
MY MP CAN

A MANIFESTO FOR YOUTH

Edited by Andrew Mycock, Alex Coates, and Lammy Jones

Introduction

Since the late 1990s, research has suggested that there is now a 'disengaged generation' of young people who are less likely to participate in traditional forms of politics, such as voting in elections or joining political parties. Young people also say they don't trust or understand politicians and that politicians don't understand or care about them.

However significant numbers of young people also claim they are interested and knowledgeable about politics and recognise their duty to vote even though they view the political system with 'engaged scepticism'. They have therefore increasingly adopted new forms of political participation, particularly in the realms of social media, which seems to be an alternative to traditional and formal political activities.

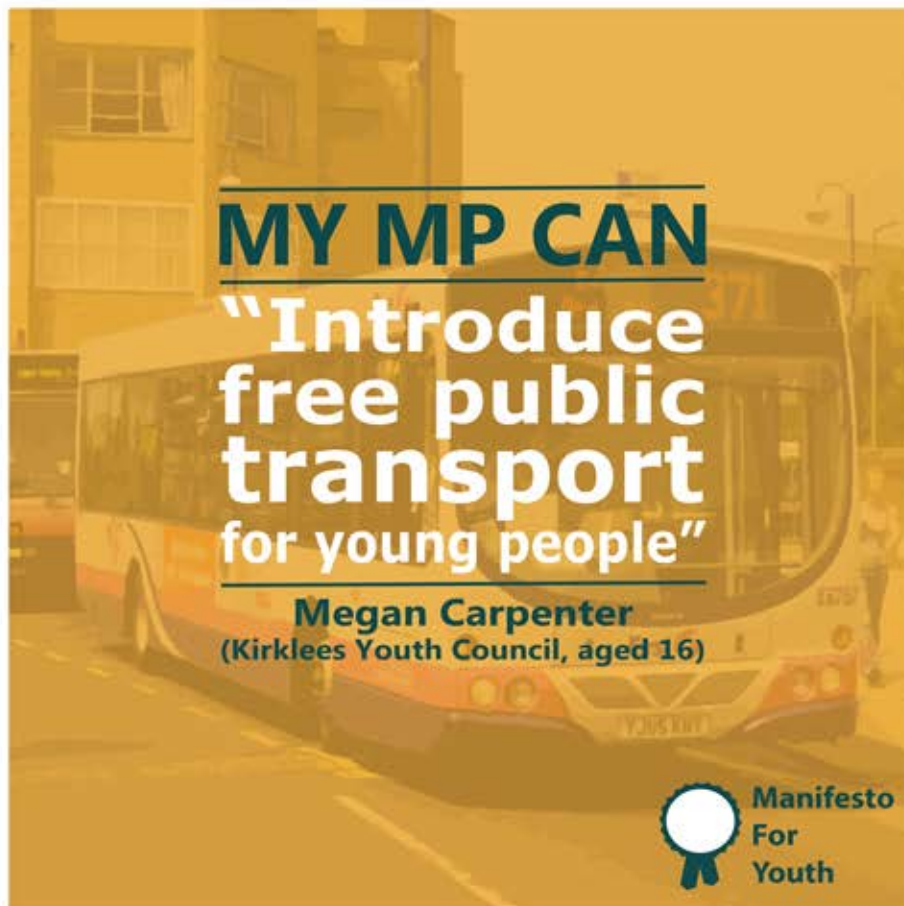
It is widely acknowledged that there is a need to reform how political parties engage with and represent the interests of young people, particularly those not yet old enough to vote. Political parties offer few opportunities to these young people to design policies that reflect their interests, particularly during local, national or European elections. This means that young people on the cusp of enfranchisement have scant interest in election manifestos that offer little they can relate to in terms of policy. This can instil a sense of political dislocation that can last for years.

