

# Campaign Guide: Votes at 16

For the first time in years, securing 'Votes at 16' is in sight. This guide provides an introduction to the issue of lowering of the voting age, and an overview of the upcoming political opportunities and objectives of the Votes at 16 campaign led by NUS, the Association of Colleges (AoC) and the British Youth Council (BYC).

## Background

The campaign to lower the legal voting age is now 18 years old (that's as old as the current age to vote!). We believe that voting for elected representatives is a fundamental right in a democratic society, and one that should be extended to 16 and 17-year-olds.

'Votes at 16' has already been successfully implemented for elections in local authorities and the devolved parliament in Scotland, and thanks to our campaigning and lobbying, the Welsh Government recently announced plans to lower the voting age in local elections to 16.

There is now a fundamental inequity of rights in this country: with the ability to vote decided by a 'postcode lottery'. This situation is both morally and politically unsustainable for the government, and with the support of opposition parties we have a real opportunity to lower the voting age across all UK elections.

Since the result of the snap election in June 2017, it is also conceivable that there is now a possible majority in favour of lowering the voting age in Parliament.

There have been two recent attempts to lower the voting age through Private Members' Bills (PMBs). Private Members' Bills are public bills

introduced by MPs who are not government ministers. Although only a small number of these usually make changes to the law, it is an effective tool to demonstrate support for a particular policy and can often cause the government to be more favourable to it in future.

The first of these PMBs was presented by the Labour MP for Oldham West & Royton, Jim McMahon on **19<sup>th</sup> July 2017**, and it had its second reading on **3<sup>rd</sup> November 2017**. NUS campaigned to ensure that as many MPs turned up for the debate as possible. As a result, over 150 MPs attended. Unfortunately, there wasn't time for a vote on the bill and the debate was set to continue on **1<sup>st</sup> December 2017**. However, the bill was 15<sup>th</sup> on the order paper, which meant it was unlikely to be heard.

On **11<sup>th</sup> May 2018**, a second PMB to lower the voting age to 16 presented by the Labour MP for Hove & Portslade, Peter Kyle, had its second reading in the Commons. Crucially, it was seconded by Nicky Morgan MP, the Conservative former Education Secretary, which demonstrates cross-party support for this campaign. Unfortunately, Mr Kyle was given just under half an hour to present his bill and

for other MPs to debate the proposals, so there wasn't enough time for a vote on the bill.

However, the campaign is far from over. The debate will resume on **Friday 26<sup>th</sup> October 2018**, so we need to keep up the momentum. We are working to ensure that as many MPs as possible attend the debate and vote in favour of the bill.

## Aim

*To secure a parliamentary decision to lower the minimum legal voting age in UK elections to 16 years old.*

## Objectives

- Support attempts by opposition parties to secure 'Votes at 16'.
- Acquire the support of Conservative backbenchers for 'Votes at 16'.
- Acquire support for 'Votes at 16' amongst the devolved authorities (combined authorities, Scottish and Welsh Parliaments, local government).

## What do we say?

- **Voting is a basic right in a democracy.** Participation in free elections is a fundamental human right (protected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UK's Human Rights Act). The reasons for excluding people from the vote therefore have to be fair and balanced. As many 16 and 17-year-olds are contributing to the taxation system, the principle stands that they should be entitled to vote.
- **The current system is "taxation without representation".** 16 and 17-year-olds hold many responsibilities in our society, and extending the franchise would engage them in the political

affairs, current events, and democratic processes that impact their lives. Votes at 16 would encourage young people to understand the society they live in, influence key decisions affecting them, and ensure youth issues are represented. Automatic blanket exclusion of 16 and 17-year-olds from voting is unjustifiable because, at 16, the law allows a person to:

1. Pay income tax and National Insurance
2. Join the armed forces
3. Leave home
4. Fully consent to medical treatment
5. Obtain tax credits and welfare benefits in their own right
6. Consent to sexual relationships
7. Get married or enter a civil partnership
8. Change their name by deed poll
9. Become a director of a company
10. Become a member of a trade union or co-operative society.

- **Young people need to be encouraged to take part in democracy, not kept out of it.** Having learnt the principles in compulsory citizenship education, 16 and 17-year-olds are ready to participate in civic life, and this is proven by the vast numbers of young people already active in local youth councils, Youth Parliament, and students' unions. Votes at 16 would inspire more young people to play an active role in our society.
- **Young people are not apathetic.** Apathy among young people has always

been a myth and the 2017 General Election has shattered that illusion for good. Students are not apathetic: they care about rising debt, diminishing access to education, and inequality in our society that makes us the first generation in years to be statistically worse off than our parents. The result of the snap election showed that thousands of young people were willing to engage with politics, many for the very first time. There were, however, 1.5 million 16 and 17-year-olds who did not receive this opportunity.

