

THE STORY

STATISTICS, TRENDS AND RESEARCH FOR YOUTH WORK

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POLITICAL IDENTITY:
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WELCOME TO THE STORY

In each issue of *The Story*, we bring you some of the latest research related to young people and youth work. We look for statistics, research and trends which can shape your work with young people – informing your thinking and practice.

With some interludes of torrential rain, the sun has been shining and the birds have been singing! Since Volume 27 of *The Story*, we have been very busy. We have been working behind the scenes on some exciting, upcoming projects, met with our Research and Ethics Advisory Board, been on our second staff retreat where we heard from Elizabeth Oldfield, attended the annual lecture (on the theme of [power](#)), and Gemma has been busy at work on the Alban Way project ([read her blog about it here](#)).

We had always planned for Volume 28 to be about young people and politics, particularly after hearing about the closure of the British Youth Council, but now it is a more live discussion than ever before. On Wednesday 22nd May, the Prime Minister announced a general election for 4th July, much to the surprise of many who expected an Autumn election.

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In this recently extended issue, we look at some of the key findings from the Children's Commissioner's *The Big Ambition Report* (p.3–5), think about young people and political identity using the findings from the *Understanding Society Surveys* (p.6–7), take a look at polls, surveys, and youthful optimism (p.8–11), and, finally, some practical ideas about how we might learn and respond in the lead up to the general election (p.12–14).

We hope you enjoy!

Dr Gemma Madle & Dr Hannah Bowden

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THE BIG AMBITION:

Key Findings and Reflections

In March 2024, the Children's Commissioner for England released [The Big Ambition report](#). Compiling the voices, views, and experiences of children and young people about their lives and aspirations and what they want the government to do, The Big Ambition is a significant report which engaged 367,000 children and adults and received responses from 253,000 (2% of children in England). Including children aged 6–17, 18-year-olds still in college or school, and adults on their behalf, the findings of this report cover 10 themes and provides some key insights into how young people feel about the world around them. You can read these in the Executive Summary of the report. Below we have drawn out some of the findings which feel particularly significant. Following this, we reflect on how on these themes and how we might respond.

Key findings

Only **11%** of the 300 children living in **mental health settings** agreed that their thoughts about their future are listened to (this group were most likely to disagree with all statements).

Only **48%** of children who were **not in school** and **69%** of **mixed-ethnicity** children agreed they felt safe and protected in their local area (compared with **73%** overall).

48% of children with a **SEND** said they know about money and life skills.

Only **49%** of children agreed they feel happy with the way they look (**60%** of boys, **40%** of girls).

57% of children with a **SEND** and **59%** with a **social worker** agreed they have the same opportunities as other children and young people.

71% of children in education agreed they feel safe online compared with **53% not in education**.

Although there were too few **Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children** to report, it was identified they have been placed in unsuitable accommodation, are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, disproportionately receive unregistered education, are subject to poor age assessment practice, and do not always get the care they need for trauma recovery.

Finally, thinking more specifically about politics, it was found that:

Only **22%** of children overall agreed that people who run the country listen to their views and only **52%** felt empowered to change issues they care about.

Food for Thought

The majority (78%) of young people included in the survey feel the people who run the country do not listen to their views. The Children's Commissioner writes that this initially made her feel 'despondent' but later came to the realisation that 'this is not a generation who have become cynical, who believe that nothing will ever change. This is a generation who feel frustrated that they are not listened to, exactly because they have complete faith that if they were listened to, then politicians could and would transform their lives for the better'.

Coupled with the [closure of the British Youth Council](#), this report identifies the growing distance between young people and politics. This is not a distance created by young people's lack of willingness to engage but by the rapidly decreasing spaces for their voices to be shared and heard. Research (see for example [Burning Down the House](#)) consistently shows young people are passionate about issues of environmental and social justice, they want their voices to count. Whilst the Children's Commissioner's reports are elevating their views, it must not be allowed to create another echo chamber of voice but a space for and call to action.

Alongside this clear chasm, there are groups of young people who, looking at the responses within this report, have a vastly different experience of life than their 'average' peer (those with a Social Worker, those with SEND, those in mental health settings, and those out of education – see those in **emboldened** above). Most notably, young people in mental health settings, on average, answered every question more negatively than all children.

The biggest percentage difference was in response to whether they feel their 'thoughts about the future are listened to,' to which only 11% of responses by or on behalf of those in mental health settings agreed with (compared to 70% overall).

Together, these two findings create a stark picture of a generation of young people who feel politicians do not listen to them and, within that, groups (who we already know to be marginalised) who feel their futures do not matter to the institutions and people who are commissioned to care for them. This was something identified in [The Independent Review of Children's Social Care](#) in 2022:

'It is paramount that children have a powerful voice in the decisions that affect them. Children in care currently have a plethora of different professionals in their lives, but too few adults who are unequivocally on their side and able to amplify their voice. This system should be simplified by replacing a number of existing roles with truly independent advocacy for children that is opt-out, rather than opt-in'.