It was with these issues in mind that staff and students at the University of Huddersfield worked with young people in order to produce A Manifesto for Youth. The project was led by Dr Andy Mycock and Alex Coates, a 2nd year politics student. The design and publication of the Manifesto was overseen by Lammy Jones, a postgraduate student within the Centre for Research in the Social Sciences at the University. We are grateful for the kind support and generous help in undertaking this project from colleagues at the Kirklees Youth Council, the Rodillian Academy (Lofthouse, West Yorkshire), Ryburn Valley High School (Sowerby Bridge), Loreto Sixth Form College (Manchester), and Xaverian College (Manchester).

We would especially like to thank the 111 young people who took part in the project for their time, energy, and ideas. The Manifesto for Youth respondents engaged with a wide-range of policy areas, highlighting the extensive remit of youth citizenship and its overlap with the electoral interests of those over the age of eighteen. Participants in the project drew attention to their concerns over the need for more female representation in parliament, the need for reform of the electoral system, and the engagement of young people in policy-making in their schools, colleges and local communities. Some respondents expressed concerns about the economy, drawing attention to issues such as tax avoidance, job opportunities for young people, and housing. A number of proposals were submitted encouraging the nationalisation of public transport provision and energy utilities as well as the abolition of private schools. A number of young people proposed the abolition of 'tampon tax', the legalisation of safe standing at football games, and establishing limits for how much CO2 can be emitted from households. The eight policy proposals outlined within the Manifesto proved however to be the most popular amongst our respondents.

