

## ANNEX 1

### Arguments For and Against a Reduction in the Voting Age

1. The Sunderland Report recommends that:

- **the age of entitlement to vote in local government elections should be reduced to 16 years**
- **the minimum age for candidates is reduced from 21 to 18**

1. Modifications to the laws governing the right to vote are always controversial.

John Adams said in 1776:

*"It is dangerous to open so fruitful a source of controversy and altercation as would be opened by attempting to alter the qualifications of voters; there will be no end of it. New claims will arise: women will demand a vote; lads from twelve to twenty-one will think their rights not enough attended to; and every man who has not a farthing will demand an equal voice with any other in all acts of state".*

#### FOR

##### Moral Right

2. At the age of 16, citizens are deemed old enough to pay taxes, leave school, marry and join the armed forces.
3. However, currently they are not considered to be old enough to vote for the people who

make decisions on how to spend those taxes – which is, in effect, taxation without representation.

4. Adulthood begins at 16 and the right to vote should be accompanied with this.

## **Citizenship Education**

5. Citizenship Education is now compulsory in schools for ages 11 and above. This should produce constitutionally literate school leavers who are arguably better equipped than many older age groups. They will leave school armed with much of the information they need about how to participate in elections.
6. However, the evidence as to how effective citizenship education is likely to prove is, as yet, extremely limited.

## **Low Turnouts**

7. There is an argument to suggest that reducing the voting age might, by interesting young people at an earlier age, increase turnout at elections.
8. Turnouts for elections have been decreasing dramatically over recent years. For the General Elections in 1992, 1997 and 2001 turnouts were 79%, 71% and 59% respectively. Many Council Elections see turnouts of 25% and some Wards have experienced turnouts as low as 8%.
9. Traditionally, turnouts are lowest among the younger age groups. In the 2001 General Election, where the overall turnout was 59.4%, the turnout for 18 to 24 year olds was only 39%; a 27% drop on the 1997 General Election.
10. The Electoral Reform Society believes that reducing the age to vote to 16 will have a positive effect on turnouts, especially if this is accompanied with a reduction in the age to become a councillor from 21 to 18.
11. The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that a reduction in the age of voting to 16 "*would not solve all the problems but it might encourage young people to engage more in politics*".
12. At present young people appear to feel disconnected from organised party politics and politicians as they are denied any say in the political process. Once young people form

the opinion that politics is not relevant to them, it can be very difficult to convince them otherwise. Young people disconnected from politics under 18 fail to reconnect when they reach 18, but giving them the right to vote may re-engage them with democracy and stimulate interest in elections.

13. The Commission on Local Government Electoral Arrangements in Wales has commented on the need to:
14. *"Inculcate in young people an appreciation of the importance of voting as they begin to assume their responsibilities as young citizens, and we further believe that it is a mistake to allow a lengthy period of time to elapse between the school leaving age and the age of entitlement to vote"*.
15. The Commission believe that giving the vote to 16 and 17 year olds will promote greater, and continued, interest in democracy and that the rate of those voting in their 20's and 30's will also be beneficially affected over time.
16. A trial in Germany where 16 and 17 year olds were permitted to vote in regional 'Lander' elections showed that a lower voting age boosts turnouts. In Hanover, the percentage of 16 to 18 year olds that voted was greater than that of the 18-35 age group.
17. It could be argued, of course, that as turnout is lowest among young voters, a reduced voting age would, in fact, reduce overall turnout still further.

### **Examples from Other Countries**

18. The youngest age of majority is 15 in Iran.
19. Brazil, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Cuba, Montenegro, Nicaragua, Yugoslavia, the Philippines, Serbia and Slovenia all have a voting age of 16. East Timor, Indonesia, North Korea, Seychelles and Sudan all have a voting age of 17.
20. In Scotland, there is a cross party campaign to reduce the voting age to 16 which has attracted much support.
21. The Scottish Parliament's Local Government Committee published its report (*Report on Inquiry into Reviewing Local Democracy*) on January 24<sup>th</sup> 2003 recommending that young people in Scotland should be able to vote in Local Government elections at the age of 16. They also suggest that the Executive should open discussions with the Scotland Office, Electoral Commission and Westminster regarding the voting age.

