the debate around lowering the voting age within academic literature.

Gaps in the literature arise in that there is a lack of engagement with young people about whether it is something they want, especially in terms of whether young people would prefer it to be lowered for local elections only. Also, there is barely any thinking given to the current state of rights and responsibilities and how young people conceptualise these. Throughout the literature review is an underlying argument that suggests that lowering the voting age could be a successful policy in terms of engaging young people, so long as it is brought in alongside a well-executed 'civics' education which is framed towards young people, as this is the best way to improve on the current state of knowledge.

### *Historical context of Votes at 16*

The issue of 'Votes at 16' has risen to prominence in UK politics in recent years and now in particular due to both the Scottish and Welsh Governments' decision to lower the voting age to sixteen for their national parliaments in 2015 and 2018 respectively. In the last twenty years, the issue of lowering the voting age has been subject to debate and review in parliament, through independent and government commissions, in the media, and in academia. The voting age was first lowered to eighteen from twenty-one years of age in 1969 through the Representation of the People Act (Johnston & Dempsey, 2018), in accordance with a progressive shift in society which brought about wider human rights reforms such as the legalisation of homosexuality and abortion in 1967. There however been scant consideration of the decision to lower the voting age to 18 in 1969, or to assess its impact and legacies (YCC, 2009b)

The first major push for a reduction in the voting age came about in January 2003, when an official 'Votes at 16 Campaign' was introduced. It came in response to growing concerns about youth political disengagement. In 1992, 68% of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds voted in the general election. The 2001 general election saw that only 39% of eighteen- to twenty-four-

year-olds voted. Moreover, youth membership of political parties was also seen to fall over this period (YCC, 2009a). The campaign was and continues to be supported by a coalition of political parties, youth councils, charities and pressure groups (Johnston & Dempsey, 2018). The campaign's central argument states that sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds already face a range of 'adult' rights and responsibilities, such as military service, paying tax, consensual sex, and marriage (votesat16.org, 2016). It is therefore argued that a reduction in the voting age would be compatible with the wider range of responsibilities that young people of this age are already assumed to be mature enough to take on, as "the fact that they have these rights indicates that they are considered able to make responsible and rational choices" (Folkes, 2004, p. 53).

In response to these calls to lower the voting age, and wider concerns around youth political disengagement, a number of commissions have been instigated to consider the issue. The first was undertaken by the Electoral Commission released their report into the 'Age of Electoral Majority' in November 2003. The report involved research conducted by ICM Government Research into public opinion on lowering the voting age and on what is conceived as the legal minimum age to be able to do certain things, such as stand for election (Boon, 2003). The Electoral Commission found that 78% of the public surveyed thought that the voting age should remain at eighteen years, and that just 22% thought that it should be lowered to sixteen, adding that "there may be valid reasons for reducing the voting age but the general public are either unaware of them or rather unimpressed by them" (Boon, 2003, p. 19).

Further to this, the Commission also found that the age of the participant had a great impact on whether they support lowering the voting age, as 33% of participants aged eighteen to twenty-four felt that it should be lowered to sixteen compared to just 5% of participants aged 65 and over (Boon, 2003). Those aged eighteen and over who were against lowering the voting age cited insufficient life experience (33%) and the immaturity of sixteen-year olds (30%) as the main reasons as to why it should remain at eighteen. Interestingly, of those in support of lowering the voting age, 24% of those aged eighteen and above believed that a person is mature enough to vote at sixteen, however only 8% of young people aged fifteen to nineteen agreed with this reason for lowering the voting age. Considering the evidence from public opinion on the matter, the Electoral Commission concluded their report with a support for keeping the minimum voting age at eighteen years old.

In 2006, the Power Commission released their report 'Power to the People' which included a set of proposals and recommendations that seek to re-engage people with formal politics. Their sixteenth recommendation positions that both the minimum age of voting and the age of candidacy for the House of Commons should be reduced to sixteen, in order to improve youth

disengagement (Power Inquiry, 2006). The Commission stated that: “when young people are faced with a genuine opportunity to involve themselves in a meaningful process that offers them a real chance of influence, they do so with enthusiasm and with responsibility” (Power Inquiry, 2006, p. 199). The report addresses claims that lowering the voting age would have a negative effect on turnout by stating that this is an ‘inadequate’ reason to disagree with lowering the voting age, as only politicians have something to lose from a low turnout. The report also argues that concerns around the political maturity of sixteen-year olds lack sufficient evidence and that the experience of the Commission itself is in contrary to this suggestion.

At the time this report was written, young people remained in education until they were sixteen. This meant that many finished their citizenship education and would then have to wait for an election in which they had reached the age of eighteen to vote, which the Commission states is “clearly likely to weaken the impact of citizenship education on the political consciousness of young people” (Power Inquiry, 2006, p. 201). The report also argues similarly to the official Votes at 16 Campaign in terms of what sixteen-year-olds can already legally do, citing joining the army and paying taxes as evidence to suggest that sixteen-year-olds would be mature and responsible enough to be able to vote competently. The report’s seventeenth recommendation also seeks to improve youth political disengagement by introducing an automatic voter registration at sixteen alongside the allocation of National Insurance numbers.

The Youth Citizenship Commission (YCC) was created in 2008 and produced their report ‘Making the Connection: Building Youth Citizenship in the UK’ in 2009. The Commission’s role was “firstly, to define what citizenship means to young people. Secondly, to increase young people’s participation in politics and promote active citizenship, reflecting the communication preferences in young people. Thirdly, to lead a consultation on whether the voting age should be lowered to 16” (YCC, 2009a, p. 3). The Commission’s response to their consultation with young people on whether the voting age should be lowered to sixteen was released in a separate report ‘Old enough to make a mark? Should the voting age be lowered to 16?’.

The consultation sought to find sufficient evidence that would bring them to a conclusion on the subject of ‘Votes at 16’, on the matters of: the political knowledge and maturity of young people; whether the right to vote at sixteen is necessary to complete a young person’s citizenship education; the impact it might have on electoral turnout and the quality of a young person’s vote; the impact it would have on young people’s perceptions and civic activity; and the administrative issues such as the impact lowering the voting age might have on schools (YCC, 2009b). The Commission summarised that they did not find enough evidence to base a recommendation either in support of lowering the voting age at sixteen or for keeping it at

eighteen. They stated that as public opinion is divided on the issue it is not possible to base a recommendation on that evidence alone. As uncovered reports such as the Electoral Commission's, they agreed that the majority of adults oppose lowering the voting age to sixteen.

However, the YCC also found that the opinions of young people were fairly even on the subject, though a majority of sixteen- to eighteen-year olds did want the voting age to be lowered to sixteen (YCC, 2009b). Based on this evidence of public opinion uncovered through the usage of independent commissions the YCC recommended that due to these results which tend to be heavily divided by age, the decision to lower or retain the voting age is one that should be decided by political processes rather than through public consultation undertaken by commissions. Importantly, the YCC concluded that the issue of lowering the voting age to sixteen "is not the principal factor in encouraging young people's interest and involvement in politics and citizenship" (YCC, 2009b, p. 4).

In 2014, the British Youth Council (BYC) undertook its third Youth Select Committee (YSC). The YSC was formed with the support of the House of Commons to enable young people "to scrutinise and hold inquiries into issues that they care about in order to influence policy and legislation" (BYC, 2014, p. 44). Each year the BYC holds a UK-wide ballot called 'Make Your Mark' in which young people vote on what they think Members of the UK Youth Parliament should campaign on for the coming year. In 2013, 478,000 young people aged between eleven and eighteen voted in the ballot and Votes at 16 in all elections was chosen as the topic to be campaigned on (BYC, 2014). Due to this interest in the topic, the YSC undertook an inquiry into whether the voting age should be lowered to sixteen for all elections, and what could be done to encourage young people's political participation.

The YSC firstly argues that it is 'oversimplified' and 'overstated' to insist that the voting age should be lowered to sixteen just because some rights and responsibilities also arrive at this age (BYC, 2014). However, they argue that the rights that do appear at sixteen seem to be indicative of citizenship, pointing to the examples of being able to serve in the armed forces and pay income tax. They stated that too much is made of the point that those under eighteen cannot buy items such as fireworks or cigarettes as these are unrelated to citizenship. The YSC addressed the point that maturity is subjective and hard to prove, however states their firm belief that most sixteen-year olds are mature enough to vote and that they have not seen any evidence that sufficiently proves otherwise. They also highlighted that as both sixteen and eighteen are ages at which important rights and responsibilities are given, this infers that society views both of these ages as significant milestones of maturity. Therefore, they argued that those who are decided to be old enough to contribute to society in ways such as serving

in the army or paying tax should be able to have a say in who makes decisions related to these things on their behalf.

Addressing the evidence of public opinion being against reducing the voting age, the YSC stated that this is not a strong enough reason to reject it. They also discussed the fact that policy makers are more likely to formulate policy that benefits the largest cohort that votes for them, and that lowering the voting age would have an effect on how governments and parties formulate policies towards young people. However, they stated that this effect will only occur if young people use their right to vote. In terms of turnout, the YSC argued that the decision to lower or retain the voting age should not be informed by the predicted levels of turnout among sixteen and seventeen-year-old voters. Despite this, the problem of low turnout amongst young people is a problem that needs to be addressed. They stated that there are advantages to voting for the first time at sixteen, such as the fact that there is less 'upheaval' at this age.

The YSC recommended that all parties should include lowering the voting age to sixteen in their manifestos. In terms of youth political disengagement, the YSC's inquiry acknowledged that lowering the voting age to sixteen may well contribute to engaging young people, however it is an issue that requires 'separate attention' (BYC, 2014, p.6). They recommended that legislation needed to be introduced to improve political education, as young people are unclear on the difference between parties and their policies due to the neglect and sometimes poor teaching of citizenship education. The YSC also recommended that the Government commission a review into the benefits of the introduction of a compulsory Politics GCSE, and that an optional one be introduced in the meantime. The YSC concluded that lowering the voting age "is an opportunity not only to include a new cohort of citizens in decisions about their future and their communities, but to ensure a better-informed, more engaged generation is equipped to take our democracy into the future" (BYC, 2014, p. 35).

Initially, the argument from the Votes at 16 Campaign which claims that the right to vote would fit in with the current rights and responsibilities of sixteen- and seventeen-year olds is convincing. It seems reasonable that someone who is already considered mature and responsible enough to make the decision get married or join the army would be able to vote competently in an election. However, a slight issue arises in that sixteen- and seventeen-year olds currently cannot marry without their parents' consent, and that you may join the army at sixteen but cannot be involved in any combat until you have turned eighteen, which perhaps points to the contrary of being able to make your own informed decisions. Mycock (2015) has pointed out that most political rights do not coalesce around the age of sixteen. Although it is certainly something to think about, perhaps this is not the best justification out there for

reducing the voting age as the legal ages for activities such as smoking, drinking, and even watching certain films are set at eighteen years.

This semi-autonomy is further entrenched by the recent move to make young people legally have to remain in education or pursue an apprenticeship until they are eighteen, and through the international convention that you are a child until you are eighteen years old (if we are to assume that voting is an activity that can only be done efficiently by adults). It is worth emphasising that the Votes at 16 Campaign does have legitimacy in the support of many politicians, pressure groups and most importantly young people: namely in the form of Youth Councils and the national Youth Parliament. This makes it open to question whether all young people would be as passionate about being able to vote at sixteen in the way that the most well-informed and politically engaged young people who are calling for it are.

The Electoral Commission's decision to reject a reduction in the voting age focused on using public opinion as a reason to keep things the way they are. Although it is useful to consider the public's opinion on political issues, it is not necessary in a representative democracy where political decisions are to be made on the public's behalf. As described by the YCC, public opinion is not necessarily the best judge of an issue. The public may not be informed of the pros and cons of lowering the voting age, and in the end, it is not our decision to make. This conclusion is therefore not a persuasive enough argument to reject lowering the voting age to sixteen, as many adults may well reject it on the basis that it does not affect them.

The Power Commission's rationale for lowering the voting age rests on the idea that lowering the voting age would improve the issue of youth disengagement by giving young people a voice earlier. However, there is not much evidence to suggest that this would be the case. It appears that Votes at 16 has come to the fore as a proposed remedy for youth political disengagement, however this is unlikely to work on its own as disengagement encompasses much more than a lack of voting. The Commission describes that doubts around the maturity of sixteen-year-olds lack sufficient evidence, and that their personal experience shows that young people are mature. A study conducted by Gibson and Hamilton (2013), argued that even the young people who cited a lack of maturity as a reason to oppose lowering the voting age were arriving at that decision through taking into account the social debate on political participation and that these arguments involved young people "demonstrating an orientation to precisely those norms of responsibility and rationality that they argued were beyond themselves and/or their peers" (Gibson & Hamilton, 2013, p. 48).