Whilst it is clear, therefore, that this has been an ongoing issue for many years, with the upcoming general election, there are several individuals and organisations who are calling on all party leaders to listen to children and young people. For example, the Children's Commissioner has made a call for 'every party leader to hold a debate for children before the election and every manifesto to consider how its pledges impact lives, their families and their futures'¹! Furthermore, a coalition of children's charities have come together to organise a mass-scale election where children can have their say about the society they want to live in:

[Our Generation. Our Vote.](#)

Responding to the Findings

It can often feel, in the face of big findings that point to systemic issues that feel well beyond our control, that we can't and won't have any influence. But, if those of us who work with young people resign to this, then changes from the bottom-up cannot occur. So, whilst we are unable to ensure those in power listen to and act on the findings of The Big Ambition report², we can ensure that in our own practice, young people feel heard, valued, and learn about spaces in which they can (particularly for those who are marginalised from such spaces more generally).

Here are some suggestions for doing so:



Distribute Power

- Include young people in decision-making within your youth work setting.
- Give young people roles and opportunities to grow in their giftings.
- Actively listen, particularly to those who you know are not listened to in one or more of their settings.



Learn

- Make sure you are aware of the current issues which young people care about. Invite them to recommend books and documentaries – watch or read them as a leadership team and have discussions with your young people.



Talk

- Talk about what Jesus and the Bible can teach us about politics – this [video](#) from Christians in Politics might be a good place to start.
- Think about how we might [disagree well](#) as Christians when we recognise our unity in Christ.



Pray

- Hand it over to God; pray for our young people and the leaders of your country. Prayer is our most powerful weapon.

1. Taken from The Children's Commissioner's official Instagram page.

2. If you do have a voice within this sphere of influence, perhaps you can consider how you might present these findings and join the call for action.

YOUNG PEOPLE AND POLITICAL IDENTITY:

Findings from the Understanding Society surveys

Understanding Society (US) has launched an annual Insights report, showcasing research on political identity and including a section on young people's political engagement. US is a large UK-wide longitudinal survey that tracks trends in attitudes and lifestyles, so we had a look to see what their Researchers discovered...

Some key findings:

Young people who don't experience childhood deprivation, whose parents are politically engaged and have a higher level of education are much more likely to be politically engaged than their peers both as adolescents and as adults.

Schools can amplify social inequality in political engagement by not offering opportunities for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in leadership or civic learning and debate (although the impact of schools offering civic learning on young people's engagement with politics is questioned in other research).

Youth Volunteering has a significant positive impact on the political engagement of YP raised by politically disengaged parents.

The research also found that for adults who lived in areas of high immigration those who identified as English had lower wellbeing and life satisfaction than those who identified as British, unfortunately they didn't explore the same links for young people in this paper, so we don't know if national identity correlates with wellbeing in the same way for younger generations.

The researchers suggest that the reason those who don't go to church are more likely to support Brexit may be due to the social mixing of regular churchgoers and their attitudes to 'outsiders'.

Why do we think this is interesting?

The % of young adults voting in the UK has decreased since 1970 from **65%** to around **50%** and the crucial age for forming political attitudes is 11–15 years old. The data shows that the voices of disadvantaged young people are underrepresented in our democratic systems both now and into the future as they become adults. The concern about the exclusion of the working class from our democratic systems and the “professionalisation” of politics is well documented ([LSE Blog](#)). So it leads us to ask what can we do as Youth Workers to encourage political engagement amongst all young people, not just those that already show an interest?

So what?

In youth work & ministry we have an opportunity to offer young people from disadvantaged backgrounds opportunities that they may be denied within school or other settings. What can our youth groups offer in terms of encouraging discussion and debate from marginalised voices, drawing out leadership skills from those who might not be the usual candidates and providing volunteering opportunities for those that might not grow up with experiences of civic engagement?

Where can I go for more info?

It's worth chatting to other Youth Workers in your networks to find out what they might be doing in this area or whether you can collaborate if your resources are stretched! But if you want to check out some online sources that might help guide you with ideas these two are worth looking at:



[Young Christians in Politics](#)

A network young people can sign up to, downloads and resources for discussion & teaching.



[The Politics Project](#)

Has teaching guides and session plans on civic engagement and democracy as well as a guide to digital surgeries if you want to help young people directly connect with their elected representatives.

POLLS, SURVEYS AND YOUTHFUL OPTIMISM

It's polling season and we thought it would be interesting to look at a YMCA survey from last Autumn that explores **Young People's political priorities** alongside some of the latest YouGov research and see if there are any parallels. We've also drawn in a few findings from a recent Evangelical Alliance survey.

