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## **Reconsidering the approach to political citizenship in youth work in England.**

### **Introduction**

In July 2025 the UK government announced the lowering of the voting age to 16, a move which aims ‘restore trust in and “future-proof” democracy’ (Mycock, 2025). However, research demonstrates that universal democratic education needs to accompany voting reform if newly enfranchised young voters are going to feel sufficiently politically socialised, engaged, and literate to vote for the first time (Loughran et al., 2021).

The Votes at 16 campaign has roots in good youth work, having featured as a UK Youth Parliament campaign for many years (National Youth Agency, 2025). Despite youth work’s contribution, in England, research and policy have tended to overlook opportunities to promote political education outside formal education (Sloam and Henn, 2019). Notwithstanding recent cuts to youth work provision, an estimated 4.4 million young people in the UK regularly engage in youth work (UK Youth and Frontier Economics, 2022). Many of these young people come from under resourced communities (National Youth Agency, 2023), are less likely to vote (Sloam and Henn, 2019) and more likely to disengage from formal citizenship education (Claymore, 2019). The informal education approach embedded within youth work identifies democracy and dialogue as cornerstones of practice (Jefferies and Smith, 2005). The negotiated nature of the youth work delivery curriculum which begins ‘where young people are at’ suggests that youth work could present an ideal environment to equip young people for political citizenship (Batsleer, 2013; Davies, 2010). Youth work could be a vital site for political socialisation.

However, youth work has faced challenges in addressing political issues throughout its history (Bunt and Gargrave, 1980; Davies, 1981; Mills, 2011; Milson, 1980). Since the turn of the millennium the explicit mention of the political has disappeared (Green and Sender, 2005; Ord et al., 2018). Over the same period, the language of citizenship filled this gap (Jefferies, 2005) indicating a further shift towards depoliticised content. Recent literature suggests that youth work has little capacity to address politics at all in an increasingly neoliberal context (Bright et al., 2017; Shukra, 2017). Critiques that are reflected in concerns raised by young people about youth workers’ reluctance to discuss politics (Garasia et al., 2015). So, while youth work claims to offer an ideal environment for political socialisation, this potential appears not to be realised (Ohana, 2020).

The research that informs this article took place across 4 youth work projects in a small northern city in England between 2020 and 2022. It involved ethnographic participant observation of 56 youth work sessions alongside focus groups with 89 young people (aged 10-24) and 21 youth workers. Drawn from thematic analysis of focus group data, firstly, this article considers the dimensions which shape young people’s understandings of political citizenship. Next the analysis of focus group transcripts and ethnographic observations is drawn on to map current youth work approaches to political socialisation. Finally, the analysis outlines practical recommendations to advance the democratic potential of youth work.

## Does youth work provide political socialisation?

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) of focus group transcripts identified six dimensions that informed young people's understandings of political citizenship:

- formal politics
- getting involved
- issues
- national/legal citizenship
- protest and campaigns
- rights, respect and responsibility.

These dimensions reflect broader repertoires of political participation and extended definitions of lived citizenship (Kallio et al., 2020; Pickard, 2019). However, they also highlight that while young people are drawing on this broader framing, formal politics remains a significant aspect.

*Number 10. I think the number 10 door is, for me, the thing that represents politics the most. (Young person, local youth voice network)*

Analysis of observations and descriptions of practice captured during this research indicate that youth work addresses many of these dimensions, providing opportunities for young people to get involved, to experience responsibility, respect and rights and to understand political processes and institutions. Thus, providing empirical evidence of youth work's role in supporting young people's political socialisation and highlighting the limitations of current policy that focusses on school-based initiatives.

Analysis of ethnographic observations and focus group data captured in this research revealed that youth work partially addressed other dimensions, engaging with conversations about issues and some conversations about politicians. However, some dimensions were omitted from practice. These include conversations about political parties or values, discussions that linked issues to political decisions, discussions about legal or national aspects of citizenship, or discussions about protest. Both youth workers and young people suggested that these omissions limited their ability to support young people's political socialisation.

*'Youth worker 1: There is a limit on how much we can actually support them with political development. We can support them to be good citizens, to understand different things, to have a voice, to get involved, to partake in democracy but we can't...*

*Youth worker 2: So, if they want to have a political debate, we wouldn't see that as part of [the project].*

This research demonstrates that youth work does support young people's political socialisation in some areas but could do more if it were able to engage with political issues more fully.

## Barriers that limit political socialisation in youth work

The following section will outline the two barriers to political socialisation identified in this research.

### Professional culture

Youth workers stated that political issues needed to be approached carefully, but conflated ideas about being apolitical, nonpartisan, non-political and unbiased. Although guidance for teachers about political impartiality has been criticised for its ambiguity, it sets out possible approaches and explicitly encourages political discussions with young people (Department for Education, 2022). Equivalent guidance for youth workers does not exist, resulting in the lack of clarity expressed by youth workers during focus groups:

*'I don't know where I've got this, but we shouldn't really educate [young people] about politics' (Youth worker)*

Youth work appears to face a policy void at national and organisational levels. Positive for Youth (H. M. Government, 2010), the last national policy addressed directly towards the youth work sector in England, does not mention politics. At the research sites there appeared to be no organisational policy outlining approaches that should be taken to political conversations. This lack of clarity results in an environment that does not facilitate political discussions (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2015). Since political discussions in youth work have been contentious throughout history (Taylor, 2008), it is unsurprising that youth workers are cautious.

