

Empowering a Young Electorate: Political and Media Literacy for Votes at 16

Submission to the APPG on Schools Inquiry into Votes at 16 from Shout Out UK and the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Political and Media Literacy

1. Introduction: Political and Media Literacy to Votes at 16: A Symbiotic Relationship

The government's Representation of the People Bill 2026 proposes lowering the voting age to 16 for all elections in the UK. This is a significant step towards broadening democratic participation. However, Shout Out UK (SOUK), the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Political and Media Literacy (PML), and its Academic Advisory Group (AAG) unequivocally believe that enhanced Political and Media Literacy education for all young people must come with Votes at 16. This establishes a direct, interdependent relationship: Neither policy can achieve optimal success without the robust implementation of the other.

Media literacy, as defined by Ofcom, is the ability to use, understand, and create media and communications across various contexts. This encompasses critical assessment of information, a skill crucial in today's complex information landscape. Political literacy, on the other hand, involves possessing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to comprehend and participate in public events and debates. This foundational understanding allows citizens to develop competence, engage in political reasoning, and actively address political problems. Both are essential for an informed and engaged populace.

Our evidence and policy recommendations, drawing on the consensus of members of both the APPG and the AAG, outline critical strategies to ensure this expansion of suffrage is underpinned by a citizenry equipped with essential PML skills. The recommendations in this evidence directly address how to empower young voters to navigate the complex political landscape, evaluate information, and engage effectively in democracy.

2. The APPG's Foundational Vision for Political and Media Literacy

The APPG believes PML is crucial for fostering democratic behaviour, emotional resilience and critical thinking across all age groups, but particularly for young people who will benefit from the expansion of the franchise.

A core tenet is a return to the basics, ensuring young people gain foundational understanding of political institutions and democratic concepts. The focus should be on cultivating foundational and transferable critical thinking skills, not just reacting to new technologies like AI, which could dilute the core purpose of democratic education.

The Curriculum Gap

The UK government's response to the independent Curriculum and Assessment Review makes several key commitments to significantly improve and strengthen Citizenship and Media Literacy education in schools across England, with a focus on preparing young people for the digital world and democratic engagement. However, these reforms will not be implemented until 2028, meaning that the knowledge and skills gaps for those children, now 12 and up, who will be voting in the next General Election will remain unaddressed.

In our view there is a need for urgent action ahead of the implementation of the new curriculum requirements and the extension of the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds to address the **gap in teacher training and confidence** we have identified. Evidence for the significant need for investment in teacher training, is presented in [The Missing Link](#), a 2021 report by Dr James Weinberg of the University of Sheffield, commissioned by SOUK and the APPG, which found teachers felt they lacked the training and support to teach Political and Media Literacy.

PML: A Necessary, But Not Catch-All, Solution

The recommendations of the APPG and AAG stress that PML education is only part of the solution for a healthy information ecosystem. It is not a catch-all solution and must be complemented by other legislation and regulation. Individual literacy efforts are hampered if systemic issues persist, such as algorithms promoting extreme content or news deserts within communities. This highlights the need for a whole-of-society approach, where education is vital, but must be bolstered by parallel efforts to improve the integrity of the broader information environment.

3. Assessing the Data on Votes at 16

Rationale for Equipping Young Voters

[International evidence](#) shows that extending the franchise to 16-year-olds can increase overall democratic participation without negative societal outcomes. [Research](#) confirms young people are capable of informed decision-making around voting comparable to older adults. Lowering the voting age can address participation inequalities and improve democratic attitudes; for example, in Scotland, the [policy gained significant popularity](#) among older generations after implementation.

For 16-year-olds to participate effectively, they need foundational PML, including critical thinking skills to evaluate political information and discern credible sources. PML is essential for young voters to navigate the [current crisis of trust in media and government](#) among adults, and rising levels of political polarisation, enabling informed decisions amidst conflicting narratives. Without robust PML, Votes at 16 risks leading to uninformed participation, susceptibility to manipulation, or undesirable outcomes like galvanisation by extremist figures.

Introducing Votes at 16 alongside strong PML education would foster greater societal recognition and valuing of young people's participation in democracy, shifting the focus of the discourse from low turnout among young voters to celebrating meaningful engagement. Effective PML education would empower young people to understand political discourse and demand to be 'spoken to' by political parties, rather than merely 'spoken about', [a concern raised after the last UK election](#).

Learning from the Welsh Experience: A Potential Learning Opportunity.

Wales, which introduced Votes at 16 without a concurrent rollout of PML education, [observed lower than expected turnout](#), with young people reporting that they did not know enough about candidates, parties and the democratic process in general. The APPG views this as a potential learning opportunity, not a reason to dismiss lowering the voting age, but as evidence that accompanying educational measures must be comprehensive and effective, and educators supported. This underscores the importance of the *quality* and *depth* of PML provision, not just its presence.

4. Strategic Framework for Enhanced Political and Media Literacy and Votes at 16 Implementation

SOUK and the APPG propose a multi-faceted framework for PML education, designed to support the Representation of the People bill and the successful introduction of Votes at 16.