One can agree with their argument suggesting that being concerned about low turnout is an inadequate reason to reject a reduction in the voting age, however this could concern the government who may worry about a weakened mandate. Equally agreeable is their suggestion

that waiting until eighteen would negatively affect the impact of citizenship education, due to there being a gap of many years between learning about politics and being able to vote in an election. This argument has not entirely stood the test of time due to the extension of compulsory education, meaning that most young people up to eighteen should have some opportunities to discuss politics during their college education. However, for those young people who do not discuss politics either in or outside of class, for example those pursuing apprenticeships, their level of engagement is bound to be affected (Henn & Foard, 2014).

Although the YCC did not argue one way or the other, they agreed that lowering the voting age is still a 'valid issue for consideration', however it should be decided by politicians rather than through public opinion. The most compelling argument that has emerged is their rejection of the idea that lowering the voting age alone would fix the problem of youth disengagement, an argument that Russell (2014) positions. Eichhorn (2018) however argues that it could be pointing to the example of young peoples' engagement in Austria and Scotland after lowering the voting age.

The BYC's Youth Select Committee built on the evidence presented over the years and recognised that lowering the voting age alone is not enough to improve engagement amongst young people. They go a step further in highlighting that political education is key to ensuring that young people utilise the right to vote and participate fully as citizens. Their argument on maturity that acknowledges its subjectivity, however, suggests that there are two milestones at ages sixteen and eighteen due to the rights and responsibilities which arrive at these ages provides a good justification for lowering the voting age to the lower of these two. Their argument is strengthened by highlighting that those rights which are accrued at sixteen are more indicative of citizenship than those that arrive at eighteen. One issue with this assertion is that they are relying heavily on the examples of serving in the army and paying income tax, when of course you must be eighteen to serve in combat, and it can be argued that there aren't many sixteen-year-olds earning enough to be paying income tax (Cowley & Denver, 2004).

Overall, their argument that those who are decided to be old enough to do these things should be able to have a say in who makes the decisions that are going to affect them is a sufficient defence for lowering the voting age. The YSC also introduce the idea that voting for the first time at sixteen may well have a positive effect on turnout, due to less 'upheaval' at this age. At present, many first-time voters may be living away from home at university, and for whatever reason will forget to register or even forget to vote or be unable to vote due to only registering at their home address. Most sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds will be living at home and will have less disorganisation in their life, making them more likely to vote. This is

evidenced by Fieldhouse and Cutts' (2016) research which demonstrates that an individual is more likely to vote if living in the same household as another person who votes, which in the case of sixteen-year olds is likely to be a parent or guardian (Fieldhouse & Cutts, 2016).

The YSC's recommendation that all parties should include 'Votes at 16' in their manifestos clearly had an impact as the Labour Party, the Green Party, the SNP and the Liberal Democrats all included it in their 2015 General Election manifestos (Johnston and Dempsey, 2018). The most important recommendation from this inquiry is their reminder that youth disengagement is something that needs separate attention, away from discussion about 'Votes at 16' which in recent years has dominated discussions around how to engage young people with formal politics. Their focus on improving political education to efficiently tackle youth disengagement provides a way to move forward that the Government can act on and successfully emphasises the argument that lowering the voting age will not achieve the desired result of increasing youth turnout without first tackling the causes of political disengagement observed amongst young people.

#### *'Votes at 16' in other countries*

Discussion in consideration of lowering the voting age has not been restricted to England. The first EU country to lower its national voting age to sixteen was Austria in 2007. Other countries that currently have their voting age set at sixteen include Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and now Scotland. The Channel Islands of Jersey and Guernsey, and the Isle of Man are three British Crown Dependencies that have lowered their voting age for their assemblies to sixteen in 2007 and 2006 respectively (YCC, 2009). In 2011, Norway trialled a voting age of sixteen for its municipal elections, however, chose to keep their voting age at eighteen after political interest did not rise amongst young people. Also, a significant gap was observed in maturity between sixteen and seventeen-year-olds when compared to older voters (Bergh, 2013)

A survey conducted in Austria by Zeglovits and Zandonella (2013) found that the political interest of sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds was higher after lowering the voting age, and that parents had an important role in the level of political socialisation of those too young to vote, as well as civic education and discussion in schools. In response to concerns that lowering the voting age would have an extremely negative effect on turnout, results from Austria have shown that turnout among sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds was around the same as (but slightly lower than) overall turnout. However, turnout was observed to decrease amongst those aged between eighteen and twenty-one, demonstrating a first-time voting boost (Zeglovits & Aichholzer, 2014). In terms of political maturity and the ability to make an informed decision

when voting, young Austrians have been observed to demonstrate a willingness to participate effectively in politics, proving to critics that lowering the voting age has not impacted the quality of vote choice or of the turnout in an election (Wagner et al., 2012).

Scotland lowered their voting age to sixteen for local elections and for elections to their national parliament in 2015, following the Edinburgh Agreement between the UK Government and Scottish Government which allowed Scotland to grant sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds the right to vote in the 2014 Scottish Independence referendum (Johnston and Dempsey, 2018). Research undertaken by Eichhorn (2015) measured the experience of these newly enfranchised young people able to vote for the first time in the 2015 general election, by comparing them with their peers in the UK. This research uncovered significant differences between Scottish sixteen and seventeen-year-olds and those in the rest of the UK since lowering the voting age, as the Scottish are much more likely to show higher levels of engagement (Eichhorn 2018).

Scottish teenagers rate themselves as much more likely to vote in the General Election than previous research had uncovered (67% voted for 9 or 10 on an 11-point scale), compared to 39% of those in the UK. His previous research observed these effects within the context of the 2014 referendum and has found that they have continued into the context of the 2015 General Election, supporting evidence that voting creates a sustained engagement. However, he also states that some differences can be attributed to the discussion of political issues in the classroom, and discussing politics with family and friends (Eichhorn, 2015). Mycock (2015, p.23) argued that this study does not provide sufficient evidence to prove the effects are – as yet - long-lasting, noting Scottish young people were likely to be “more politically energised when compared to their peers across the rest of the UK after experiencing a referendum campaign that dominated Scottish public life so manifestly”.

The Wales Act 2017 has granted the National Assembly of Wales and The Welsh Government the devolved power of administration over their elections to the Assembly and Wales’s local governments, allowing them to reduce the age of the franchise to sixteen for these elections. (Johnston & Dempsey, 2018). The Welsh Expert Panel concluded that lowering the voting age would increase political participation and awareness and recommended that this should come into effect for Assembly elections from 2021. They also recommended that citizenship education be delivered to a high standard and that the Assembly should work to encourage young people to participate in politics (Assembly Commission, 2018).

The effect of Scotland and Wales has reignited debate around lowering the voting age to sixteen in England. So far, the Labour Party, the Scottish National Party, the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party have voiced their support for the voting age to be reduced to

sixteen-years old at both the national and local level in their manifestos. The Conservative Party in England has historically been opposed to reductions in the voting age, opposing the reduction from twenty-one-years old to eighteen-years-old in 1969, and currently the Government has shown little interest in reducing the voting age any further (Johnston & Dempsey, 2018). In July 2017, The MP for Oldham West and Royton Jim McMahon put forward a Private Members Bill which argued for a reduction in the voting age to sixteen in parliamentary and other elections; to make provision about young people's education in citizenship and the constitution; and for connected purposes. The bill is currently in the process of a second reading which is due to resume on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 2019. (Parliament.uk, 2019).

Local authorities have also lent their support to lowering the voting age to sixteen. Council leaders in Rotherham have backed a motion to lower the voting age to sixteen (Rotherham Council, 2017), and several Bristol City councillors are in the process of appealing to the mayor to support a motion to allow sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds to vote in local elections (Ashcroft, 2017). Moreover, some new 'metro-mayors' in England support lowering the voting age to sixteen for city-region elections. The Kirklees Democracy Commission, made up of local councillors, have supported a motion to lower the voting age to sixteen, and the Commission released a report in 2017 which argued that the voting age should be lowered to sixteen nationally, accompanied by democratic education. The Commission also supported the trialling of lowering the voting age for local elections, in order to familiarise young people with voting (Kirklees Democracy Commission, 2017).

The evidence so far suggests that 'Votes at 16' has been successfully applied in each country in which it still stands. However, the evidence from Norway suggests that young people need more support in developing their political maturity in order to prevent a lack of engagement rather than just being given the right to vote. Austria has had success in implementing it alongside a framework in education, however evidence does suggest a first-time voting boost. Despite this, it has kept its voting age at sixteen which proves it has been successful, and political interest has been observed to rise amongst young Austrians (Zeglovits & Zandonella, 2013). Lowering the voting age in Scotland has helped to mobilise an already quite politically-minded group, so it is unclear whether it would be as successful in England (Mycock, 2015). Therefore, improved political education is necessary before lowering the voting age, to ensure young people in England would know how to use their vote.

## *Youth political disengagement*

Young people have been observed to be disengaged with politics as they are much less likely to engage with formal methods of politics than older adults. In the 2017 General Election, just 57% of eighteen- to nineteen-year-olds and 59% of twenty- to twenty-four-year-olds voted, which is low compared to 77% of sixty- to sixty-nine-year-olds and 84% of those aged seventy and over (YouGov, 2017). Disengagement in the form of low turnout poses a problem for the legitimacy and mandate of democratically elected governments (Print, 2007), particularly if this generation do not develop an engagement with politics, a concern which has been referred to as a potential 'crisis of democracy' (Farthing, 2010).

Party membership is also low amongst today's young people, which Phelps (2012) argues can be attributed to the declining role of social group identification in society today. It was once the case that most individuals would consistently vote for the party that represented their social class. Today, the lack of a strong partisan and social group identity means that "young people in Britain are now without one of the basic tools for their psychological engagement with conventional politics" (Phelps, 2012, p. 282). However, a surge in youth turnout was observed in 2017, which has been referred to as a 'youthquake', with a surge of young people voting, many in support of Jeremy Corbyn's Labour party (Sloam et al., 2018). It is argued that this represents more than just an increase in turnout and represents "a multi-faceted phenomenon involving fundamental social, political and cultural shifts" (Sloam et al., 2018, p. 6). Despite youth turnout still being much lower than older voters, this shows that young people are not apathetic, and that engagement could be starting to improve.

One explanation for young people's disengagement is that they are reported to feel marginalised from and disaffected with the politics of today – viewing politicians and political institutions as power hungry and selfish rather than as representatives for the people and as a means for positive change (Henn et al., 2005; Mycock & Tonge, 2012). Henn and Foard's (2014) study collected the opinions of young people who did not vote in the 2010 General Election. They uncovered that these young people chose not to vote because they found politics to be confusing, and that it is "populated by a professional political elite that is more concerned with pursuing its own narrow self-serving agenda than it is in championing the interests and issue concerns of young people" (Henn & Foard, 2014, p. 367). They also found that this attitude changed depending on the current educational status of the participant, as those who pursued full-time education for longer reported less feelings of marginalisation. It can therefore be argued that political education is the most efficient way to address the current state of marginalisation reported amongst young people and to improve their engagement with politics.

Citizenship education was introduced into the UK's curriculum in the early 2000s, the aim of which was to benefit society by creating "an active and politically-literate citizenry convinced that they can influence government and community affairs at all levels" (CAG, 1998, p. 9). For many young people, it has not done much to engage them with conventional politics as levels of participation have not improved (Print, 2007). However, it is interesting to note that those who took Citizenship Studies as a GCSE were found to be more likely to have voted in a General Election (Pontes et al., 2017). This research demonstrates that education is acknowledged to effect levels of engagement, as those with higher levels of education are much more likely to participate in traditional forms of politics, therefore indicating that education is the way to solve the problem. The observation that participation has not increased could suggest that citizenship education was not implemented as well as it could have been.

Farthing (2010) has suggested that today's young people fall into a category of 'antipolitical' or 'radically unpolitical', as both engagement and disengagement is occurring at the same time. He argues that a complete overhaul of politics is required as the current response to youth disengagement is doing nothing to engage the 'unpolitical' young people, and that it is unhelpful to judge young people's levels of engagement against traditional adult-centric criteria. This is because today's young people are observed to engage with politics and as citizens through ways different to traditional understandings (Farthing, 2010).

Gifford et al. (2014) highlight the role of the new media in providing young people with a platform in which they can participate and belong. The internet has proven to be a useful platform for young people in terms of talking about and raising awareness of political issues that matter to them. For example, creating and sharing petitions, and discussing issues on social networks (Yang & DeHart, 2016). Social media has also proven to be useful in mobilising and engaging young people, as was seen in Labour and Momentum's method of communicating their message to younger voters, the success of which can be attributed to the impact of 2017's 'youthquake' (Fletcher, 2017). The recent increase in youth engagement means that lowering the voting age is likely to encourage young people to participate, as the 'youthquake' has proven that they are not apathetic. Promoting 'Votes at 16' and continuing to promote policies on social media could be the way forward in terms of getting the message out to young people today.

Young people can be seen to demonstrate a civic engagement through volunteering in their communities, and some are even active in their local youth councils and the UK youth parliament. Despite these new and emerging online forms of participation, voting in elections is unfortunately the only real way that a citizen has the power to effect change (Print, 2007). Also, these alternative forms of participation such as social media discussion tend to be

focused on a single issue and for a relatively short amount of time, rather than forming a sustained engagement (Print, 2007). However, this is a negative view of young people's engagement, and if the effects of the 'youthquake' are sustained into the next election then this could prove this assertion to be wrong. Print (2007) may be overlooking the fact that young people can be concerned about multiple issues at any one time, and that adults can be subject to a focus on a single issue too.