In contrast to the lack of clarity about the place of political discussions, youth workers were clear that protest should not be addressed with young people.

*Researcher: Which [types of political participation] would you look at and go-well that wouldn't be acceptable to funders?*

*Youth worker: Protest (there was agreement across the group to this response)*

Protest did not feature in any discussions during observed youth work sessions. However, young people view protest as an increasingly relevant, accessible and effective approach to political participation (O'Brien et al., 2018; Shukra et al., 2012), a view echoed by young participants in this research.

*Our right to protest is really important as a part of politics, especially at our age, being unable to vote. It's one of the main ways that we can get our voices heard as young people to those in power. (Young person)*

Youth workers appear to be responding to policy shifts which repress young people's participation in protest and dissent (Pickard, 2019). However, restricting discussion of protest does not appear to reduce young people's awareness and engagement with it (Pickard & Bessant, 2017). In the USA youth worker's engagement with protest provides opportunities for them to educate and ask critical questions about the issues and processes, potentially dispelling myths and misinformation (Bonfiglio, 2017). Engagement allows youth workers to act as mentors, equipping young people with tools

to take part in direct action safely and ensuring that young people are aware of the risks involved (Bonfiglio, 2017). Restricting young people's discussion about protests is more likely to leave them ill-equipped to think critically about the political world that they occupy (Brocklehurst, 2015). Therefore, there is a strong rationale for reviewing the approach taken towards protest in youth work, and in formal democratic education.

### Youth workers insecurities

This research also identified issues with practitioner's knowledge and values. Some youth workers suggested that they did not address politics because young people did not want to discuss politics, however, analysis of the data suggested that young people's disinterest was overstated and related to a narrower definition of formal politics. While many young people were sceptical of formal political processes, they were not disinterested, reflecting the findings of Henn & Foard (2013). Young people's scepticism was often linked to a lack of knowledge (Tonge et al., 2012), suggesting a self-perpetuating cycle. Youth workers do not include politics in youth work activities because they feel young people are not interested.

*Youth worker 1: But considering activity planning and whatever, it [politics] probably doesn't ...*

*Youth worker 2: Pop up*

But this reduces opportunities for young people to gain knowledge, making it less likely that they will introduce these topics in informal conversations. Young people remain less informed about politics, as opportunities to introduce and develop this knowledge are missed.

In the focus groups youth workers indicated that their own scepticism influenced their willingness to discuss politics.

*I think our opinion of politicians is probably quite low ... So, it would be difficult for us to be very like, [enthusiastically] 'Oh yeah, yeah. Vote for this, and you will see change!' (Youth worker*

Their concerns echoed McCulloch's (2000) critique of the dominance of the civics education approach which requires youth workers to promote enfranchisement rather than to engage in critical conversations about the effectiveness of current political systems.

Alongside this youth workers in open-access youth projects felt that they did not have sufficient knowledge or understanding of politics to discuss these topics with young people.

*'I guess I've always thought I don't know enough to feel comfortable educating them. Whereas we understand about the sexual health side of things, and we understand about racism' (Youth worker).*

This reflects the gap in political citizenship education that has been identified for youth workers in Germany (Kessler, 2022) and teachers in England (Weinberg & Flinders, 2019). The lack of education and training around addressing political issues left youth workers

concerned about the potentially divisive nature of political conversations. This contrasts to the clarity that youth workers expressed about their role addressing other sensitive issues such as racism, sexism, or homophobia. The pedagogical approach informed by Freire (1972) that underpins youth work seeks to create spaces for critical dialogue. Youth work's anti-discriminatory value base orientates these discussions and youth work training aims to equip workers to engage with these challenging conversations (Batsleer, 2018; Hatton, 2023; Watt, 2017). In contrast youth workers lack confidence in their knowledge and remit to address political issues, so are ill-equipped to create an environment where political issues can be explored.

This research has highlighted youth work's potential to support young people's political socialisation but also identified that youth work's professional and organisational culture currently limit its capacity to deliver democratic education. The research has also identified opportunities to address these barriers and increase youth works ability to equip young people for political citizenship which are outlined below.

## Recommendations.

1. Policymakers should provide clear national guidance about addressing political issues in youth work, adopting an approach that maximises youth work's capacity to address all dimensions that young people draw on to frame their understandings of political citizenship. Policy must also consider how youth work engages with protest, fostering approaches that enable young people to critically navigate and engage in the political world that they occupy. This will require an integrated approach across the Department for Digital Culture, Media and Sport, the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Department for Education as activities to support the extension of voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds are developed (Mycock, 2025).
2. Professional organisations, such as the National Youth Agency (NYA), and UK Youth should develop guidance about youth work's approach to addressing political socialisation. Guidance should outline youth work's role in facilitating discussions on political values and parties and define circumstances under which practitioners could share their own political ideas. This is particularly important if organisations promote a nonpartisan stance.
3. Investment in education and training about political socialisation is needed. Political socialisation should be included in NYA's proposed reform to youth work qualifications. Youth work organisations need to invest in CPD that equips youth workers with political and citizenship knowledge.
4. Resources for use in youth work that support youth workers to address political citizenship in youth work need to be developed. These could build on the work of the [Association for Citizenship Teaching](#) and [The Democracy Classroom](#). Research which works alongside young people to develop accessible resources would be particularly useful.

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