Teacher Development and Capacity Building: The Linchpin of Democratic Education

Addressing the recognised gap in citizenship education in Key Stages 1 and 2 requires significant, sustained investment in teacher training and Continuing Professional Development (CPD). This is crucial to overcome the [current lack of teacher expertise and capacity](#), which hinders effective delivery of citizenship education. Parallel conversations with Ofsted are proposed to enforce curriculum requirements and assessment criteria for PML, ensuring consistent quality.

Case Study: Comprehensive multi-session Teacher Training - Ofcom's Media Literacy training for professionals who work with children

Ofcom identified a gap in Continuing Professional Development related to media literacy for professionals working with children and young people. To mitigate this gap, Shout Out UK (SOUK) was commissioned by Ofcom in September 2023 to deliver a mass-scale Train-the-Trainer delivery programme targeted at a minimum of 500 UK teachers and education professionals who work with children across the UK. From December 2023 to July 2024 we delivered Sessions 1 and 2 to 1,026 Education and Youth Professionals, and Session 3 to 28 participants across England and Wales.

As shown below, despite the limited time available for training, the nature of this programme and the higher than expected numbers of participants highlight the desire from the education sector to have this type of training available to them. It is not only beneficial for the attendees from a pedagogical perspective, having a greater understanding of prebunking and debunking activities, but it also highlights the need for this training for safeguarding practices in educational spaces. Crucially, educators felt more able to prevent digital harm to young people because they were more aware of the types of digital harm they might encounter.

Key Quantitative Findings:

In response to the statement "I understand the difference between mis, dis, and malinformation", 8% of participants said they "Strongly agreed" pre-programme, however, this grew to 62% post programme.

In response to the statement "I know the types of online harms that young people can encounter", 29% of participants said they "Strongly agreed" pre-programme, however, this grew to 64% post programme.

In response to the statement "I can prevent digital harms in a setting with young people", 54% of participants said they either "Agreed" or "Strongly agreed" pre-programme, however, this grew to 93% post-programme.

Key Qualitative findings:

Participants highlighted the importance of the training on new technologies, and found the section on deepfakes particularly interesting and insightful.

Participants highlighted the value of improved vocabulary on the subject, allowing them to navigate media literacy with "clarity and confidence" when talking to young people.

Participants highlighted the desire to receive more training on Media Literacy, highlighting the need for further training on specific topics such as algorithms.

Please find here the [final report](#) from the project.

Engaging Young Voters

With people aged 18-24 already the [least likely to vote in any UK election](#), there is an urgent need to engage young citizens with knowledge and tools to empower them to use their democratic rights. Annual and year-round democratic initiatives such as Welcome to Your Vote Week and the GLA's Civic and Democratic Participation programme and London Voter Registration Week provide rigorously evaluated models, which must be scaled up to ensure more active participation.

Case Study: The Greater London Authority's London Voter Registration Week

Since 2020, Shout Out UK has been the community delivery partner on the GLA London Voter Registration Week and wider Civic and Democratic Participation programme. The impartial programme is co-designed with Londoners and co-delivered in collaboration with a broad, pan-London coalition of support, made up of civil society and educational institutions. It is coordinated with statutory bodies, including the Electoral Commission and borough electoral services.

The GLA and Shout Out UK have co-designed an array of political and media literacy resources with underrepresented communities, including accessible formats such as Easy Read and BSL, as well as 16 community languages. These have been shared widely by the GLA coalition of support, made up of civil society organisations, educational institutions and libraries across London, who support us to raise awareness among the most under-registered and underrepresented communities, including young Londoners.

In 2025, the campaign worked with 84 educational institutions. As campaign coalition partners, they received a suite of resources and the offer to host in-person events in their institutions. The programme's offer of in-person events and resources extends to all mainstream secondary educational institutions and post-16 settings across London, year on year, as well as reaching alternative settings such as Special Educational Needs, faith schools, etc.

During London Voter Registration Week 2024, events took place in 23 educational institutions across London, including voter registration stalls, workshops and assemblies, as

well as the dissemination of political literacy materials to all London schools. Over 3,300 young people were engaged through these in-person events.

The activities run during London Voter Registration Week 2024 supported young people in many ways, including:

- Providing young people with impartial, accurate and up-to-date information on voter registration, Voter ID, as well as wider civic and democratic rights.
- Guiding them through the process of registering to vote.
- Increasing understanding that they can register from 16, as many young people were not aware of this fact before we spoke to them.
- Engaging in conversations with EU and Commonwealth Londoners to increase the understanding around their eligibility to vote in different elections.
- Directing young people to the GLA WhatsApp chatbot for further information on voter registration, and Voter ID.
- Supporting Deaf and Disabled Londoners and Londoners with English as an additional language with information available in BSL and 16 community languages, besides English.

Impact:

Since London Voter Registration Week started in 2019, London has seen a marked increase in voter registration rates. The Electoral Commission report into the state of the December 2022 electoral registers states: “In England, among different types of local authority area, the most notable change in completeness [of the electoral register] has been among London boroughs with an increase from 76 per cent in 2018 to 82 per cent in 2022”.