### *Youth transitions to adulthood*

Another explanation for youth disengagement suggests that it has been encouraged by the prolonged transition to adulthood for today's young people. It has been made complicated by the changing social and economic circumstances seen since the 1990s, so much so that it is now viewed as a period of 'quasi-citizenship' (Benedicto & Morán, 2007). Traditionally, markers such as leaving the family home, leaving state education and getting married provided evidence that a person has become an independent and autonomous adult –which formed the traditional understanding of what it means to be a citizen. However, today, factors such as a lack of access to secure employment (such as rising youth unemployment and the proliferation of 'zero hours' contracts); the extension of compulsory education until the age of eighteen-years old; and a financial inability to leave the family home (due to high rent and house prices), makes the average young person more dependent on their family than they would have been compared to past generations – therefore lengthening the transition from adolescence to adulthood. (Flanagan et al., 2012; Benedicto & Morán, 2007).

Ways of identifying the move from youth to adulthood have been complicated further as 'youth' as a descriptive term has been known to be used up to the age of thirty (Gifford et al., 2013). Leading on from this, the use of age as a marker of adulthood has been muddled by the usage of inconsistent legal 'ages of consent' which are based on adult perceptions of when a person becomes mature enough to be granted certain rights and responsibilities which are associated with being a citizen (Mycock & Tonge, 2012). This delayed transition to adulthood is said to affect how long it takes for a person to act on their civic or 'adult' responsibility to participate in the political community and could provide an explanation for the low turn-out in elections observed amongst young people. Life-cycle theories state that "stable patterns of civic engagement take hold once individuals have settled into adult roles, such as steady jobs, marriage, and parenting that build up their stake in community affairs" (Flanagan & Levine, 2010, p. 160). It is therefore hypothesised that youth political disengagement has increased

as a result of this lengthened transition to adulthood, which has served as a barrier to their integration into civic life.

Lowering the voting age to sixteen would reopen questions and drive confusion around when 'adulthood' begins, furthering this inconsistency in legal ages of responsibility as highlighted by Mycock and Tonge (2012). There is currently a gap in the literature concerning how this could be impacted. The literature on youth disengagement suggests that lowering the voting age could be a solution to this disengagement, however, introducing a voting age of sixteen without also introducing a framework in education may not achieve the desired result. The most persuasive argument reviewed places an emphasis on education as the best way to develop an individual's knowledge and interest in politics.

Evidence has been presented which suggests that those who received an education in Citizenship were more likely to vote in a General Election, and that educational status affects feelings of marginalisation (Pontes et al., 2017; Henn & Foard, 2014). Therefore, 'Votes at 16' should be included as part of a set of solutions to the disengagement rather than invoked as a panacea to the problem. Despite an increase in turnout amongst young people and evidence of ways in which young people do participate, the issue of youth disengagement has become central to the debate around lowering the voting age to sixteen, which has become prominent as a solution to this phenomenon.

### *Debates on lowering the voting age*

'Votes at 16' has therefore emerged in political discourse as a response to concerns about low levels of turnout in elections, suggesting that giving sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds the right to vote could fix the problem of disengagement with formal politics and avoid any looming crisis of democracy. It has been noted that if you vote in an election, then you are very likely to continue to vote in subsequent elections (Coppock & Green, 2016; Bedolla & Michelson, 2012; Meredith, 2009). In terms of young and newly enfranchised voters, The Electoral Commission found that of those 75% of sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds who voted in the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum, 97% reported that they would vote again in future elections and referendums (electoralcommission.org.uk, 2014). This provides a defence for lowering the voting age, arguing that early enfranchisement would ensure a sustained engagement with voting as seen in Scotland, thereby re-connecting young people with the democratic process.

Evidence presented by Meredith (2009) in a study which compared the voting behaviour of young people who turned eighteen-years old just before past elections with those who turned

eighteen just afterward, indicates that voting is habit forming, as past eligibility increases the likelihood that an individual will participate in future elections. Further to this, the study argues that eighteen-year olds who vote in low salience (for example, local or regional elections) are very likely to continue to vote in future national elections (Meredith, 2009). It has been advised that earlier enfranchisement, complemented by a 'civics'-style citizenship education in schools, would assist young people in their political literacy and their future relationship with the democratic process (Folkes, 2004).

The 'Votes at 16 Campaign' has argued that sixteen- and seventeen-year olds should be given the right to vote in elections due to sixteen-year-olds already facing a range of civic rights and responsibilities which would be compatible with having the right to vote (votesat16.org, 2016). However, an issue with the argument arises in that young people must still seek parental permission to marry under the age of eighteen, cannot enter into combat until they are eighteen-years old, and now must remain in education (or pursue an apprenticeship) until they are eighteen—all legal requirements which appear to lack confidence in the maturity and decision-making skills of those under eighteen years of age. Critics such as David Denver (2013) have asserted that these rights highlighted by the campaign are unrelated to enfranchisement, and in terms of the argument presented by supporters of 'Votes at 16' that there should be 'no taxation without representation', he calls attention to the fact that only a very small amount of under-eighteens pay any income tax.

Furthermore, the voting age was reduced to eighteen in 1969 as part of the Representation of the People Act and in connection to wider human and social rights reforms occurring at the time. It is argued that political rights do not coalesce around the age of sixteen, which could render the justification for a reduction in the voting age somewhat questionable, as it would not correspond with other wider political and personal rights (Mycock, 2015). The voting age remains at eighteen-years as this age is conceived as the correct minimum voting age in the majority of established democracies and in 26 out of 27 EU member states (Cowley & Denver, 2004). Also, it is argued that repositioning the age of adult responsibility would be out of touch with international convention. The UK has signed the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that an individual is to be legally classed as a child up until the age of eighteen years of age (Denver, 2013).

However, Rehfeld (2011) has argued that The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child goes too far in prioritising child welfare over their participation rights, and that political participation would assist young people in their citizenship by giving them the experience necessary to develop their political knowledge (Rehfeld, 2011). A common concern of sceptics of lowering the voting age questions whether sixteen- and seventeen-year olds possess the maturity

necessary to vote competently in elections, a problem with this argument being that maturity is subjective and is bound to vary between individuals.

Rehfeld contends that political maturity is 'continuous and developmental', it does not miraculously appear once a person turns eighteen-years old. He also argues that "this failure to address the continuity of development in political institutions has exacerbated the exclusion of children from politics, in regions where their welfare is in most cases secure" (Rehfeld, 2011, p. 143). Research highlighted earlier has suggested that voting and engaging with political processes is an experience which forms a sustained engagement (Meredith, 2009). Rehfeld supports this by proposing that if children were given some form of political power from an early age, they would then become more familiar with the rights and responsibilities of being a citizen, which would make them more likely to continue to engage with politics once they become adults (Rehfeld, 2011).

Although there seems to be an absence of a loud opposition to lowering the voting age in the media, public opinion remains against or generally indifferent to a reduction in the minimum voting age (Birch et al., 2015; Cowley & Denver, 2004). In their report on the 'Age of Electoral Majority', the Electoral Commission concluded with a support for the status quo, stating that "there may be valid reasons for reducing the voting age, but the general public are either unaware or rather unimpressed by them" (Boon, 2003, p. 19). Chan and Clayton (2006) explain that public opinion was used in this report to gauge whether 'votes at 16' should be implemented as it is perhaps the only way that conceptions of maturity can be agreed upon, which again highlights how maturity is entirely subjective and cannot be accurately pinpointed. Despite this, they argued that a lack of political maturity amongst sixteen and seventeen-year-olds means that the voting age should remain at eighteen (Chan & Clayton, 2006).

The arguments in opposition tend to rest on this public conception of voting rights and adults' conception of the maturity of young people. The most convincing arguments in support of lowering the voting age are presented by Rehfeld (2011) who argues that giving young people the ability to participate in politics from a young age will allow them to build their knowledge and familiarise them with the process of voting, and it is likely that this would be the case if accompanied with a framework in 'civics-style' education (Folkes, 2004). Supporting this argument is the observation from Meredith (2009) that voting is habit forming, indicating that a young person who votes for the first time at sixteen will continue to do so, which has been supported by the findings of the Electoral Commission which showed that 97% of newly-enfranchised Scottish teenagers would vote again (Electoral Commission, 2014). Therefore,

if brought in alongside a well-considered and well-executed framework in education, 'Votes at 16' has the propensity to be a successful policy.

Concerns about public opinion form the least persuasive argument. The public is not always the best judge of an issue. It is largely over-eighteens sampled, and their opinion is formed on subjective conceptions of maturity. A significant gap in the literature reviewed concerns whether the majority of young people are in favour of the voting age being lowered to sixteen, which raises questions about whether it is a campaign led by a small minority of politically engaged young people and politicians. Despite maturity being subjective, the fact that the British public have been largely apathetic to the idea of lowering the voting age is perhaps the most legitimate reason as to why it hasn't been lowered yet. The general conception of young people aged sixteen to seventeen is that there would be no point in changing anything as they would either not turn up to vote, or they would damage the system by voting incompetently due to a lack of political knowledge (Chan & Clayton, 2006).

### *Conclusions*

This research will address an identified gap by taking a bottom-up perspective involving a unique sample of young people aged between fourteen and eighteen as participants, in order to find out whether being able to vote at sixteen is something that young people in Kirklees would want. It will also assess whether young people think that extending the franchise to sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds will redress youth political disengagement in order to test the assertions made within the literature concerning its perceived effect.

A further gap in the literature reviewed has been identified regarding the extent to which a reduction in the voting age will address youth disengagement and how it might reform rights and responsibilities associated with youth and adult citizenship which underpin transitions to adulthood. It also seeks to contribute to existing research regarding youth democratic education and voting age reform, exploring what political knowledge, skills, and experiences young people have and what they feel they require to vote competently in elections. It will also provide much-needed research on attitudes of young people to voting age reform in England, complementing work undertaken in Scotland and Wales. It will also undertake research from the 'bottom-up' on the attitudes of young people with regards to lowering the voting age and local democracy rather than at Westminster. Research on local democracy and 'Votes at 16' has been overlooked thus far. It is informed by the Kirklees Democracy Commission report, published in 2017, which recommended that the voting age be lowered to sixteen for local elections – but only after research was undertaken with young people across the region. This research fulfils this request and will be submitted to the Kirklees Democracy Commission to inform evidence-based policy.

## Research Methodology

This section will firstly outline the overall approach to this research project. It will focus on how a mixed-methods approach has been taken to carry out the research, as it involves quantitative research in the form of an online survey, and qualitative research in the form of individual focus groups. A mixed-methods approach has been taken in order to overcome the limitations associated with using a single method, and to harness the strengths of each. Next is an explanation of the quantitative survey research undertaken, and how using this method allows me to meet the aims of my research. This will lead on to an explanation of how using qualitative data drawn from my focus group research has allowed me to do the same. Lastly is a summary of how the overall methodological approach taken allows me to reach valid conclusions on the opinions of young people in Kirklees on the topic of lowering the voting age, their wider views on politics, and their attitudes towards adult ages of responsibility.

### *Overall approach*

This research project covers the opinions of participants aged between fourteen- and eighteen-years old living within the Kirklees area. The justification for my focus on the fourteen to eighteen age bracket is because currently, young people aged sixteen and over can register to vote. If the voting age was lowered to sixteen, then fourteen-year-olds would be affected by being asked to register to vote, so it would therefore be valuable to this research to consider their opinions. I chose the upper age limit to be eighteen as I wanted to include the thoughts of eighteen-year-olds who would already be able to vote in an election, in order to see if their opinion on enfranchising sixteen-year-olds differs from those young people who are younger and unable to vote.

I have taken a specific research decision to undertake a mixed-methods research strategy for my primary research and decided to supplement quantitative data gained from an online survey with qualitative data from focus groups in order to explore the depth and meaning behind the findings of the survey. This is the best way to help me get the most valid results as mixed-methods research designs can be used to combine both the strengths of each method and help to overcome the limitations associated with using one method of research (Kelle, 2008; Flick, 2014).

One strength of using a quantitative research approach for this study is that it is easy to measure and will produce objective findings from a targeted sample aimed at a specific cross-section of young people in Kirklees. A limitation is that quantitative research has been criticised

for ignoring or not considering the meaning behind peoples' behaviour (Bryman, 2016), and therefore relying on this method alone will not allow this research to understand the reasons why young people have responded to the questionnaire in the way that they did. Including qualitative research helps to rectify this issue as participants' words, explanations and understandings are heavily emphasised (Henn et al., 2009). However, the approach has been criticised for being too subjective and the results from the studies involved are difficult to replicate (Bryman, 2016). Therefore, the objectivity of numerical data found in quantitative research accounts for this limitation.