## Our Approach

There are three basic strands of our approach to this campaign. Firstly, building relationships with opposition parties to support future initiatives and ensure 'Votes at 16' remains a key priority. Secondly, we want to influence a sufficient number of MPs to directly affect the outcome of the Private Members Bill. Thirdly, we want to generate 'soft pressure' on parliamentarians by generating a climate of opinion in favour of 'Votes at 16', and through securing the support of local politicians and other influential figures.

The campaign is split into three distinct phases. These phases help us to plan a series of activities around our key objectives that also fit the parliamentary cycle.



## What can you do?

### Build a relationship with your MP.

For the Private Members' Bill on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2017, students' unions and college leaders successfully mobilised to meet our target of 100 MPs to attend the debate.

Our priority now is to ensure that even more MPs attend the second debate this month. The best way to do this is to start building relationships now. NUS will be meeting with MPs in key constituencies, but we will need your help to ensure that as many MPs as possible turn out to support the bill.

We are organising a Day of Action on **Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2018** where we will be supporting students and college leaders to engage MPs in key constituencies, so it's a good idea to book in meetings with your local MP now. If you are not sure who your MP is, [you can find out who they are here](#). You can also find their contact details on that page, and can attempt to set up a meeting by getting in touch with their office. Alternatively, you can send a letter asking for their support.

If your MP agrees to attend the debate and support 'Votes at 16', please let us know at [campaigns@nus.org.uk](mailto:campaigns@nus.org.uk).

### Win the support of local politicians

One way of putting 'soft pressure' on parliamentarians is to win the support of other influential politicians. There are four clear groups that it may be useful to influence:

1. **Mayors of the new [combined authorities](#)**. These are the newly-created 'super' boroughs that are overseen by a directly-elected Metro Mayor. Five of these mayors have already been elected – in Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, the West Midlands and the West of England. The Metro Mayors do not have the

power to extend the franchise as a devolved issue. However, securing their support is a way to get them to leverage MPs in their parties and to raise the profile of the campaign. If you are in any of these districts, think about working with other students' unions or colleges in your area to set up a meeting, or sign a joint letter asking for their support.

2. **Local councillors.** Another tactic is to win the support of your local council. Get in touch with your local councillors to see if they would submit a motion to the council meeting, [just like they did here at Bristol City Council](#) (also includes a handy model resolution on page 5!).
3. **Devolved representatives.** If you're in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, you can attempt to discuss the issue with your representative to those parliaments. In Scotland, there is already 'Votes at 16' in local elections, but not in elections for Westminster. Discuss ways in which MSPs can work with their colleagues in Westminster to support the campaign. In Wales, plans have been announced to lower the voting age in local elections to 16. You can likewise discuss the issue with AMs to ensure that the outcome is positive.
4. **Lords.** We believe that there is also a majority for 'Votes at 16' in the House of Lords. There will be an attempt sometime next year to present a Private Members' Bill to the House of Lords on the issue, led by a cross-party group of peers. Lords are also influential more broadly within their own party, and writing to peers may also be a useful way to demonstrate support.

If you are at a university, try starting with your Chancellor or members of your University Council, which can quite often include peers.

### **Engage with the community**

It's really important that we consistently shift and then demonstrate a groundswell of public opinion in favour of 'Votes at 16' to ensure that the issue stays on the agenda. One way to do this is to engage with the local community in the debate.

Think about hosting public debates or panel discussions, taking the argument out into wider society. You can also think about utilizing the local press by asking for an opinion piece, or through convening a local letter of community leaders.

### **Work with the sector**

Think about how you can work with your Principal or Vice Chancellor to amplify the case for 'Votes at 16'. There is widespread support for lowering the voting age amongst sector leaders and it is enshrined in the policy of organisations such as the Association of Colleges (AOC).

In the first instance, make contact with your Principal or Vice Chancellor to discuss your campaign. Then think about what kind of joint initiatives you could do to demonstrate support – for example, an open letter to a local MP signed by both the students' union and the institution could be a really effective way to raise the profile of the issue and influence your elected representatives.

## Further Information?

If you need more any more information or ideas for your 'Votes at 16' campaign, or want to make suggestions to us, feel free to get in touch at [campaigns@nus.org.uk](mailto:campaigns@nus.org.uk).

	Have you...?	
1	Downloaded the 'Votes at 16' campaign guide?	✓
2	Taken part in the national day of action for the 1 <sup>st</sup> Private Members' Bill on 7 <sup>th</sup> October 2017?	✓
3	Taken part in the Targeted Day of Action with MPs, Metro Mayors and Elected representatives on 27 <sup>th</sup> April 2018?	✓
4	Visited the Fair.Vote (Votes at 16) <a href="#">website</a> ?	
5	Met with your institution or college to discuss a joint initiative?	
6	Contacted your MPs, Metro Mayors or local councillors to arrange a meeting?	
7	Met with your MP to discuss the second Private Members' Bill, or lobbied them via Twitter?	
8	Met with your local councillors, or 'Metro Mayor' of a combined authority?	