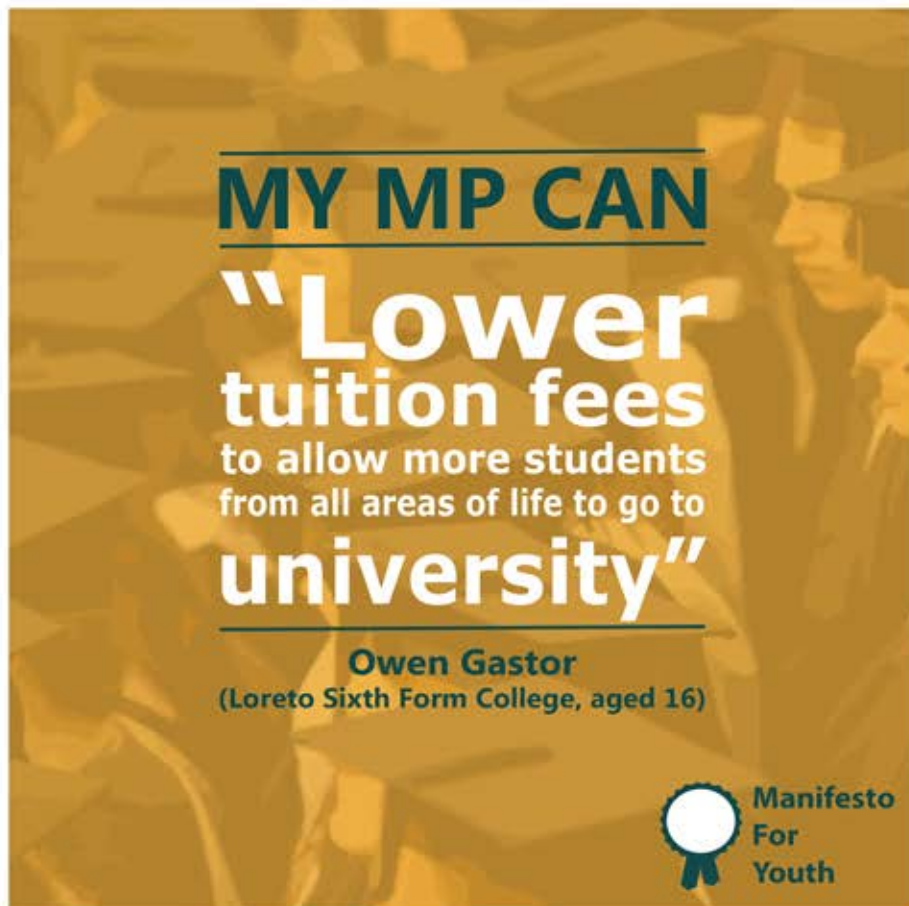
Transport

Transport is an issue that resonates strongly with young people, with many citing the increasingly high costs associated with travelling by bus and/or rail to get to school or college. Some young people, such as Kate Crawshaw (Ryburn Valley High School, aged 14), suggested that bus prices should be lowered for young people. However most respondents supported free public transport for under-18s, noting the extent to which young people are constrained by increasing transport costs. For example, Jordan (Loreto Sixth Form College, aged 17) noted 'the high prices of transport means that there is less money for books and stationary'. A number of students also commented on the cost of car insurance for young people, arguing that this discriminated against them and limited their capacity to be independent of their parents and public transport.



University Tuition Fees

The issue of university tuition fees is clearly one that vexes under-18 year-olds non-voters, with a significant number of respondents proposing their reduction. Jennifer Cox (Rodillian Academy, aged 16) spoke for many when she questioned 'why should students who want to study at university have to pay such a substantial amount of money that they end up with a colossal amount of debt?' Some, such as Rabiya Olajide (Loreto Sixth Form College, aged 17) provided a specific figure, suggesting tuition fees should be lowered from £9000 to £5000. However it was noticeable that few young people suggested that tuition fees should be scrapped completely, thus indicating that many now accept that they should pay something towards their higher education. Alex (Loreto Sixth Form College, aged 16) proposed the introduction of a system 'whereby graduates pay a proportion of their income that is relative to their degree course and profession'.



Voting Age

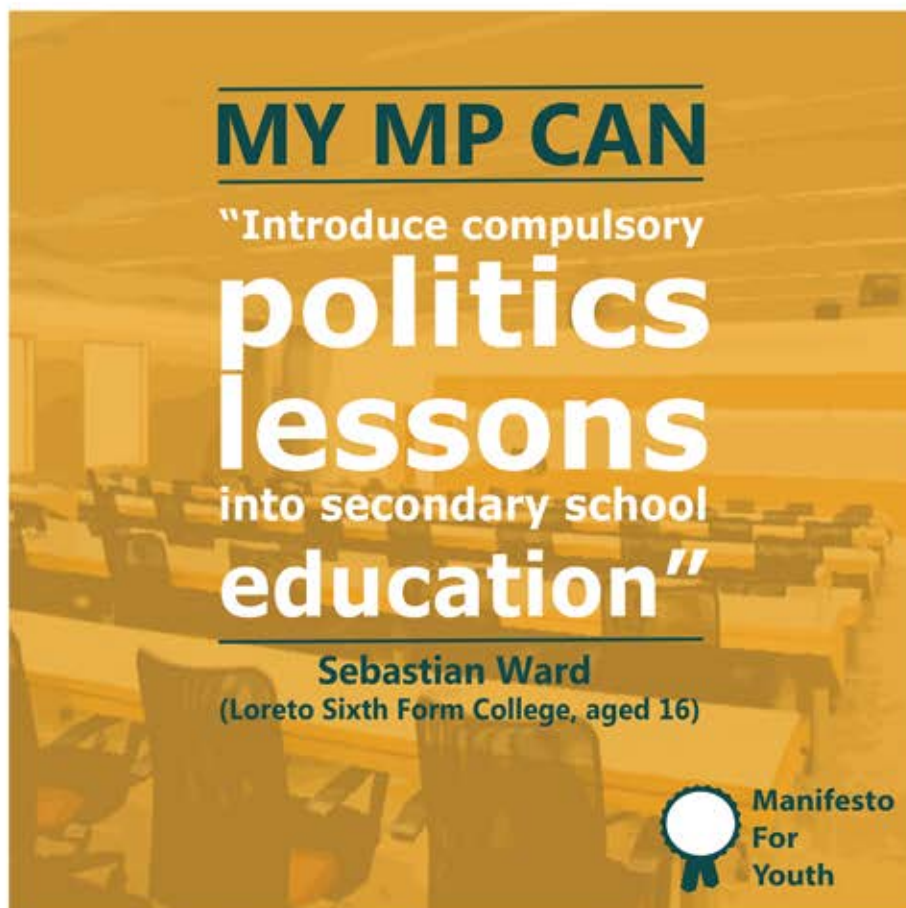
Concerns about youth political disengagement and the health of British democracy are reflected in the number of proposals for voting age reform in the UK by the respondents. Some, such as Callum (Loreto Sixth Form College, aged 16), suggest young people should have the vote as they have 'reached a level of maturity'. However support for 'votes at 16' was not uniform. Amelia (Loreto Sixth Form College, aged 16) suggested that the voting age should be lowered to 17 'as you are able to drive, hence have to buy fuel and insurance'. Some, such as Sam Capper (Xaverian College, aged 16) suggested that, rather than lowering the voting age, compulsory voting should be introduced with an option for 'none of the above'.