By supplementing the quantitative data collected through the survey with in-depth qualitative research undertaken with young people, it provides me with an explanation of the reasons as to why they feel the way that they do, in order to provide more conclusiveness to the research. For example, one element of the online survey seeks to find trends on young people's general interest in politics, and the addition of a focus group provides them with an opportunity to explain the reasons behind their level of interest. Therefore, this makes my study a mixed-methods approach as it combines these two different research methods with the aim of compensating for the weaknesses and utilising the strengths of each, in order to make valid assumptions about the opinions of young people in Kirklees.

### *Quantitative research undertaken*

I chose to undertake quantitative research through the means of an online survey in order to obtain a general overview of the opinions of young people on the subject matter. Quantitative research involves the analysis of quantified numerical data, and "entails a deductive approach to the relationship between theory and research, in which the accent is placed on the testing of theories" (Bryman, 2016, p. 32). By employing a quantitative research method to carry out this study, it enabled me to frame the discussion for the focus groups by establishing the interesting lines of inquiry. Further questions within the survey sought to find general trends on their level of interest in politics, whether they know general political facts such as the name of the Prime Minister, whether they feel they know enough to vote, whether they believe that lowering the voting age would get young people interested in politics, and whether they think certain legal ages of responsibility should be lowered to sixteen too. By measuring this through quantitative methods, I can draw conclusions about the opinions of young people in Kirklees on the research questions.

The online survey was hosted on *Qualtrics* and received a total of 366 responses from young people aged between fourteen and eighteen living in Kirklees. In order to distribute the survey to the target sample, I accompanied Kirklees Council's electoral outreach officer along to local

colleges to help promote voter registration, and whilst there I asked young people to fill in the survey on tablets that we had brought along with us. The survey was also helped to be distributed by the leader of Kirklees Youth Council who promoted it on online and via email to young people in both the age category and local area, and by taking along multiple paper copies of the survey to NCS sessions she was facilitating.

The survey included seven closed-answer questions based on the research questions. It featured a statement at the beginning which explained that the responses were being collected for academic research and the nature of the study their data would be used for. The resulting responses were quantified and analysed using both Qualtrics and Excel to create cross-tabulations and see the results in percentage form, in order to get a picture of the general opinions of young people. One positive with using an online survey for this research is that “by taking a representative sample from a given population and applying a standardised research instrument in the form of a structured questionnaire, surveys enable descriptive and explanatory generalisations to be made about the population in question” (Henn et al., 2009, p. 134).

In the case of my research, the data I have gathered enables me to make generalisations about the opinions of young people in Kirklees on whether they want the voting age to be lowered to sixteen, and their views on politics and rights and responsibilities. Online surveys featuring closed-ended questions are also easy and convenient for the participant to answer, which helps when surveying teenagers on something that may not be of interest to them. Also, they are easy for the researcher to quantify and analyse, as well as being cheap to distribute (Bryman, 2016), which helped me to receive a large amount of responses.

However, a limitation of using an online survey for this research is that it will only tell me the number of young people who feel a certain way, but it will not address the reasons why they hold a certain opinion. The closed-ended questionnaire on its own does not give young people any opportunity to elaborate on these issues and does not allow for myself as the researcher to ensure that the participant fully understands the question being asked (Henn et al., 2009). It is also restricted to those young people who have access to the internet, and it is possible that someone who is out of the intended age bracket could fill in the questionnaire which would put the validity of the results to question (Bryman, 2016). Focus groups are however not subject to these limitations and therefore helped to overcome these issues.

### *Qualitative research undertaken*

I chose to undertake qualitative research through the means of holding five individual focus groups with young people. A focus group is a group interview which stimulates discussion around a topic, allowing participants to provide and build on their own ideas as well as respond to questions asked (Henn et al., 2009). Qualitative research places a focus upon participants' words and the meaning behind them when analysing data, in order to generate theories (Bryman, 2016). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p.3), "qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them". Simply put, qualitative research is used to provide a detailed understanding of participants' perspectives in order to learn about the social world (Ormston et al., 2014).

The focus groups were made up of five individual groups. The first focus group involved eight fifteen-year-old pupils from Thornhill Academy in Dewsbury. The second focus group involved roughly twenty-five fifteen-year-old pupils from Westborough High School in Dewsbury. The third focus group involved two sixteen-year old members of the Kirklees Youth Council. The fourth focus group involved ten seventeen-year-old students from Greenhead College in Huddersfield, and the fifth and final focus group involved over thirty sixteen-year-olds involved in the Huddersfield branch of the National Citizen Service. I also ran a trial run of questions I had prepared during an event called 'NotWestminster' in Huddersfield which involved young people. Their responses to the questions I had prepared helped me to revise the wording of the questions I had prepared in order to avoid any misunderstandings.

In order to recruit participants for the research, I was put in contact with staff from the democracy department of Kirklees Council who work with schools in the local area. It is from here that I was put into contact with headteachers and safeguarding staff from local schools who gave me the opportunity to run hour-long focus groups with a select number of young people, and the department also helped to distribute the online survey via email. In the case of Westborough High School, I was asked to run the focus group with a full class, and in the case of National Citizen Service I was asked to run the focus group as an activity session for a full group of around 30 young people.

Before each focus group, I introduced the topic of lowering the voting age to sixteen. This was either done through a quick power-point presentation if the room made it possible, but sometimes done through reading out the main points of the debate. The information featured a history of the Votes at 16 Campaign and their main points of argument, followed by

arguments in disagreement, followed by examples of countries in which the voting age has already been lowered and moves towards lowering the voting age in England, and finally an explanation of why I needed the opinions of young people in Kirklees, drawing on the recommendation of the Kirklees Democracy Commission to lower the voting age for local elections. This was important as I discovered that only the Kirklees Youth Council had heard of the debate before the focus group, and I of course left out the introductory background information on the debate for this group.

The process of the focus groups followed a semi-structured interview process and took no longer than an hour. The interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone and transcribed afterwards. I had a script of questions I wanted to ask, however I tended to slightly alter the wording of the questions or even omitted some depending on the participants. I wanted to ask the same type of questions to each group in order to see if there would be any difference in interest between groups of different backgrounds.

As my research involved young people, special ethical consideration had to take place. Firstly, young people were made aware that their data was to be recorded as part of a study both through a very simple worded information sheet and through an explanation at the beginning of the focus group. Secondly, I had to ensure that a member of staff who has a DBS certification was present in the room as I myself did not. For those aged under sixteen, a consent form had to be signed by the headteacher or head of safe-guarding instead of the individual participant themselves. However, as the topic was not of a sensitive nature, the young people had no issue with sharing their opinions and got involved with group discussions without needing to withdraw.

Using focus groups accommodates for the limitations associated with using a closed-question online survey on its own by giving the young people space to provide their own take on the subject and elaborate upon it, and to bring into conversation elements of concern that may not have been considered by myself prior to the focus group (Henn et al., 2009). As I was present it allowed for conversation to be prompted, and for key terms to be explained. The use of focus groups for this research also allowed me to be able to observe how young people collectively conceptualise politics, and how their beliefs are presented and develop through group discussion with their peers (Finch et al., 2014).

The use of focus groups also has its limitations in that its findings are largely subjective and cannot be generalised to all because they only represent the opinions and beliefs of those interviewed (Kelle, 2008; Bryman, 2016). There may also be an issue in terms of interviewer effects and bias, resulting in young people responding in a way that they believe is desirable

to the researcher. As well as this is the issue of participants who talk too much, as well as those who do not talk at all (Henn et al., 2009).

These concerns are less likely to be present within a questionnaire. Therefore, by combining these the two research methods and presenting qualitative explanatory findings alongside those drawn from a large quantitative sample, this will account for some of the lack of generalisability, in order to produce a more accurate and representative account of the opinions of young people in Kirklees. Using a targeted sample of young people living in Kirklees aged between fourteen and eighteen and invoking both quantitative and qualitative methods of research in the form of an online survey and focus groups is the best way to meet the aims of this research.

The mixed methods approach I have selected assists me to meet my aims as the online survey can tell me generally whether young people support lowering the voting age; whether they feel confident in their political knowledge; whether they believe lowering the voting age will redress youth political disengagement; and whether young people think that other attendant ages of responsibility should be reconsidered. By conducting focus groups in which young people are interviewed on the topics, I can find out their opinions on these matters, I can also prompt them to give me explanations as to why they think this way. Through undertaking a mixed methods approach, I have avoided certain limitations associated with using one single research method and maximised the strengths of both. Therefore, using this sample, research methods and procedure allows me to uncover the feelings of young people in Kirklees and provided them with an opportunity to share what is important to them, which in turn has informed the conclusions of this research.

## Fieldwork Analysis

### Section 1: Do young people want Votes at 16?

This section will cover young peoples' attitudes towards the idea of the voting being lowered for all elections; the voting age remaining at eighteen for all elections; and the voting age being lowered for local elections but remaining at eighteen for general elections, which is a question that has not generally been explored previously in the literature on lowering the voting age. This section will also discuss the relationship between the age of the participant and attitude towards lowering the voting age, and the relationship between political interest and level of support for lowering the voting age, in order to test whether support increases with age, or if interest has much bearing on support for lowering the voting age.

#### *1.1 Young people who want the voting age to be lowered to sixteen*

Out of the 366 respondents to the survey, 48.8% of young people in Kirklees aged between fourteen and eighteen years-old stated that they wanted the voting age to be lowered to sixteen for all elections. In the focus groups, arguments in support of lowering the voting age focused on the idea of wanting to be in control of their future, and to be able to 'have a say' on things that affect them. This was demonstrated by fifteen-year-olds from Westborough High School when asked to give their reasons for their support for lowering the voting age to sixteen. One raised the idea that policies affect young people. Another said, "we should have a choice as well because it's our future", and another added that "it's going to affect you, so why not be able to vote?". One seventeen-year-old student from Greenhead College argued that "it's our future so we should be the ones deciding it".

One sixteen-year-old at the National Citizen Service (NCS) stated that "the people that are voting aren't going to be here when it's all enforced, which sounds all doom and gloom, but it's my future, why should they decide it?", with another young person adding that "I reckon that the majority of people that voted 'Leave' were sixty-five and over, but they're the people who it's going to least affect, why should they decide our future?". More young people shared this disappointment that they are impacted by political decisions yet are unable to change anything through voting, stating that, "it's our generation that's affected, we should have a say in it". Another emphasised that "policies affect young people, so we should be able to have a say who is making these decisions". One young person from Kirklees Youth Council said that they wanted the voting age to be lowered to sixteen: "because I think that young people need

to have the choice to decide where their own future goes, and not have people who are older decide where your future goes”.

One fifteen-year-old from Thornhill Academy agreed with lowering the voting age as they “don’t think there should be an age to vote”. Another fifteen-year-old from Westborough High School even thought that there should be an upper age limit to voting: “old people shouldn’t be allowed to vote because there should be a certain age where they shouldn’t be allowed to vote, only because they’re old and they’re gonna die soon, so yeah I think it should be more focused on young people other than old because we’re the future”.

These comments demonstrate that a lot of young people are aware of the importance of voting, and seem to have faith in democratic processes, which contrasts with the idea that they are apathetic. Also, these comments show that they know electoral outcomes are largely determined by older voters. Most young people interviewed had not heard of any debate around lowering the voting age prior to the focus groups (except Greenhead College and the Youth Council), but many were keen on the idea of voting. This effect was observed at the focus groups with Westborough High School and the National Citizen Service in particular. Many young people gave further arguments in support of lowering the voting age once questions of maturity, political interest and knowledge, and political education were discussed.

### *1.2 Young people who want the voting age to remain at eighteen for all elections*

22.4% of the young people surveyed opposed lowering the voting age to sixteen for all elections. The initial arguments against showed that some didn’t see a point in lowering it because it’s only a difference of two years, and they don’t see any harm in waiting a bit longer. Another reason was that young people perceived themselves to already have enough stress in their lives to have to worry about voting. One fifteen-year-old from Thornhill Academy opposed the idea, saying “I am fine waiting until I’m eighteen.” A seventeen-year-old from Greenhead College stated “I think it’s better to wait two years. A lot of people change their beliefs after a certain thing happens, I just think more years means more experience with it.” Another sixteen-year old from NCS said “I think just wait until you’re eighteen, you don’t need the pressure at sixteen. Plus, I just don’t see it as a big deal- just wait two years”. A fifteen-year old from Westborough High School noticed that “eighteen is the age for every other thing so it just makes sense to keep it at eighteen”.

One fifteen-year-old from Westborough High School opposed the idea as they thought that you don’t need the stress of voting at sixteen. They said, “you’ve got so much pressure on your shoulders about GCSEs and going to college, so you don’t really think about it [politics],

so we should just keep it at eighteen". This opinion was shared by a sixteen-year-old at the NCS, who said, "at the end of the day we're still going through GCSEs, that's probably one of our biggest concerns right now. At sixth form they had hours and hours of assemblies on getting them to vote and I think that's just wasting time when you need to revise and stuff. People are either gonna vote or they're not", with another commenting that "[I'm] just not that bothered, more important stuff to think about, like college or what time I'm going to go to bed".