The Greater London Authority Civic and Democratic Participation Evaluation Report June 2024 - June 2025 can be found [HERE](#).

All the information and materials can be found on the GLA Democracy Hub at registertovote.london

Case Study: DISMISS

SOUK’s 2024 DISMISS campaign was a digital-first initiative tackling political disinformation targeted at young voters. Delivered in partnership with Ofcom and the Electoral Commission, the digital campaign reached over 6 million individuals and achieved 13,500,000 impressions combined across the UK General Election phase in 2024 and



UNESCO's GMIL Week in 2025. DISMISS demonstrated how strategic, youth-centred media literacy interventions can empower informed democratic participation.

Amid rising geopolitical instability and the proliferation of AI-driven disinformation - particularly deepfakes and algorithmic manipulation - DISMISS provided 18–24-year-olds with the tools to critically navigate complex online environments. Through co-design workshops, we created tailored content on topics such as misinformation, echo chambers, and data manipulation. A flexible, multi-phase rollout, adapted to the snap UK General Election in July 2024, UNESCO's 2024 Global Media and Information Literacy Week and the Electoral Commission's Welcome to Your Vote week, enabled us to scale engagement quickly across platforms including TikTok, Meta, and X, achieving an estimated total reach of 1,754,688 18-24 year olds.

Quantitative and qualitative evaluation shows strong impact: 100% of focus group participants reported increased confidence in recognising and addressing political disinformation. Animated content and short-form videos were especially effective, underscoring the importance of platform-specific, creative digital strategies.

This campaign evidences the vital role digital engagement plays in fostering political literacy and resilience among young people. It also highlights the importance of collaboration between expert-led civil society organisations, such as SOUK, regulators, and platforms. For the DISMISS campaign, we partnered with X to showcase a video which highlighted the dangers of misinformation. The tech companies have an important responsibility here and we believe the government should consider seeking a commitment from them to fund future media literacy programmes, including in schools. The DISMISS resources could also be adapted for a national schools-wide poster, leaflet and digital campaign to support media literacy efforts in schools ahead of the implementation of the National Curriculum and Assessment Review. Additionally, government support for a scalable campaign would significantly strengthen national efforts to counter online harms and promote democratic inclusion.

Please find the full impact report [HERE](#).

Elections Bill - Specific Implementation for Votes at 16

Beyond the broader PML educational framework, successful Votes at 16 implementation requires specific considerations:

- **Democratic Education as a Parallel Effort:** We urge lawmakers to consider an amendment to the bill which ensures that Political and Media Literacy (PML) is rolled

out alongside the extension of the vote. It would mandate that the government's efforts to improve democratic education through the curriculum occur alongside the extension of the vote, ensuring that 'Votes at 16' is not delayed by educational reform timelines.

- **Full Inclusion as Democratic Actors:** Government and Political parties must actively engage young people, ensuring they are included in political debates and media coverage as active democratic participants. This must include a commitment to robust future funding for national voter registration, democratic participation and media literacy campaigns and initiatives.
- **Electoral Register Reform:** With only 16% of 16- and 17-year-olds currently registered, automatic voter registration (e.g. at National Insurance number issuance) would significantly address this. Schools and the DfE could also support the registration of 15-year olds through sharing pupil registers to assist identity verification (since 15-year olds will not have NI numbers).
- **Voter ID Policy Review:** Any Voter ID policy review must consider the types of identification typically held by 16- and 17-year-olds to ensure accessibility.

5. Conclusion and Key Recommendations

The APPG unequivocally re-emphasises that the success of Votes at 16 is inextricably linked to comprehensive political and media literacy education. This is not an add-on, but a fundamental requirement for empowering young people to become informed, engaged, and responsible participants in UK democracy. The APPG's consensus is clear: Political and media literacy education must come with Votes at 16.

To ensure the expansion of suffrage leads to a more informed, resilient, and vibrant civic society, we believe the following measures must be considered:

- **Concurrently with the commencement of the Representation of the People Bill,** the Secretary of State should lay before Parliament a strategy for the delivery of practical voter education and media literacy support in schools and colleges.
- **Bolster cross-curricular PML education** to ensure it is embedded across disciplines. OFSTED should also monitor and record schools' engagement with democratic education.
- **Invest in Teacher Capacity:** Prioritise significant, sustained investment in teacher training and CPD for PML educators across all Key Stages.
- **Implement Votes at 16 with Supporting Reforms:** Proceed with a comprehensive franchise extension for 16-year-olds across all elections, coupled with reforms to the electoral register (e.g., automatic registration) and a review of voter ID policies to

ensure accessibility for young voters. Allocate funding for expert third party organisations to deliver national and comprehensive democratic engagement campaigns, specifically co-designed to encourage voter registration and the participation of young people.

These measures represent vital, long-term investments in the future of UK democracy, ensuring that the expansion of suffrage to 16-year-olds leads to a more informed, resilient, and vibrant civic society.