It was clear that some young people connected voting age with wider questions about the variability of ages of responsibility. Some, such as Matthew Turner (Loreto Sixth Form College, aged 17) argued that the age young people are allowed to purchase alcohol should be lowered to 16. However some young people, such as Ayisha Ul-Haq (Loreto Sixth Form College, aged 17) suggested that the age of consent for purchasing alcohol and tobacco should be raised while they driving age should be lowered to 16.



Citizenship Education

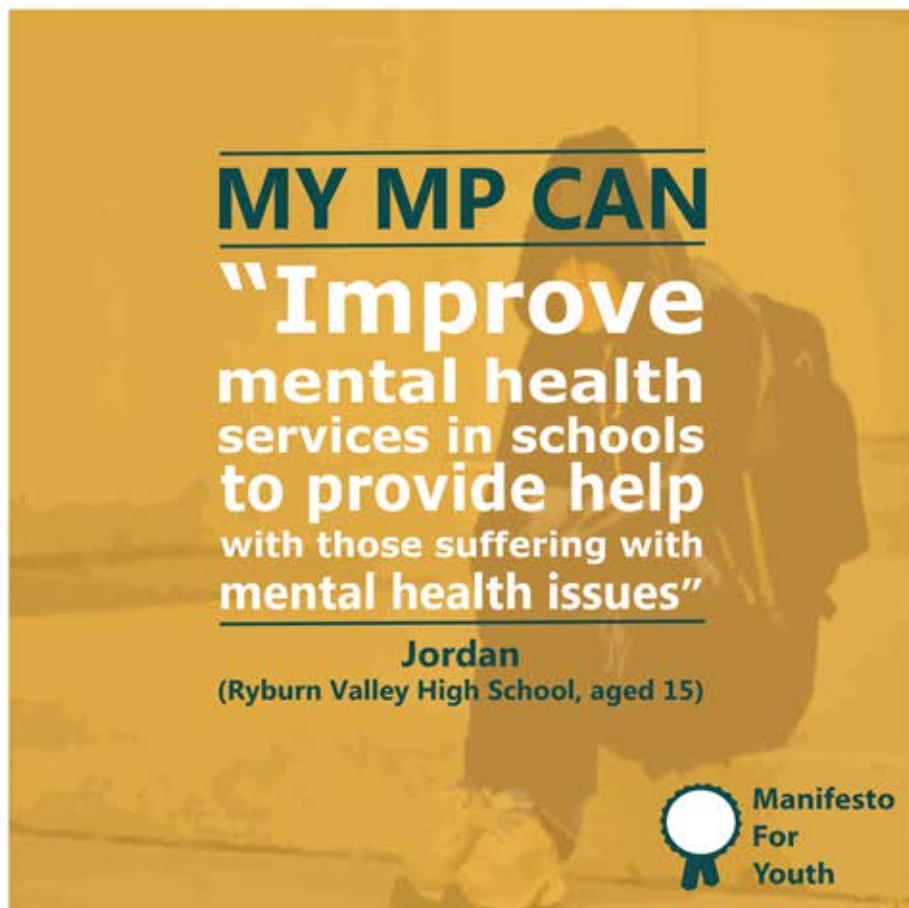
Although Citizenship has been a statutory subject in the National Curriculum in England since 2002, government and academic research has consistently highlighted the lack of attention given to the political education of young people. A significant number of respondents drew attention to this issue, arguing that dedicated political education was not a feature of their own educational experience. Some, such as Yann Griffiths (Xaverian College, aged 17), argued that compulsory political education should be linked to a recognised qualification such as a GCSE and also 'supported by MP visits to schools'. Megan Carpenter (Kirklees Youth Council, aged 16) was one of a number of respondents who argued that political education should be linked to a wider programme of 'Life skills' education providing information for young people on applying for jobs and mortgages, paying taxes and banking, and other ways to prepare them for adulthood. Annie (Loreto Sixth Form College, aged 16) agreed, proposing that the UK Youth Parliament's 'Curriculum for Life' should be implemented.