Young people who don't support lowering the voting age appear to express less interest in politics and think they are less prepared to vote than those who do. This sentiment was felt the most at the focus group at Thornhill Academy in Dewsbury, who were hard to prompt discussion with most of them as the topic of politics did not interest them. Perhaps this shows that political concepts need to be introduced to young people in a way that relates it to their interests and things they care about, and in a way that engages them so that they can see how decisions impact them. Currently, young people see politics as something which goes on separately from their lives as though it is something they only need to know about once they can vote. Further to this, their suggestion that they have "enough pressure" on their shoulders could mean that sixteen is not necessarily a more appropriate time to introduce voting than eighteen.

The opinion shared by those against lowering the voting age which highlights that sixteen-year-olds currently have enough pressure in their lives has implications for the argument which considers that it may be better to lower the voting age to sixteen as young people are in a period of instability at eighteen, as suggested by the Youth Select Committee (2014). It may be that sixteen is also another period of upheaval, with big events such as revising for and sitting GCSEs and choosing a college dominating the month of May. However, these may be mild excuses for a lack of interest without wanting to admit to a lack of interest or knowledge. As one young person from Westborough High School put it, "I disagree with that, because when you're eighteen you have bigger things than GCSEs to worry about, like rent".

### *1.3 The opinions of young people on the proposition of lowering the voting age to sixteen for local elections but keeping it at eighteen for general elections.*

A third option which offers a 'third way' with regards to the Votes at 16 debate is the idea to lower the voting age to sixteen for local council (and city-region) elections but to keep it at eighteen for Westminster elections. This is the framework that has been discussed by local councils such as Kirklees and Rotherham and is currently in place in both Scotland and Wales, as they do not have the power to lower their voting age for Westminster elections. The survey

data has shown that 28.8% of young people preferred this option. Including this option introduces a local perspective to this debate and provides respondents with a middle ground option which allows for assessment on the level of 'weak' support for lowering the voting age.

When asked this question during the focus groups, opinions were mixed. When young people voiced their support for the idea, they tended to argue that this was the best way to 'start off' lowering the voting age. Young person A from the Youth Council stated that "I think that's what we should start with first of all, because we don't have the right framework in education." Young person B added that it "could increase youth engagement", and that we should "start small" and encourage participation by discussing it in schools. One seventeen-year-old from Greenhead College reluctantly said that "it's a start—if we really can't do it for general elections".

Those who either opposed or didn't see much point in the idea tended to argue "if they can lower it for that one, why not for general elections?" as one fifteen-year old from Westborough High School put it. One seventeen-year-old from Greenhead College opposed this idea, arguing "no, that will make everyone really uninterested [...] I don't want to go to council meetings, that's not what interests sixteen-year-olds. There's no point. It'll bore people out of voting". During the National Citizen Service focus group, one sixteen-year-old opposed the idea as much as they had opposed the idea of full enfranchisement, as "young people aren't going to be bothered." Another sixteen-year-old from the session added, "I don't know what the difference [between local and general elections] is to be fair".

This has implications for the current standing of local politics in the consciousness of young people. Clearly young people do not perceive local politics as having much impact upon their lives. More needs to be done to engage young people with the importance of local democracy, and indeed to educate young people on the differences between and the roles of local and national politics. Perhaps local elections are never going to be as exciting as general elections, as is seen in turnout each year. Despite this, the survey data has demonstrated that there are young people who support this as a 'first step' towards 'Votes at 16'.

However, the outcome of a local election will have a great impact on decisions made for the local community, so it is important that young people are aware of this. Some young people are keen on the idea as a 'starting point', and young person B from the Youth Council felt that it might increase youth engagement, but it is open to question whether their less engaged peers would see this as an exciting opportunity. If 'Votes at 16' is introduced for local elections and nothing is done to improve the current state of general political knowledge then it is unlikely to move beyond this 'starting point', as a totally disengaged young person is unlikely

to bother to vote in a local election, especially if they do not know what constitutes local politics to start off with.

#### 1.4 Explaining support for Votes at 16

| Preference                                       | Interest in politics          |                                    |                                 |                              | Total |
|--|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------|-------|
|  | 'Very' interested in politics | 'Sometimes' interested in politics | 'Rarely' interested in politics | 'Not' interested in politics |       |
| Local elections: 18<br>Westminster elections: 18 | 8.3%                          | 18.7%                              | 22.4%                           | 37.4%                        | 22.4% |
| Local elections: 16<br>Westminster elections: 16 | 73.3%                         | 49.3%                              | 43.4%                           | 36.3%                        | 48.8% |
| Local elections: 16<br>Westminster elections: 18 | 18.3%                         | 32.1%                              | 34.2%                           | 26.4%                        | 28.8% |

*Table 1: Support for Votes at 16 by political interest*

Table 1 shows a link in support for lowering the voting age and young peoples' level of political interest. Of those who report that they are 'very' interested in politics, 73% are in favour of lowering the voting age. Of those who ranked themselves as 'not' interested in politics, 36% supported lowering the voting age. This means that 64% of young people who are uninterested in politics do not want the voting age to be lowered for national elections. This therefore provides evidence that only the politically interested young people are really engaged with the idea of voting at sixteen. This therefore challenges the key position of advocates who state that lowering the voting age will lead to an increase in participation among politically disengaged young people.

| Preference                                       | Age   |       |       |       |       |
|--|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
|  | 14    | 15    | 16    | 17    | 18    |
| Local elections: 18<br>Westminster elections: 18 | 23.7% | 14.3% | 21.3% | 32.1% | 27.8% |
| Local elections: 16<br>Westminster elections: 16 | 41.2% | 65.7% | 49.7% | 42.9% | 55.6% |
| Local elections: 16<br>Westminster elections: 18 | 35.1% | 20%   | 29%   | 25%   | 16.7% |

*Table 2: Age and support for Votes at 16*

Table 2 shows that age does not appear to have much of a bearing on level of support for lowering the voting age. These findings are interesting because it does not display a pattern in support by age. This was also felt at the focus group as support for lowering the voting age seemed to be down to the individual. I had expected sixteen-year-olds to be more supportive of lowering the voting age than eighteen-year-olds, who are already at the age of franchise, however this has proven that just less than half would want it. Fifteen-year-olds are seen to be more supportive however this could be due to the smaller sample.

### *1.5 Conclusions*

The young people who felt passionate about being able to vote at sixteen suggested that they wanted to be able to have a say on things that will affect them. Although those in favour dominated the conversation during each focus group, a majority want to retain eighteen as the minimum voting age for general elections. This noted, a majority also wanted to vote in some elections at the age of sixteen and participate in local elections. It was noteworthy that those who opposed lowering the voting age raised concerns about stress and disruption in their lives at sixteen, highlighting some of the issues that advocates of voting age reform cite as a reason

for youth political disengagement at eighteen. Support for Votes at 16 was found to be clearly linked to high levels of political interest, with those not interested in politics generally opposed to the proposition. This indicates that support for voting age reform is not universal or has equal resonance or importance for all young people.

## **Section 2: Do young people under the age of enfranchisement feel they possess the required political skills, literacy and experience to vote competently in elections?**

### *2.1 Maturity and life experience*

During the focus groups many young people believed that sixteen-year-olds are mature enough and/or have enough life experience to be able to vote. Young people argued that maturity is subjective or pointed out that there were already things in life that sixteen-year-olds are already expected to be mature enough to handle. A fifteen-year-old from Westborough High School argued that “if you can start learning to drive at seventeen, you should be able to vote. I think you are mature enough”, their classmate added “I agree, because if you have to make important decisions about what you wanna do with your life and what subjects you should study, I think you should be able to vote because I think you’re mature enough”. Some seventeen-year-olds at Greenhead College demonstrated a view that a person would be mature enough to vote at this age. One thought, “if you’re mature enough to do all this stuff, like bring a child into the world, you should be able to have a say in what happens [...] as much as there is an argument that a lot of sixteen-year-olds are too immature probably wouldn’t vote, the people who want to see change will vote and it will benefit us”.

At NCS, one sixteen-year-old thought that “if we’re old enough to have kids and get married, we should be able to vote”. A seventeen-year-old helping out said that “some sixteen-year-olds are more mature than eighteen-year-olds, and if they wanted to vote they should be able to. I’m seventeen and I’ve wanted to vote since I was like fourteen. Another explained “I think it’s kind of a difficult one because obviously at sixteen some people aren’t going to be mature enough to vote, but some people are—but the same can be said for people who are eighteen. If you think you are mature enough to vote and want to vote, then you should be able to”. Another added “I don’t get how you wake up on your eighteenth birthday and suddenly you’ve got all these extra views. Sixteen is just an age, it depends on who you are with how mature you are”. One of the sixteen-year-olds felt very strongly about the issue:

“Sixteen-year-olds are smart enough to make their own decisions. We have a lot of strong opinions, we always get painted in a way like we’re immature, but if you added our votes in, we could really change the results of elections and referendums, and I feel like we’re mature enough to vote—we can start driving at seventeen!”.

However, there were also many young people who thought that sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds are not mature enough and/or do not have enough life experience to be able to vote competently. One fifteen-year-old from Thornhill Academy said that, “by [eighteen] we’ll be mature enough, I’m fifteen and I don’t think I’ll be mature enough [to vote] at sixteen”. A fifteen-year-old from Westborough High School thought, “I think that if sixteen-year-olds vote, they don’t exactly know what they’re voting for. Eighteen-year-olds are more mature than them, they know what they’re doing”. Another shared that they don’t have enough life experience as “we’ve only been around for sixteen or seventeen years which compared to say an eighty-five-year-old that’s not really ‘reyt long”. Two sixteen-year-olds from NCS disagreed with lowering the voting age because “they might not have enough life experience”, acknowledging “that’s why older people are against it”.

A few young people also pointed out that maturity is subjective and hard to measure. A fifteen-year-old from Westborough High School said that they were unsure about lowering the voting age as “it’s a bit of a yes and no for me, like not everyone is capable enough of making that decision, and obviously not everyone is mature as well, so it’s kind of a hard one because you should be able to but then you shouldn’t be able to”. During the focus group with members of the Youth Council, young person A suggested that “it’s subjective. It doesn’t come down to life experience, it comes down to political knowledge. You can say you’ve not lived through the time, but you can learn through looking back at the time”. This opinion was shared by students at Greenhead College, one of the seventeen-year-olds said “why do you even need life experience? If you know enough about it then you don’t really need it”. Another said, “if you can revise for your GCSE exams you can revise for a general election, it’s not a life experience thing.” One of them stated that “all you have to do is think: do I agree with that, or do I agree with that? [...] I don’t think it’s to do with life experience”.

Considering these comments, it may be time to reject arguments about maturity as a reason to oppose earlier enfranchisement and focus instead on concepts that can be measured and improved upon such as political knowledge. Most young people felt that they were mature enough to vote, citing examples of how sixteen-year-olds are already assumed mature enough to do things such as raise a child. Some doubted the importance of ‘life experience’ and how that as well as maturity can be defined. However, despite this, issues of maturity remain a concern for those over eighteen.

Valid arguments in opposition come from the young people who feel they themselves would not be mature enough to vote, however this could stem from a lack of confidence in their political knowledge. The arguments from others suggesting the immaturity of their peers have some weight to them from personal experience of some sixteen-year-olds, however they failed to give an example as to why they thought people of this age would be too immature to vote competently.

## 2.2 Political interest

Within the survey, young people were asked to select the statement that best represented their interest in politics. 16.7% of young people described themselves as ‘very’ interested in politics; 36.6% described themselves as ‘sometimes’ interested in politics; 21% described themselves as ‘rarely’ interested in politics; and 25.3% described themselves as ‘not’ interested in politics. There is a relationship between interest in politics and the age of the participant. With the total of those ‘very’ and ‘sometimes’ interested in politics combined, the percentage can be seen to increase with each year of age, and the opposite of course seen for the results of those ‘rarely’ and ‘not’ interested in politics:

| Age                       | 14  | 15    | 16    | 17/18 |
|---------------------------|-----|-------|-------|-------|
| Percentage Interested     | 48% | 48.6% | 54.6% | 63%   |
| Percentage Not Interested | 52% | 51.4% | 45.4% | 37%   |

*Table 3: Combined total of those ‘very’ and ‘sometimes’ interested in politics, and of those ‘rarely’ and ‘not’.*

Considering Table 3, it can be argued that political interest increases with age, which could provide a defence for keeping the voting age at eighteen, where older teenagers can be seen to develop more of an interest. However, the difference between is marginal.

Despite the evidence of political interest increasing with age, the data has shown that 25.3% rank themselves as not interested in politics, compared to 16.7% who say that they are very interested in politics. This view was represented during the focus groups, where young people explained their reasons for lack of interest or shared their views on why their peers are uninterested. At Thornhill Academy, one fifteen-year old stated that they didn’t think “other fifteen and sixteen-year olds are really that interested in it” when whether they would want to

be able to vote at sixteen. When asked why people their age might not be interested in politics, their classmate explained “technology—playing video games and talking to friends rather than being interested in politics”.