### **Widening Participation**

22. The National Assembly is currently pursuing a number of initiatives to encourage

widening participation. If it is desirable to encourage a wider cross section of the community to stand for election and to participate in the electoral process, it is clearly necessary to change the legislation which prevents this from happening.

## **AGAINST**

### **Young People Lack the Knowledge and Maturity to Participate**

23. It could be argued that young people have little experience of life and little experience of having responsibility.
24. As a result, they are more likely to be influenced by single issues rather than a considered approach to the wider policies / manifesto of candidates, and an overall appreciation of the skills needed to provide effective government.

### **Young People are Susceptible to Influence**

25. If young people are given the right to vote, they may be pressured or influenced to vote a particular way by their parents. This will confer political power to those with children.
26. However, a similar argument was used in opposition to the extension of the franchise to women claiming that women would almost certainly vote in agreement with their husband's instructions. The secret ballot guarantees that no person may know how any citizen's vote was cast and so a young voter will feel free to vote in accordance with their own beliefs.
27. Though, in many cases, 16 year olds may vote as their parents would, this is also true for adult voters. The number one determining factor in the political allegiance of all voters is that of their parents. Studies have found that 89% of Conservative voters have two Conservative parents, with 92% of Labour voters having Labour parents.
28. There is no evidence that this would be more of an issue at the age of 16.

### **Interests of the Young are Already Protected**

29. It is argued that those who already have the vote bear the interests of younger people in

- mind when voting. It is therefore unnecessary to extend the franchise to those who may vote foolishly or who may be susceptible to pressure from parents or others.
30. However, these arguments appear patronising. Each person votes for what they consider to be best for themselves and their community. It could be argued that the best people to vote for the interests of the young are young people themselves.
  31. It is also interesting to note that these arguments were used in the eighteenth century to deny the vote to the working classes and again in the early nineteenth century to prevent the extension of the franchise to include women.

### **Young People Are Disinterested In Politics**

32. Turnouts have traditionally been lowest among the younger age groups suggesting that this generation is uninterested in democracy and politics.
33. However, young people frequently participate in protests and demonstrations and belong to interest groups, showing a keen interest in issues and politics in the wider sense. It is paradoxical that young people are often the most active in single-issue politics (such as anti-war protests and environmental issues) but show little interest in party-politics and the traditional democratic processes.

### **A Reduction in the Voting Age Will Further Decrease Turnouts**

34. Some experts believe that a reduction in the voting age would do little to improve poor election turnouts. They attribute low turnouts among the young to a lack of distinction between the political parties, not apathy.
35. Turnouts are more likely to be increased through convincing people of the importance of elections, rather than through an extension of the franchise.
36. However, trials in Germany did suggest an increase in turnouts through allowing younger people to vote. It is also worth considering that instilling an interest in younger people through Citizenship Education at school, and then allowing them to exercise their knowledge and interest at an earlier age may produce a more democratically aware and concerned electorate in the future who are more likely to attend elections.

## Reduction In Age Of Candidacy

37. There is a recognised need to attract more candidates to stand for election. There is a particular problem in Wales of uncontested seats, and new candidates are therefore needed to provide communities with a choice of representatives.
38. It has also been observed that Welsh councillors are generally older than the national average. It is anticipated, particularly with the likely introduction of a severance scheme for older councillors, that retirements will soon take place, and these vacancies will need to be filled.
39. Therefore, although any reduction of qualifying age could not take place in time for the 2004 elections, increasing the number of persons eligible to stand may help in 2008 and later elections in filling a number of vacancies or by providing more choice for the electorate in currently uncontested constituencies.
40. However, it is questionable as to how many young people aged 18 to 21 would be interested in standing for elections, and whether this is the best solution in such circumstances. It is recognised that young people, women and minority ethnic groups are all severely under represented in all organs of governance including local government. It could be argued that attempts to increase participation from all these groups would be a more effective task.
41. The Sunderland Report recommends lowering the age of candidacy "*not in the expectation that many 18 year old candidates will suddenly emerge, but rather because it will enable community councils to co-opt those aged 18 and over to fill vacancies, and so perhaps persuade such young people in due time to move forward to stand for county/county borough councils*".