Mental Health

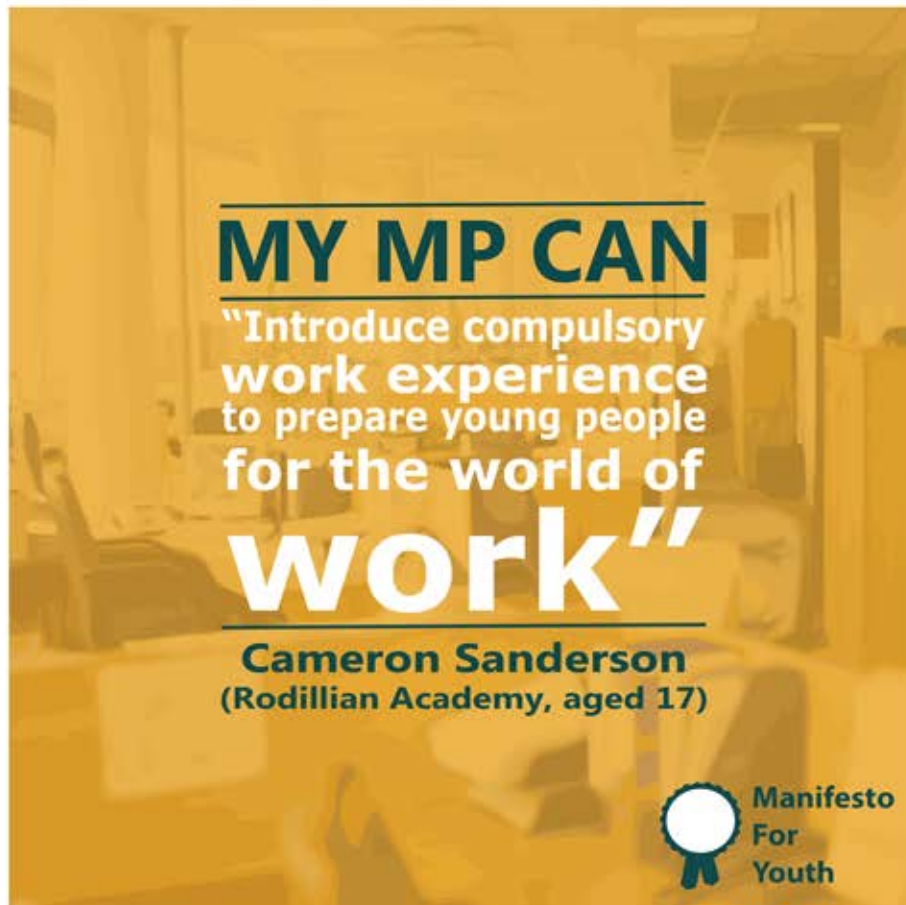
The growing resonance of mental health amongst political parties is also reflected within the Manifesto. A key concern of young people is that support for them is not sufficient.