At Westborough High School, one fifteen-year-old explained that young people are interested in politics, however not having the power to vote means that they lose interest, saying that “we want our opinions out there but we’re not given a chance because we can’t vote, and it’s not fair so we basically feel discouraged, like oh might as well just sit back and see what happens”. When asked if they would vote at sixteen, one young person added that “you kind of get heartbroken you know when you really want someone to be in power [...] and it kind of discourages you, and you just lose interest in it. Everyone I know votes Labour, but we never get it so there’s no point in voting”. Another young person explained that “Theresa May is full of her own importance, she just doesn’t seem that interested in this country at all” as to why young people are uninterested in politics.

During the focus group with two sixteen-year-old members of Kirklees Youth Council, young person B suggested why young people are distanced from politics:

“Only a minority of young people understand the opportunities available to them. We must ensure that more young people are first off aware of the democratic opportunities available. The government aren’t offering anything for young people so there’s no point in us even following politics”.

At Greenhead College, all the seventeen-year-olds interviewed shared an interest in politics. When asked for reasons why they thought their peers might be uninterested in politics, one young person suggested that “people don’t think it applies to them, when you’re a lot younger you’re not in control of much”. Another said, “I think that a lot of people look at politics cynically, they hate every politician because it doesn’t make any difference anyway, but if they learn to be more positive a lot of people would be interested”. Another added that “people think it’s either boring or just too bureaucratic, or they think it’s too much of a sensitive area, too controversial to discuss”.

At the NCS focus group, the sixteen-year-olds’ explanations for their lack of interest spanned from “I don’t give a crap about politics or anything”, to “it’s just not interesting”, to “what are we going to change through voting?”. One young person said, “When we hear people talking about politics its boring and they’re just in a massive room talking, they don’t encourage fun things to get young people into politics”, with their friend adding that “it’s just a load of posh people”. Another young person added that:

“I basically think that the whole stereotype of sixteen-year-olds not being into politics is because we’re not really *in* politics, and because we don’t have a chance to vote, we’re not interested, because what are we going to do? People usually vote because they think they’re going to get something out of it, and because we can’t really do anything with the knowledge right now then there’s not much point learning about it until we get a vote at 18”.

Finally, another young person explained that “it just doesn’t get spoken about until a certain age, for us we’re only really just starting to hear and talk about it, it’s not really something we’ve been thinking about, it’s just something that’s always been there”.

There were a few young people who expressed a personal interest in politics. At Thornhill Academy, one fifteen-year-old did not contribute much during the session however approached me afterwards to tell me about issues that mattered to her. At Westborough High School, Greenhead College and NCS, young people expressed their interest in politics through wanting to learn about politics, and to be able to vote at sixteen in order to have say in ‘their future’. They also understood the rationale behind the debate, despite having not heard of the topic before the focus group.

At the focus group at NCS, one young person brought up the issue of how under eighteens get paid less than adults for doing the same work, demonstrating awareness of a political decision that affects young people. When one person in the group said that they didn’t “give a crap about politics”, another responded saying “you should give a crap because it affects your whole life”.

At Greenhead College and with the two members of the Kirklees Youth Council, a much higher level of political interest was seen. These were the only two focus groups in which participants reported supporting a political party, with one seventeen-year-old student from Greenhead adding that they were a “massive Labour supporter”. When asked why young people might be uninterested in politics, one of the seventeen-year-olds said, “I don’t think anyone would be uninterested, just uninformed”. Another of the seventeen-year-olds explained that their political interest came from seeing posts from Momentum on social media:

“I think Jeremy Corbyn has done a lot for young people knowing about it because he has reached out on social media. I think that was the first time that I’d really seen or heard—of course I knew about politics and voting, and you know the names of the parties, but actually seeing real stuff, like policies and all of that was through reaching out on social media”.

Young person A from Kirklees Youth Council explained that “sixteen-year-olds aren’t as naïve and uneducated as people think we are, there are sixteen-year-olds out there who are really interested in and passionate about politics and want to have an influence on how the country’s being run”.

Political interest is observed to increase with age (Table 3). There was a difference in attitude between the fifteen-year-olds at Thornhill Academy and the seventeen-year-olds at Greenhead College, however this could be because the young people at Thornhill Academy are more likely to have come from a disadvantaged background than those at Greenhead College. It could well be that young people attending this college are more likely to be exposed to political discussions in and outside of the classroom.

The explanations presented by young people tended to relate to two themes. The first theme was that some young people expressed a total uninterest in politics. The second theme was that young people are uninterested in politics because they feel discouraged from participating or are disheartened by it all. This opinion was shared by some fifteen-year-olds from Westborough High School who either explained that they felt discouraged from following politics because they can’t vote, that they lose interest when the election result is not what they hoped for, or due to a lack of faith in politicians, as found by Henn and Foard (2014).

Those who showed their interest did so through getting involved in the debate and placed an importance on taking an interest in voting for “our future”. They explained that their interest and awareness came from seeing posts on social media or suggested that young people who are uninterested are just uninformed on politics, highlighting the importance of education.

### *2.3 Knowledge of politics*

The survey data has found that 93.7% knew the name of the Prime Minister, 65.8% knew which political party was currently in government at Westminster, 44.2% knew the name of their local Member of Parliament, and 21.7% said that they knew the name of their local councillor. Only 48.1% felt that they knew enough about politics to vote, and therefore over half of the young people surveyed would not feel confident enough in their political knowledge to vote, putting them at risk of not voting. 76.2% of young people knew how and where we vote in elections, and 49.3% knew how to register to vote. By getting a feel for young people’s general political knowledge it allows for understanding whether young people are completely out of touch with politics or whether they are taking notice.

At the focus group with Kirklees Youth Council, when asked if they would feel confident enough in their knowledge of politics to vote, young person A responded “yes, definitely”, and young person B acknowledged “but we’re just a minority of all young people”, but pointed out that “some sixteen-year-olds know more than fifty-year-olds”. At Greenhead College, one seventeen-year-old said: “I think I know enough about politics to vote. I study Government and Politics and my mum’s interested in politics, so we discuss it a lot”. Another person suggested “I don’t think there’s a lot of difference between a sixteen-year-old being informed as much as an eighteen-year-old who is informed”. One seventeen-year-old said, “I feel like I know a lot more about politics than a lot of my family [...] my brother is eighteen and he couldn’t tell me anything about politics, but I know enough to make a well-informed vote”. Another thought that it is wrong to withhold the right to vote from sixteen-year-olds based on a lack of political knowledge:

“You can still be an adult and know nothing about politics and still vote. So, I think it doesn’t really matter in a way. If you’re gonna be concerned about whether people know enough about politics to vote, don’t just consider sixteen-year-olds, if you’re going to really be that pedantic do a test or something. I think you can’t use that argument against sixteen-year-olds but not for over-eighteen-year-olds”.

At NCS, one sixteen-year-old thought that “some sixteen-year-olds know more about the world than older people because of social media, we should get a say what happens in our future. Just because we’re not there yet doesn’t mean we don’t know”, and another added that “over-eighteens can be thick as well”.

However, some young people were concerned that sixteen and seventeen-year-olds don’t know enough about politics to vote. At Thornhill Academy, one fifteen-year-old said that they “just don’t know enough about politics right now”. When asked if anyone talks about politics or about news stories with their parents, everybody said that they did not. When I asked if anyone supported a political party, I was asked to explain what a political party was, and when I did, they responded that they did not.

At Westborough High School, one fifteen-year-old disagreed with lowering the voting age, as they believed that “not many kids nowadays know much about politics to wanna vote”. When asked if sixteen and seventeen-year olds know enough about politics to vote, one of the fifteen-year-olds responded with “not really, because if you think about it we’re not spoke to about politics, like the older generation seem to think oh they don’t know anything about it, so they don’t need to know anything about it so we’ll just leave them to it”. Another thought that “even if there is like a small percentage of sixteen- to seventeen-year-olds that know a lot about politics it’s not enough to change things”.

At NCS, one sixteen-year-old said, "I don't have a clue about politics. I didn't even know who the prime minister was. The news isn't interesting, there's too many big words". When asked if they felt like they knew enough about politics to vote, most of the responses were "no", and the best was "sort of". One explained that "you should be able to vote because it's our future, but, people like myself, I don't know enough to vote". Some disagreed with lowering the voting age because "I just don't have enough interest in it, I just don't know anything about it to start with", and one stated, "I don't think most teenagers understand the complexities of politics enough to vote, they don't understand what votes actually mean, like leaving the EU".

In terms of the general political knowledge shown by young people who responded to the survey, it is reassuring to find that 93.7% know the name of the Prime Minister. However, the percentage drops to 65.8% when asked if they know which political party is currently in government, and even further down to 44.2% who know the name of their local MP. Worryingly, only 48.1% of the young people surveyed feel that they know enough about politics to vote.

There are young people who feel confident in their knowledge of politics. The group that showed the most confidence were the two sixteen-year-old members of the Youth Council, however they acknowledged that they are a minority of all young people. Most of the seventeen-year-olds from Greenhead College felt that they knew enough about politics to vote, with some arguing that there is a lack of political knowledge amongst over-eighteens as well, an argument which was also shared at NCS. Despite this, the overwhelming attitude amongst most of the young people interviewed was that they didn't know enough about politics. This was prevalent at the focus groups with Thornhill Academy, Westborough High School and at NCS especially. One fifteen-year-old at Westborough High School explained that adults do not tend to discuss politics with young people.

#### *2.4 Level of satisfaction with political education*

Just 40.9% of young people surveyed felt that they had enough opportunities either at school, at home, or in their community to learn about politics. This demonstrates that young people do not feel that they have adequate opportunity to learn about politics and importantly, that they want to learn. Most young people discussed in the focus groups that firstly, there aren't enough or any opportunities to learn about politics in school, and secondly, that they would like to have some form of political education within schooltime. Many young people suggested these ideas before the topic of political education came up in the conversation. When asked if there were any things that need to be considered before lowering the voting age, one fifteen-

year-old from Thornhill Academy thought that we needed “better political education, so you feel more well informed”, and when asked about whether they get to learn much about politics in school, there was a resounding “nope”.

At Westborough High School, one fifteen-year-old suggested “I think that maybe in schools they should talk more about [politics] to us because obviously then we’re going to be around longer to see what the EU turns out like, and it’s not fair us not getting a choice”. When asked how we could address the issue of sixteen and seventeen-year-olds not knowing enough about politics, “I think they need to start putting it more in schools so like at the beginning of the day, we should learn a bit more about politics during our school time”.

When I did ask about political education, they brought up their PSHE (Personal, Social, and Health Education) lessons. Many expressed an annoyance that they didn’t learn “anything” about politics, and that they wanted more opportunities to learn about it. One fifteen-year-old added that it was “somewhere to mess about”, and that “we need one lesson a week to learn about politics”. When asked if there were any things that needed to be considered before lowering the voting age to sixteen, one pupil suggested that we need “more political education” before lowering the voting age.

At Greenhead College, one of the seventeen-year-olds stated, “we aren’t taught about politics so how are you supposed to know if no-one teaches you?”. Another added that “you’re not taught about politics until you ask to be taught about politics”, and another explained that “if you’re not interested you won’t vote. We don’t get taught about it in schools”. Again, these opinions arose before I had asked about political education. When the topic of political education came up, and I asked whether they learnt about politics at school, one responded “absolutely not”. One of the seventeen-year-olds said, “we did a mock EU referendum in school, but that’s it”.

One of the seventeen-year-olds explained, “I feel like in secondary school I didn’t even know what politics was, you just know about this thing called the government and stuff like that, but not really anything else”. When asked if there was anything that needs to be considered before lowering the voting age, one suggested “the availability of education on politics”, and another suggested that along with this, “we need education on bias and what bias is”. Lastly, one suggested that even “if we keep it at eighteen, we need more information on how politics and government works”.

Young person B from Kirklees Youth Council explained that lowering the voting age has “always been considered as a solution to youth disengagement, however it will only be successful with the appropriate framework, and this is where political education comes in. Political education is required *first*”. When asked if sixteen and seventeen-year-olds know

enough about politics to vote, young person A responded, “generally no, we need better political education in schools and more opportunities to get involved in democracy”. Young person B explained, “I had to do my research myself, in school I’ve had no political education whatsoever”. Young person A thought that “people need to be taught about the lowest levels of politics, how it all works, because if you went out and asked a sixteen-year-old what the four biggest parties are they’d only be able to tell you Labour and Conservatives at best”.

During the focus group at NCS, when asked why they disagreed with lowering the voting age, one sixteen-year-old responded that “we haven’t been taught about it in school, we need to be taught about it. In PSHE [they] just talk about drugs and that, we don’t learn about politics”. In response to the same question, another sixteen-year-old added that:

“We don’t get taught about it, they would just expect us to know what we’re voting for. We need to be taught about it. Generally, we’re not interested right now because we haven’t been taught about it. I think it would be good to have a bit of political education”.

