

How can we encourage civic engagement amongst the younger generation?

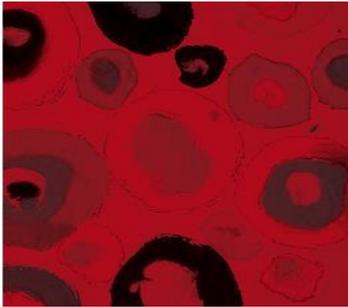
Submission from the Children's Commissioner to the Youth Parliament Social Services Committee

Introduction

- 1 I am delighted that the Youth Select Committee has chosen to focus on young people's civic engagement in this inquiry. Decisions made today by Parliament, local councils, and even other organisations like schools will impact on children and young people for years to come.
- 2 As the people most affected by these decisions, children and young people have the right to have their voices heard and taken into account. This right is set out in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, but in practice, is seldom upheld.
- 3 This is a great shame, not only for the children and young people whose opinions are not gathered or not heard, but for everyone, because decisions made with the participation and partnership of children and young people tend to be better, fairer, and more enduring.

Framing the issue

- 4 Discussion on this topic often centres on the question of how we can persuade an otherwise uninterested or disengaged population of children and young people to take more of an interest in civic matters. I believe this is the wrong framing.
- 5 It's true that young people are more likely not to engage with civic decision-making. At the 2017 general election, for example, only 62 percent of all eligible voters aged 18-24 were enrolled to vote, and of these, only 70 percent actually voted, representing a total loss of more than 270,000 potential young voters. These statistics are even worse for local elections.
- 6 However, I do not see such low voter engagement amongst young people as a failure on their part, but on the part of the politicians, institutions, and policies that have failed to actively seek the views of children and young people, take their needs and rights into consideration, or – frankly – even take the issues that matter to children and young people seriously.
- 7 While we should encourage civic engagement amongst younger generations, I want to be clear that the responsibility for this lies mostly with our civic institutions to make themselves meaningful, responsive, and relevant to children and young people.
- 8 There are many ways to do this, including looking at alternative decision-making models, co-designing policies and institutions with children and young people, and strengthening and expanding civics education, but I would like to focus my submission on one option, which has been close to my heart since I took over as Children's Commissioner: lowering the voting age to 16. I made the same challenge to your equivalent committee, the Social Services Committee, [when I appeared before them last year](#).



The OCC represents **1.1 million** people in Aotearoa New Zealand under the age of 18, who make up 23 per cent of the total population.

We advocate for their interests, ensure their rights are upheld, and help them have a say on issues that affect them.

For more information, please contact:

Holly Walker
Principal Advisor,
Strategy, Rights and
Advice

h.walker@occ.org.nz

04 931 7197

What do children and young people tell us?

- 9 When staff from my office [surveyed children and young people ahead of the 2017 election](#) about how they want to have their say on the issues that are important to them, we learned that children and young people think Aotearoa New Zealand is a great place to live, but that they think some things need to change. These were housing, the environment including climate change, inequality, and education.
- 10 Children and young people told us they care a lot about and feel connected to these and other issues. They want to talk about them with their whānau and friends. They want to talk and learn more about these issues in everyday life, ideally face to face, in a calm and safe environment. They prefer sharing their opinions and ideas via informal face to face conversations, or sessions led by children and young people, or through surveys, or with experts such as politicians visiting their school or community.
- 11 There was strong support among the children and young people we surveyed for lowering the voting age to at least 16 years of age. Children and young people also supported having civics education at all levels of education, increasing engagement opportunities to learn about issues that both interest and affect them. I have attached the full report as an appendix to this submission.

The case for lowering the voting age

- 12 In my view, lowering the voting age could enhance turnout, ingrain the habit of voting, and uphold children and young people's rights.
- 13 New Zealand would not be alone in giving younger people the vote. Sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds in Argentina, Cuba, Ecuador, Austria, Nicaragua and Brazil all have the right to vote.
- 14 In the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, 16- and 17-year-olds were empowered to vote, and 75 percent of them did so. The strongest political leadership in the US in recent years has in my view come from high school protesting against gun violence in their schools.
- 15 No doubt the Committee will hear about the need for greater civics education. I agree this is important. But in my view, it should be combined with lowering the voting age, so that students learning about opportunities for civic engagement at school have the opportunity to immediately put what they have learned into practice.
- 16 Evidence suggests that if voting habits are established early, they are likely to be set for life. If young people have the opportunity to vote for the first time while they are still at school, they are more like to continue to build on this civic engagement in the future. This is backed up by longitudinal research in the US, which found that when students experienced involvement in civic and political issues that mattered to them, there were had positive long-term impacts on future political participation.

Conclusion

- 17 I would like to conclude with the words of teenager Azaria Howell, [writing for the Spinoff](#) last year:

"Some argue that young people don't know enough about the world to allow them the right to vote, an argument that I think is simply absurd. We should be able to have a voice on issues that are impacting us, as we will inherit the hand-me-down decisions of the older generations' votes. I would argue that young people know more about certain aspects of politics: we are the ones living out changes to NCEA and breathing the air others have polluted. We should be able to have an impact on the school we attend every day, or the bus that takes us home, in the form of a vote."