Hannah Marshall (Ryburn Valley High School, aged 13), suggested there is a need for more mental health therapists and better education about mental health in schools. Jordan (Ryburn Valley High School, aged 15) proposed that 'each school should have a councillor for young people to talk to if they are suffering with depression or anxiety'.



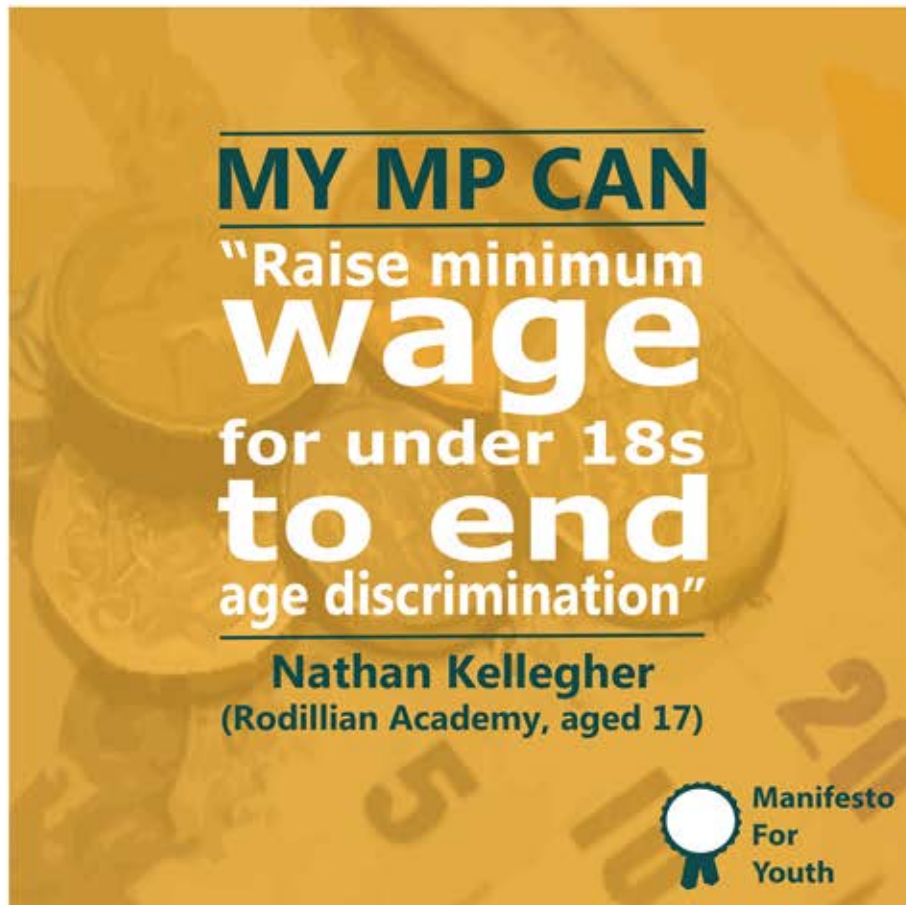
Work Experience

Research has highlighted that work experience for young people in formal education is variable and not always rewarding or of value to them. The resonance of this issue amongst our respondents highlights that many are concerned that they do not have sufficient work placement opportunities to supplement academic and other forms of learning. Jamie-Lea Taylor (Loreto Sixth Form College, aged 17) suggested that work experience should be offered during Year 9 in order to not interfere with GCSE's, noting work experience 'teaches students life and communication skills which they require in later life'.



