

Votes at 16 Inquiry LaunchMonday 24 November / 12:30 – 13:30 / Macmillan Room, Portcullis House

1. Welcome and Introductions

The Chair welcomed attendees and explained that the meeting will focus on the APPG's new inquiry into how schools can enable young people to feel empowered and enfranchised in anticipation of the introduction of votes at 16.

2. Remarks – Peter Swallow

Peter explained that the aim of this inquiry is not to justify the government's decision to reduce the voting age to 16 for all elections. Instead, now that we have votes at 16, the focus is on the next question: how do we ensure young people are supported and equipped with the skills, understanding, and sense of responsibility needed to engage meaningfully in democracy? He emphasised that this matters because voting in a first election significantly increases the likelihood of continued democratic participation throughout life - and that the opposite is also true.

3. Remarks – Freya Aquarone

Freya introduced herself as an educator and education researcher with a background spanning teaching, curriculum support, and academic research. She explained that her role is to support the APPG by gathering and analysing evidence and producing the final inquiry report, which will summarise findings and make recommendations to government.

She outlined the research approach, which will involve collecting both written and oral evidence. Written submissions are now open to the public via the APPG website, with submissions particularly welcome from educators, young people, sector bodies, and stakeholders whose work relates to democracy and democratic practices in education.

Freya explained that the three oral evidence sessions will take place between January and March, each focusing on a different stakeholder group. The first session will examine international examples where votes at 16 are already in place, such as Wales and Scotland. The second evidence session will centre on young people themselves and the third teachers and education leaders.

Freya also outlined the key questions guiding the inquiry:

- Are schools places that teach effectively about democracy and democratic participation? What helps this to happen, and what discourages it?
- Do schools embed democratic practice in both teaching and learning and broader school culture? How could this be done differently or more effectively?

- What key steps need to be taken to ensure that schools prepare all young people to participate actively and meaningfully in democratic life?

She concluded by stressing that the inquiry is not simply about adding more content to the curriculum. It is also about whether young people are given meaningful opportunities to experience democratic processes first hand in schools. This includes democratic practices in classrooms, participatory pedagogies, collaborative curriculum approaches, and youth involvement in governance structures across the school.

4. Q&A

Inquiry session with young people

Chris Vince MP welcomed the inclusion of an evidence session with young people and asked how the panel would be selected and how it would reflect real-life diversity across minority groups, ages and genders. Freya explained that the process for finalising invitees for the oral evidence sessions is still ongoing, but targeted invitations will be sent to ensure a wide range of perspectives. While oral sessions will have limited capacity, written submissions were open to anyone, and we can do additional outreach where gaps appear.

Deliverability of recommendations

Lord Hampton noted that the Francis Review identified problems without clear suggestions for how to improve things. He asked whether the inquiry could provide a clear list of practical suggestions without adding pressure to teachers. Peter responded that the Francis Review's purpose was to identify what needed to change and implementation would follow, but he agreed that for the APPG's inquiry to be useful it needs to propose deliverable, realistic changes.

Mapping curriculum opportunities

Tom Middlehurst (ASCL) suggested that a valuable contribution of the inquiry would be mapping recommendations to existing opportunities in the current and incoming curriculum, showing school leaders how aims could be met. Peter agreed, arguing for an "evolutionary" approach that built on what already works rather than seeking another fundamental curriculum overhaul.

Learning from non-mainstream and alternative settings

Helen McGuire (parent campaigner) asked whether the inquiry would consider democratic schools, free schools and self-directed learning environments where democratic practice was embedded throughout daily learning. Freya confirmed that written submissions were open to all and that outreach would include those working or learning in more radical or alternative settings. She noted there was much to learn from models operating differently. Peter added that private schools often performed well in this area due to greater resources. While they

could not be directly “copy and pasted” into state schools, he was not opposed to adopting effective practices where appropriate.

Engaging with ideological opposition

John Bolt (SEA) warned that evidence would also come from groups opposed to democracy in schools, favouring more authoritarian models. He asked how the inquiry would address that challenge. Freya acknowledged divergence in views on the purpose of schooling. She said the inquiry focused not on whether democracy should be embedded but on how it could be done effectively.

Careers and work experience

Sarah Staples (Careers & Enterprise Company) highlighted new commitments for two weeks of work experience and suggested exploring how careers education and real-world exposure could build democratic understanding. She asked whether there was space for organisations like hers to contribute. Freya encouraged a submission and said the scope of the inquiry would, to an extent, be shaped by the evidence received.

Curriculum models

Alasdair MacDonald noted that England has a growing number of schools adopting a narrow, knowledge-based curriculum with highly controlled behaviour systems and warned that this should not be under-estimated. Peter responded by highlighting that the CAR’s concept note identifies three forms of knowledge: subject content, skills based, and knowledge about citizenship and the world. He emphasised that the review’s framing - including Becky Francis’s recommendations - does not advocate a narrow curriculum but instead supports a broader and more balanced approach.

Primary aged children

Sue Watson (teacher) asked whether the inquiry would include primary pupils. Peter confirmed that primary engagement was already happening and that there is a planned citizenship day event in his constituency with primary schools. Peter also committed to producing a child-friendly version of the terms of reference to share with selected primary schools. Freya added that while the oral evidence session with young people would focus on older age groups, written submissions were open to all ages.

Specialist citizenship teachers

Joe Bell (Association of Citizenship Teaching) raised concerns about curriculum reforms not being implemented until 2028 and highlighted the current shortage of specialist citizenship teachers. Peter agreed that this was why the inquiry was timely, sitting between the CAR publication and the rollout of votes at 16. He stressed that citizenship teaching should be specialist-led but also embedded across the curriculum. Freya echoed this, noting that

democratic empowerment needed to extend beyond subject knowledge into young people's wider school experience.

Engaging schools and MATs

Lord Watson asked how schools would be approached to ensure individual headteachers could contribute independently of MAT leadership structures. Freya explained that written evidence was fully open and that teachers within MATs could submit evidence independently and that the inquiry welcomed diverse forms of evidence including case studies and research.

Parents and carers

Baroness O'Neill asked how parents and carers would be engaged, noting that many young people learn about politics at home. Peter responded that parents and carers have a huge role to play and he would love to see them lead the way on this, but that doesn't always happen. He committed to ensuring that the inquiry captures their voice and how both parents and schools can support each other.

Socio-economic disadvantage

Tom Symons (Fair Education Alliance) raised the need to consider the experiences of pupils from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly in schools with high levels of deprivation. Freya agreed and confirmed that this would be considered as part of the inquiry.

Youth sector engagement

John Fowler stressed the importance of capturing views from informal education settings, particularly the youth sector, and recommended engaging national organisations such as the National Youth Agency. Freya confirmed the inquiry would welcome contributions from these organisations.

Qualifications

Anthony Smith (Parmiter's School) asked how qualifications might fit into the inquiry's recommendations. Freya said this was an area she hoped the inquiry would explore further. Peter added that meaningful measurement would ultimately come through increased turnout among 16- to 18-year-olds if the system succeeds.

5. Next Steps

The Chair encouraged all attendees to submit evidence to the enquiry and spread the word. Details can be found on our website: <https://www.schoolsappg.org.uk/news/votes-at-16-inquiry/view>