Many shared that they wanted to learn about it in schools, with one explaining that “we should learn more about it because it’s useful knowledge”. However, one young person did shout “no”, and when asked why they wouldn’t want it, they responded “it’s boring”. When asked how they should be taught about it in schools, one sixteen-year-old said it should be done by “giving us an unbiased overview of parties and main policies and what they mean, break it down for us”. Another sixteen-year-old thought it shouldn’t be done in class, saying “instead of a lesson, have an assembly—show us how to research”, and another suggested that schools should do more educational trips. Lastly, one sixteen-year-old thought that learning about politics would increase their knowledge and therefore their interest, “I’m not interested simply because I haven’t learned about it. So, when they talk about it, I don’t know anything, so I just don’t bother following it. If I learned about it then I would”.

Young people either favoured learning through having one lesson a week to learn about politics, or some preferred to be taught analytical skills such as to be taught how to research themselves or to be shown how to identify bias in articles they may come across. Many shared that they do not learn about politics during PSHE, which has replaced Citizenship education. As argued by young person B from the Youth Council, political education is required first if the voting age is to be reduced as a response to youth disengagement. This is evidenced by the opinion of those who said that they would be interested in politics if they had an opportunity to be taught about how it all works.

## *2.5 Conclusions*

It is difficult to definitively assert that young people do or do not possess the maturity and life experience necessary to vote competently in an election, as some individuals will mature faster than others. Many in the focus groups shared that they felt mature enough to vote. Some highlighted that life experience is not necessary as you can learn from the past. A few felt that they would not be mature enough, and many acknowledged that their peers might not. However, those who disagreed did not provide much explanation as to why they felt that they would not be mature enough to vote competently. For this reason, maturity should not be a criterion to which to judge whether the voting age should be lowered. Young people are bound to doubt themselves and their rationality on the subject when they are told that they are immature, as they have no reference to what it is like to think as an 'adult'. Therefore, consideration of the political skills, literacy and experience of young people should only be done with reference to their reported levels of political interest and knowledge.

In terms of young people's levels of political interest, many young people have reported being uninterested in politics. Within the focus groups, the two main reasons for their disengagement were a total disinterest in politics and feelings of disenchantment. There are many young people who are involved in their local community such as in the Youth Council, who have a deep interest in politics. There are also those who have never heard of the Youth Council. Political interest can be seen to increase with age, and this could be due to exposure to more political conversations.

Young people do not feel that they know enough about politics to vote competently in an election. This opinion was shared in the focus groups, with a minority surveyed feeling that they knew enough about politics to vote. Closely related to knowledge is their level of satisfaction with political education. Young people did not feel that they have enough opportunities to learn about politics either at school, at home, or in their community. Young people consistently said that they need to be taught about how government works and have expressed that if they learned about politics this would encourage them to follow it. Currently, a majority of young people surveyed under the age of enfranchisement felt they did not possess the required political skills, literacy and experience to vote competently in an election. Despite this, there are many young people who feel that they do, and this is not reason to prevent them from doing so. Even if the voting age is to remain at eighteen, it would be wise to provide a political education, to ensure that everyone realises the importance of their right to vote.

### Section 3: Voting Age Reform, Democratic Engagement, and Transitions to Adulthood

This section will firstly lay out young peoples’ opinions on whether lowering the voting age would get young people engaged with politics and will also explore whether young people would vote if given the opportunity. It will then consider whether young people think that other ages of responsibility which accompany youth transitions to adulthood should be lowered. It will explore young peoples’ attitudes towards the minimum ages of personal, social, and political rights, in order to find out their opinions on whether these should change along with the voting age. It will also discuss whether young people feel lowering the voting age is appropriate as they must now remain in some form of statutory education until they are eighteen.

#### 3.1: Could lowering the voting age to sixteen get young people engaged with politics?

|  | Could lowering the voting age get young people interested in politics? |       |
|--|--|-------|
|  | Yes  | No    |
| Keep both at 18                                  | 42.9%  | 57.1% |
| Lower both to 16                                 | 94.8%  | 5.2%  |
| Local elections: 16<br>Westminster elections: 18 | 82.4%  | 17.7% |

*Table 4: Support for Votes at 16 and views on youth disengagement*

Table 4 shows that young people in Kirklees who support lowering the voting age for local and general elections think that it could get young people interested in politics. The opinion of those who would prefer it to remain at eighteen is more even, however a slight majority think that it would not get young people interested in politics. 79.7% of those surveyed believed that lowering the voting age could get young people interested in politics. 67.3% reported that they would vote in their local council elections if the voting age was lowered, and 66.7% said that they would vote in a general election if they were given the opportunity.

At Westborough High School, lots of the fifteen-year-olds agreed, and one thought it would “definitely” get young people interested. One fifteen-year-old explained that “I think it would

because it's giving you responsibility. It makes you feel more of an adult, because you're changing something". Another believed that if the voting age was lowered and they were able to vote, they "would become mature in order to get the information". The idea that a young person would educate themselves in order to vote, therefore engaging with politics was shared by a seventeen-year-old from Greenhead College who when asked if they knew enough about politics to vote, responded by saying:

"I think I probably don't know enough as of yet, but if I was given the opportunity to vote I would take it a lot more seriously. Just because I don't have to think about it now I probably don't, but if I had the opportunity to make a decision that would affect my future, then I would look at it and really consider my decision and I think a lot of people would if they were given the opportunity".

Young person B from Kirklees Youth Council said that "there's an outlook on sixteen-year-olds now that is responsible, and there's a lot that would want to vote". Highlighting that many sixteen and seventeen-year-olds would go out and vote if given the chance. This individual also felt that 'starting small' and lowering the voting age for local elections first would increase youth engagement.

At NCS, one sixteen-year-old agreed with lowering the voting age because "it will make us get engaged with it", another suggested the same by saying, "it might get more sixteen-year-olds interested in politics, it can only be good for us". When discussing the reasons why young people are uninterested in politics, one participant explained that "unless you lower the age, we're not going to want to do anything about it". Others felt the same about lowering the voting age to attract the attention of young people, stating "[it] would make people more interested because it gives them a reason to research", and "if we had a chance to vote, maybe more of us would be interested in politics".

20.28% of those surveyed did not think that lowering the voting age would get more young people interested in politics and voting. During the focus groups, some objected to lowering the voting age on the basis that it alone wouldn't be enough to interest young people. This opinion was shared at the NCS focus group. One sixteen-year-old thought that there wouldn't be enough sixteen-year-olds who would be bothered about voting. Their friend added to this, "to elaborate on that, most of us don't even care, so there's not enough of us to justify it". Another stated that "if we were given the chance to vote, not many would do it anyway".

Therefore, young people tend to believe that lowering the voting age to sixteen will help to interest young people in politics. More than half of young people showed their intent to vote in either a local or general election, and curiously slightly more said they would only vote in their local elections. There seems to be a consensus that a person would inform themselves once

they are able to vote, however the current state of turnout amongst eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds may prove this assumption to be idealistic.

### *3.2: Where do young people think that the ages of responsibility which accompany youth transitions to adulthood should be set?*

This section will consider the opinions of young people on whether sixteen-year-olds how the rights and responsibilities associated with youth transitions to adult citizenship are understood within the context of voting age reform. 39% of young people thought that sixteen-year-olds should be able to purchase alcohol, and 34% thought they should be allowed to purchase fireworks. Young people tended to believe that eighteen was the correct age to be able to purchase these items, as they felt that this law was in place to keep them safe, and Young person A from Kirklees Youth Council stated that “the voting age and those things are completely separate issues. They should remain at eighteen”.

In terms of being able to drive a car, the general attitude was that young people were not concerned whether it is reduced from seventeen to sixteen, as it would only be a year’s difference, however 60% of young people surveyed thought that sixteen-year olds should be able to drive. For age ratings on films and video games, 62% of those surveyed thought that sixteen-year-olds should be able to purchase games and films that are restricted to eighteen-year-olds. Young people noticed that could be a contradiction in being deemed mature enough to vote but too young to watch certain films. However, a young person from NCS even pointed to a bigger contradiction that exists currently in that sixteen-year olds can sign up for the army, but they cannot play or purchase a Call of Duty game which simulates being in battle.

In terms of whether the age of candidacy should be lowered to eighteen only 36% of young people think that a sixteen-year-old should be able to stand for election as a councillor, and 21% thought they should be able to stand as an MP. They would prefer the age of candidacy to remain at eighteen, even if the voting age is lowered. One focus group that rejected this totally was Greenhead College, who argued that a sixteen-year-old would not be electable and would not be experienced enough to do the job. One sixteen-year-old from the NCS suggested that “they would have a greater knowledge of young people’s issues, and what young people are thinking”, however they were in the minority.

In discussing whether sixteen-year-olds should be able to be called for jury service, though some of the younger participants from Thornhill and Westborough felt that teenagers knew right from wrong, the older seventeen-year-olds from Greenhead College opposed this and argued that they would be too young to deal with disturbing or complicated cases, as “some

eighteen-year-olds couldn't do that, and they're expected to". Only 30% of young people surveyed thought that sixteen-year-olds should be called to serve on a jury if the voting age was lowered.

When discussing the issue of the raising of the school leaving age in England and how this might affect arguments for lowering the voting age came into discussion, young people felt that this should be irrelevant to considerations. However, one fifteen-year-old thought that this would be a barrier to a reduction in the age of candidacy. Young people used this opportunity to state that they want political education in school. One seventeen-year-old from Greenhead College stated that "if we were educated on politics and left at sixteen, people would be ready to vote. But we're not educated on politics at all – I think it's quite unfair that we don't know what's going on".

### 3.3: Conclusion

A significant majority of young people thought that lowering the voting age would help to improve youth disengagement. They believed that gaining the right to vote would motivate them to inform themselves and get involved. Some young people however objected to lowering the voting age on the basis that young people do not care, and therefore would not vote. Despite this, the research indicated that young people thought that lowering the voting age would get themselves and their peers interested. However, it is open to question whether this effect would be sustained once voting at sixteen became a normality.

In terms of how young people conceptualise rights and responsibilities that are connected to voting and the transition to adulthood, most young people prefer these to remain at eighteen, despite being quite supportive of lowering the voting age during the focus groups. The consensus was that a sixteen-year-old would be far too young to do these things efficiently. Most importantly, young people did not see a connection between these wider rights and being able to vote.

## Discussion

Three central themes have been uncovered during this research involving young people aged between fourteen and eighteen in Kirklees:

- Support for lowering the voting age amongst young people is not as strong as is suggested by its proponents.
- Young people feel that they need more opportunities to learn about politics, especially at the local level.
- Young people think that other legal ages should remain at eighteen and do not see the correlation between other rights and responsibilities and voting.

Less than half of the young people surveyed were in favour of the universal lowering of the voting age for all elections. Slightly over half of the young people surveyed would prefer the voting age for general elections to remain at eighteen, however some would still like 'Votes at 16' in some capacity. During the focus groups, one of the reasons why young people opposed the idea was because they perceived there to be too much stress going on in their lives aged sixteen to be able to vote. Despite it being the least interested participants reporting this reason for being against a reduction in the voting age, as it was mentioned so frequently it should be recognised as a concern of young people. It demonstrates that sixteen can also be a time of uncertainty, which contrasts with the Youth Select Committee's view that young people would be more prepared to vote at sixteen as there is less upheaval at this age (BYC, 2014).

Another reason to keep the voting age at eighteen shared was that some young people felt that it would be better to wait for two years, with some arguing that this gives young people more time to develop an understanding of politics. There is some weight to this as political interest can be seen to increase with age. Despite there being less support for lowering the voting age than anticipated, throughout the focus groups the general feeling was that young people were intrigued by the topic. Many of the vocal participants showed excitement in discussion towards the idea of being able to vote, with most referencing having the power to have a say in their futures as their reason for supporting it and demonstrated an awareness that older voters turn out in the highest numbers, meaning that decisions are largely decided by them and expressed dissatisfaction about not being able to vote for parties with policies that support the needs of young people.

There is a link between a respondent's reported level of political interest and their support for lowering the voting age. Of those that ranked themselves as 'very' interested in politics, 73% were in favour of lowering the voting age to sixteen, in comparison to 8% who wanted it to

remain at eighteen. For those who ranked themselves as 'not' interested in politics, 36% were in support of lowering the voting age, meaning that 64% of those respondents who are not interested in politics oppose lowering the voting age for national elections. This could suggest that 'Votes at 16' is for the most politically engaged young people, namely those who are involved in Youth Councils and the Youth Parliament. My research supports Mycock's (2015) observation that Scottish young people are more politically minded than their English could be used here to demonstrate that many English people who are not interested will not turn up to vote. Therefore, the results of the Scottish General Election may not be applicable to the English situation, as it is just a few who would rank themselves as interested, compared to such a politically minded group.

Though this is not necessarily a problem as those who want to vote should be able, but it could have implications for the theory suggested by campaigners that lowering the voting age could significantly help to address issues of youth disengagement. If politics remains peripheral in the English school curriculum, it is likely that only interested young people will go out and vote as they are the most confident in their knowledge of politics. Most young people do not feel the same level of confidence, as is evidenced by the young people who shared within the focus groups that they would not know who to vote for and therefore would not vote. This was seen in Norway where political interest and participation did not rise after trialling a voting age of sixteen (Bergh, 2013). However, 79.7% of young people surveyed believed that lowering the voting age could get young people interested in politics. This is consistent with Eichhorn's findings which showed that lowering the voting age in Scotland increased young people's levels of political engagement (Eichhorn, 2018). Those interviewed in the focus groups had faith in the idea that they and many of their peers would educate themselves through research.

