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Dear Mr Bellringer

### **How old is enough? The minimum age of voting and candidacy in UK elections**

YouthLink Scotland is the national youth agency for Scotland. We promote the well-being and development of young people in a local, national and global context. We are a national voluntary organisation serving the needs of young people, and those who work with them. YouthLink Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Electoral Commission's consultation *How old is enough? The minimum age of voting and candidacy in UK elections*.

In Scotland a young person at 16 can, for example, get married, take a job, pay taxes, take up a tenancy and pay Council Tax, but cannot stand as a candidate in local and parliamentary elections or vote in those elections. YouthLink Scotland considers that the lack of a standard legal age of majority, with different minimum ages applying in relation to different activities gives rise to a number of anachronisms. In this respect, a 16 year old can work and pay taxes, but is unable to vote on how these monies are spent until they reach 18. The same consideration applies in relation to young people under 18 paying Council Tax, but being unable to vote or stand in local elections. YouthLink Scotland considers that this amounts to a significant democratic deficit in these areas, which should be recognised and addressed. This view is supported by most young people. Reflecting this, the recent *Nestle Family Monitor 'Young People's Attitudes Towards Politics'* by MORI found that three in five young people believe that the minimum voting age should be reduced, with 53% wanting it to be set at 16 or below.

YouthLink Scotland takes the view that introducing a new minimum age for voting and for candidacy in local and parliamentary elections will, however, require a balance to be struck between young people's rights and their responsibilities. To achieve this, considerable work needs to be done in terms of engaging with young people about their rights and responsibilities as active citizens. YouthLink Scotland believes that youth work can play a major role in this process, and would welcome further discussions with the Electoral Commission about how best to promote the participation of our young people in politics and in society as a whole.

The need for such initiatives is highlighted by the fact that many young people have already been turned off by politics, and are completely disenchanted with politicians. In a large number of cases this is evident even before the young people are faced with the choice of whether or not to vote in their first election. Reflecting this, a recent survey of 3,096 11 – 25 year olds across Scotland undertaken by Mori Scotland on behalf of YouthLink Scotland indicates that less than half agree that it is important to vote (41% of 11 – 16 year olds and 48% of 17 – 25 year olds); *Being Young in Scotland in 2003, YouthLink Scotland's Research Findings ("Being Young in Scotland")*. This trend has been reinforced by the increasing political apathy in our society, reflected in declining voting turnout in recent elections. In this respect, if a particular family has no history of voting at elections it is unlikely that the young people in that family will attach very much importance to voting, and on how to meet their responsibilities as voters.

YouthLink Scotland considers that the increase in political apathy is a general issue which cuts across our society regardless of age. We strongly believe that the apathy and disengagement of many young people needs to be tackled if we are to safeguard the long term health and vitality of our democracy. Lowering the minimum age for voting and candidacy is just one area which should be considered. To promote the involvement of our young people in politics and in society we must also address the reasons why so many of our young people feel so negative about politics and politicians. Significantly, one of the main findings of *Being Young in Scotland* is that, while young people have most trust and respect for their parents and have a high level of trust in doctors, they have least trust for the press, the media and politicians.

We must also look at how politics is portrayed in our education system and in the media, particularly in terms of issues around citizenship, and our rights and responsibilities as voters. Politicians also need to consider how they engage with young people, and to ensure that young people's voices are heard. Furthermore, where politicians consult young people it is vital that the consultation process is meaningful, and that the views of young people are seen to be making a positive contribution to the development of policy.

Careful thought must also be given to how modern technology can best be used to disseminate information about the political system, and its structures. The findings of *Being Young in Scotland* highlight that a considerable amount of work needs to be done in these areas if we are to ensure that our young people have the necessary background knowledge and information to have the confidence to participate as active citizens in our political system. The findings of *Being Young in Scotland* suggest that only just over a quarter of those surveyed claim to know a great deal or a fair amount about what the Scottish Parliament does (28% of 11 – 16 year olds and 26% of 17 – 25 year olds). If we are to encourage the future involvement of our young people in our political system, both as voters and as candidates, more needs to be done to ensure that they have the necessary background information to make informed decisions as both active citizens and voters. This will help to strengthen our democracy, and to safeguard its long term health and vitality

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require more information, or would like to discuss this matter further.

Yours sincerely

Maureen Mallon  
Head of Development