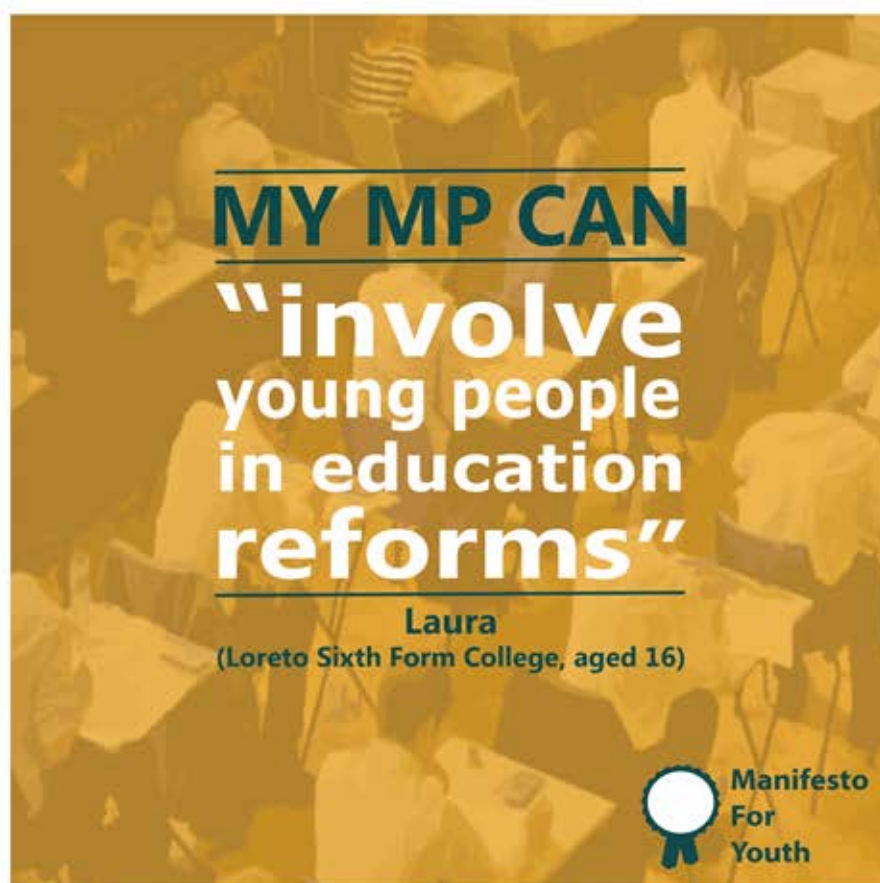
Minimum Wage

The principle of equality with regards to the national minimum wage encouraged a number of young people to argue for an end to employment-based age discrimination. For many young people who are economically active, usually in part-time employment, a clear sense of injustice is evident. As Mina Emami (Loreto Sixth Form College, aged 17) argued, 'I believe it is unfair that two people who do the same job and have the same responsibilities should be paid differently due to their age'. Hannah Tawn (Loreto Sixth Form College, aged 17) suggested that 'there was a fight for equal pay between men and women and now there has to be a fight for equal pay between youth and adults'.



Education Reform

Many of the young people who responded drew attention (implicitly or explicitly) to a strong sense of powerlessness. This lack of ability to engage in or influence debates about their education was reflected in a broad range of policy areas, with concerns expressed about the lack of health schools meals (Liam, Ryburn Valley High School, aged 14) and a need for better trained school teachers (Pat Brierley, Loreto Sixth Form College, aged 16). One issue of particular concern has been the reform of GCSE examinations, with shift from modular to exam-based assessment encouraging Saad Saddiq (Kirklees Youth Council, aged 13) to demand a 'return to the old system'. This issue was of more resonance to younger citizens amongst our respondents, with James (Kirklees Youth Council, aged 14) also requesting an 'increase in the amount of coursework rather than exams'. Gemma Newton (Rodillian Academy, aged 17) argued that changes to the curriculum should also mean 'consulting with the teachers unions'.



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