A few believed that lowering the voting age for local elections would be a good 'starting point' to help get young people engaged, with the goal of building up towards being able to vote at sixteen nationally. The survey data showed that roughly 29% of young people would prefer this, however one participant at Greenhead College thought that this might bore young people rather than inspire them. One young person at NCS commented that they did not know the difference between local and general elections. The attitude that local elections were less salient than general elections was felt throughout the focus groups, and perhaps some young peoples' support for lowering the voting age for local elections rather than general elections stems from this opinion.

The findings of this research therefore stand in contrast with the assumption that being able to vote at sixteen is something that young people in Kirklees want. Despite this, the assumption by the commissions reviewed that it could help young people to get interested in

politics (Power Inquiry, 2006; BYC, 2014), has been reiterated by both the survey data and through opinions presented in the focus groups. The data also demonstrates the same findings as the YCC who found that the opinions of young people were very even on the subject, highlighting that not all that much has changed in ten years, as only slightly less than half of the young people this research surveyed wanted the voting age to be lowered for all elections.

Young people need more opportunities to learn about politics as the local level as well as national. Young people do not feel confident in their knowledge of politics. 48.1% feel that they would know enough to vote, and only 40.9% believe that they have enough opportunities to learn about politics. In the interviews, they reported that they want to be able to learn either through having one lesson a week to learn about politics such as a Politics GCSE, by having assemblies on how to research, or through educational school trips. Even before the topic of political education was raised in the focus groups, young people consistently suggested it as something that they think is imperative to improving the level of disengagement seen amongst young people.

Further to this there is a need to improve young people's knowledge of local politics as well as national politics, especially if the voting age is lowered for local council elections. The little amount of political education received (if any) is generally framed towards national politics, meaning that young people can form negative conclusions about local politics not mattering, and seen at the NCS focus group they may not know the difference between a local and a general election. The issues that are highlighted in the literature around young peoples' lack of knowledge on politics have been found through this research to be magnified even more at the local level, as many young people are unclear on what local politics is and indeed does.

Despite not feeling confident in their knowledge of politics, most young people are not apathetic. They want to be able to learn more in order to have a say in their future, and even those who said they were not interested at the start of the focus groups still had things to say on the subject. They showed an awareness of the fact that if they cannot or do not vote, their needs are less likely to be represented in politics. Social media was also identified to be an encourager in terms of informing and engaging young people, as some reported seeing posts from the Labour Party online, confirming the observations of Fletcher (2017) on the subject of 2017's 'youthquake'.

Many however do not trust politicians and have a negative image of politics as something that is too complex for them to be able to comprehend, confirming the conclusions of Mycock and Tonge (2012) and Henn and Foard (2014). This does not show complete disinterest as they are showing an awareness even if it is cynical. However, some completely switch off when it comes to political discussions, and some even feel that the news has "too many big words".

As there are young people who feel that the news is too complicated to understand, politics is evidently framed in a way that excludes young people. One sixteen-year-old from NCS felt that politicians and institutions need to encourage fun ways to get young people into politics. However, one could argue that it is going to be very difficult to introduce topics such as Brexit and controversies around universal credit in a way that is going to be fun for young people.

They have explained that the overriding reason for their lack of knowledge is down to a lack of political education, and linked to this is the fact that many believe that they are not spoken to about politics until they reach eighteen, by which time they are expected to know it all, enough to be able to cast an informed vote. Very few young people expressed support for a political party, and some asked for clarification on what a political party was, to which they said they did not support one. This upholds the analysis that the declining role of social group identification has left young people with little reference on who to vote for and to support (Phelps, 2012).

The core of this argument, one that was suggested by one of the participants from Kirklees Youth Council, is that political education is required first before lowering the voting age for all elections, as we do not have the right framework in education to prepare young people to be able to vote. This supports the view of the YCC (2009b). It is the best way that the government can ensure that more young people will have the tools to develop an interest and an awareness of current affairs, and therefore be able to follow the news with its “big words” and be more likely to vote. Reducing the voting age without bringing in a framework in education could risk leaving unengaged young people behind.

Young people think that other legal ages should remain at eighteen even if the voting age is lowered, and do not see the correlation between being able to vote and other rights and responsibilities. The young people interviewed believed the legal ages of certain rights and responsibilities discussed were not relevant to discussions around lowering the voting age. In the case of personal rights such as how old you should be to drink, smoke, or purchase fireworks, young people felt that this age should remain at eighteen as the law is there to keep them safe. They however shared that the fact that sixteen-year-olds cannot purchase alcohol, cigarettes and fireworks does not delegitimise the campaign for lowering the voting age, and many believed that it was irrelevant. This supports the Youth Select Committee’s idea that too much is made of the point that eighteen-year olds cannot buy these items, and that being able to vote at sixteen would not be out of place with these other rights (BYC, 2014).

For other personal legal ages such as how old you should be to be able to drive, 60% of those surveyed thought that sixteen-year-olds should be able to drive. In the focus groups, most of the participants were less enthused about the idea of taking it down by a year. When

questioned about their opinions on the current standing of age ratings on media such as films and video games if the voting age is lowered, young people felt that it may be a contradiction that they would be able to vote at sixteen, and able to join the army at sixteen, but not able to play certain video games or watch certain films. When surveyed, 62% of young people felt that sixteen years-old should be at least the upper limit on age restrictions.

The most opposition was felt when discussing political ages of responsibility such as being able to stand as a candidate, serving on a jury, and leaving school at eighteen. Those who voiced support for lowering the voting age to sixteen did not support the age of candidacy being reduced to sixteen too, and only 21% of those surveyed thought that a sixteen-year old should be able to stand for election as an MP. The reasons young people gave rested on the idea that they would be too young to do the job competently, that nobody would vote for them, and one young person gave the reason that you would have to remain in education until you are eighteen. This contrasts with the recommendation from The Power Commission (2006) that the age of candidacy should be lowered to eighteen in order to improve youth disengagement (Power Inquiry, 2006).

What has not been anticipated by the Votes at 16 Campaign's argument is the barrier to the reduction in the age of voting and candidacy brought by the extension of compulsory education. It would make it near impossible for a sixteen-year-old to stand for election. Currently, young people can work from sixteen through an apprenticeship, or can work in some jobs if they pursue part time education alongside it. Being a Member of Parliament would not be feasible along these terms. However, their argument that sixteen-year-olds already face a range of adult rights and responsibilities was confirmed during the focus groups as some young people suggested that it is inconsistent that a person is considered mature enough to raise a child, but too immature to vote.

Young people do not conceptualise voting as being tied in alongside a process of rights and responsibilities which are accrued over time during a young person's transition to adulthood, however it is inherently informed by conceptions of adulthood and maturity. Most ages of responsibility are set at eighteen, informed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that an individual is legally a child up until the age of eighteen (Denver, 2013). There is currently a gap in political studies literature regarding transitions to adulthood and the rights and responsibilities associated with it.

Therefore, the findings of this research support a call for lowering the voting age, as there is a significant proportion of young people in Kirklees who would want it in some form and believe that it would get themselves and others interested in politics. However, it may be better to reduce the voting age only after a quality framework in education has been introduced and

has had time to make an impact. As suggested by young people, this could prove to be an effective way to help them to develop a knowledge of and interest in politics.

## Conclusion

Through reviewing the literature, this research has found that lowering the voting age has been consistently suggested as a way to redress youth disengagement. This research has uncovered that young people in Kirklees marginally favour the voting age remaining at eighteen for general elections at least. However, nearly half of those surveyed would like the voting age universally lowered to sixteen. Interestingly, a just under a third of those polled would like the lowering of the voting age for local and city-region elections – something which has not been noted in debates about 'Votes at 16'. Further to this it has also uncovered that a majority of young people in Kirklees believe that lowering the voting age to sixteen would get young people interested, as they believe that it would inspire them to research in order to be able to vote, confirming these suggestions from the literature.

By analysing young people's attitudes, this research has distinguished that young people believe that there needs to be political education in place before lowering the voting age in England, as young people do not feel confident in their political knowledge and would not know who to vote for. Some young people are unaware of the distinction between local and national politics, which therefore would not prepare or engage them if the decision was made to lower the voting age for local elections. As there has been no research undertaken regarding voting age reform and local government, this has contributed to current knowledge by highlighting this need for education on local politics.

This research has also investigated into young people's attitudes towards various rights and responsibilities, which has received little attention in literature. It has uncovered that young people do not see a connection between voting and these other rights and responsibilities, and how they may affect each other. Most young people wanted these legal ages to remain at eighteen, even if they supported lowering the voting age to sixteen, and especially opposed reducing the age of candidacy to sixteen.

The key value of this study has been its bottom-up approach to the 'Votes at 16' debate by uncovering the opinions of young people of differing attitudes and backgrounds through both qualitative and quantitative research. The study surveyed a unique sample of fourteen to eighteen-year olds and is unique in its local politics aspect which is largely neglected in the literature. Through incorporating this aspect into the research, it allowed an issue to arise in how young people currently conceive local politics, allowing myself to formulate a conclusion on how young people need to be taught about local politics as well as national politics through education.

The focus group research conducted faced a few minor issues. There was the potential for bias as although the topic was presented as impartially as possible, the topic was on 'Votes at 16', therefore participants may have answered in a way that they thought the researcher wanted to hear. However, many young people still provided arguments in opposition so this concern may not be justified. In the first focus group with Thornhill Academy, I found that many of my questions invited a one-word answer and it was sometimes difficult to get explanations out of the participants as to why they felt that way, which meant I had to rethink how I asked the questions in future.

There were some young people who did not contribute very often as they may have not wanted to talk in front of the group. I found that often the same people would answer first, and I would have to try and prompt others to get their thoughts. I wondered if some were worried about getting shut down by other members of the group who had different opinions. Despite this, I received a breadth of information which highlighted the issues that are important to young people. I did not anticipate that political education would be something that they felt so strongly about, however this research has highlighted young people want it and feel it is necessary to sort out political disengagement.

In terms of the survey, a limitation was the disproportionate number of responses between each age group. Only 35 fifteen-year-olds completed the survey, compared to 185 sixteen-year-olds. The fact that the surveys were distributed amongst Kirklees' NCS groups meant that the survey received more responses from this age group. However, this may not necessarily be a problem as the topic concerns sixteen-year olds. A further issue was that a few responses who ranked themselves as 'not' interested in politics selected that they knew all the general political knowledge trivia, since one of the questions asked if they knew the name of the leader of Kirklees Council it would be expected that someone who is not interested in politics would not know this.

Also, for the final question which asked whether lowering the voting age could get young people interested in politics, 33 of those who opposed lowering the voting age believed that it could, compared to 44 who believed it would not. It is therefore unclear whether they oppose lowering the voting age even though they believe it would get young people interested in politics, or whether they ticked the box they believed the researcher would want them to tick in order to finish the survey quickly. However, the large amount of responses amassed means that the data can be used to show the issues that are affecting young people in Kirklees. It demonstrates at the very least that they do not know enough about politics, and that they do not have adequate opportunities to learn about it.

This research represents the thoughts and feelings of young people aged fourteen to eighteen in Kirklees on the topic of the voting age being lowered, their views on politics, and ages of responsibility, and is therefore generalisable to young people in Kirklees. However, outside of Kirklees these results may not be representative, and therefore cannot be used to suggest that this is the way that all young people in England feel. In order to push this research forward, one way would be to make the survey sample more representative by including the opinions of more fifteen-year-olds. Another way would be to distinguish whether the young people who preferred the voting age to be lowered for local elections would like this as a 'starting point' in order to gradually introduce it to sixteen for all elections, or whether they would prefer the national voting age to permanently remain at eighteen.

To take this research further, it would be interesting to compare these results by conducting the same study in Scotland where sixteen-year-olds can already vote, which could mean that less young people would opt for the local elections version of Votes at 16, as they already have it in place nationally. It would also be interesting to see if they report higher levels of interest and knowledge in politics, and to uncover whether lowering the voting age was a motivator in this, or whether Scottish young people are more politically literate than their English counterparts.

In conclusion, this research has uncovered that slightly under half of young people in Kirklees support lowering the voting age to sixteen. Upon further investigation, young people have reported a dissatisfaction in the lack of political education in the curriculum and believe that this would be needed in order to improve their knowledge and to enable them to vote. This research has found that young people do not conceptualise voting as being part of a range of rights and responsibilities that are tied in with being a citizen and tend to prefer the age of eighteen for most of these legal ages which are markers of a transition to adulthood. Importantly, this research has uncovered evidence that young people in Kirklees believe that lowering the voting age would lead to an increased engagement with politics, but this will be maximised if political education is introduced to the curriculum and delivered at a quality and focuses on the local elements of politics as well as the national.

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