Who was surveyed?

YouGov

- 2,072 adults (18+) of which 168 were 18–24 year olds
- 23–24 May 2024

YMCA

- 1,054 young adults (16–24 year olds)
- September 2023

Evangelical Alliance

- 1,380 self identified evangelical Christians (adults)
- Nov/Dec 2023

Key findings:

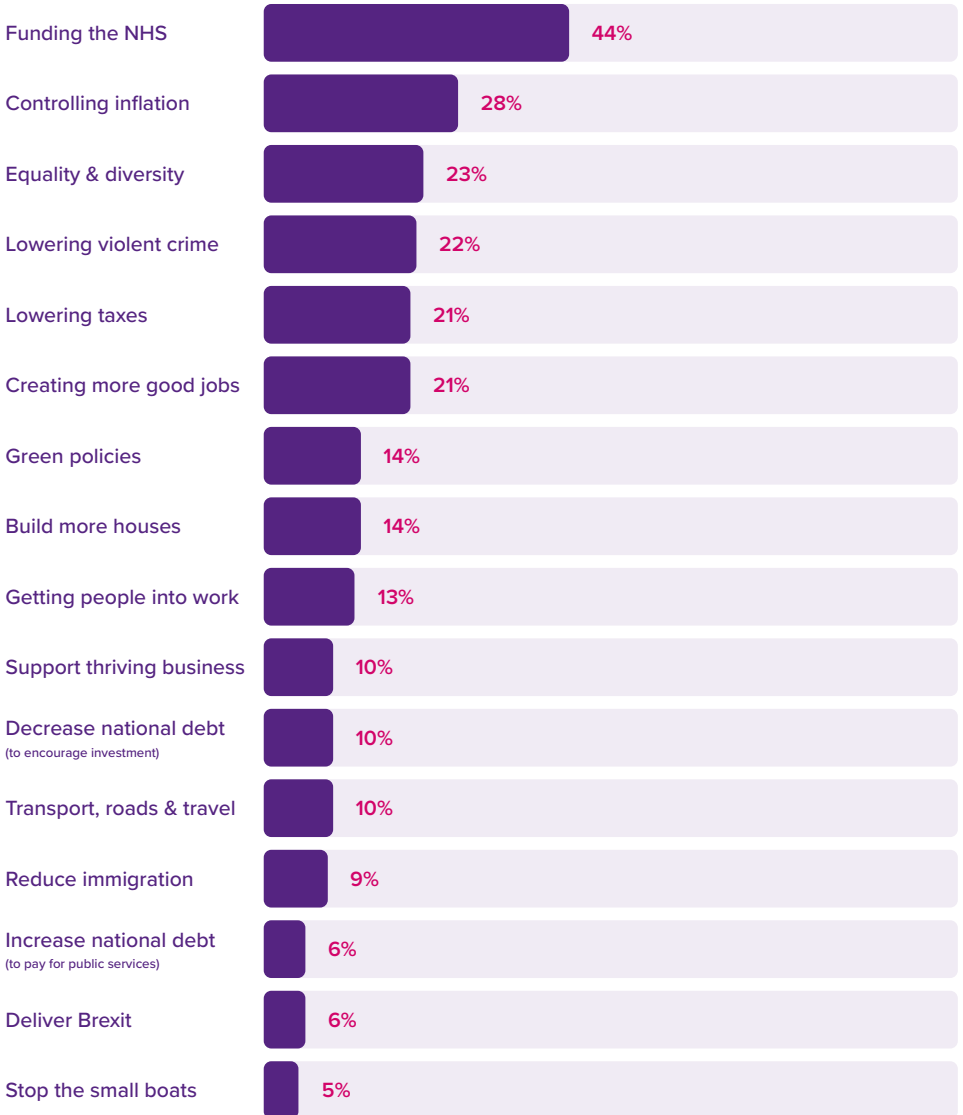
When it came to the NHS, Social Care and Opportunities for young people the 18–24-year-olds were fairly convinced a Labour Government would bring improvements whilst those over 65 didn't really feel it would make much difference.

The only areas where younger voters felt they wouldn't see improvement were Defence (no change) and Stopping the small boats (-1).

The biggest differences between the younger and older voters were seen around the Economy, and Standard or Cost of living with younger voters more confident they would see improvement and older voters expecting things to get worse should we see a Labour party in power.

Figure 1. Young people's political priorities % of young people who ranked each priority in their top 3 (YMCA)

What are young voters' political priorities?



What are political priorities for young people?

Young people are less concerned about debt, borders and Brexit and more concerned about health, welfare and fair opportunities

(Figure 1 – YMCA).

The NHS is a top priority for young adults with **44%** in the YMCA survey saying it was a top 3 priority for them. It was also one of the areas that younger voters were most optimistic an incoming Labour Government would improve

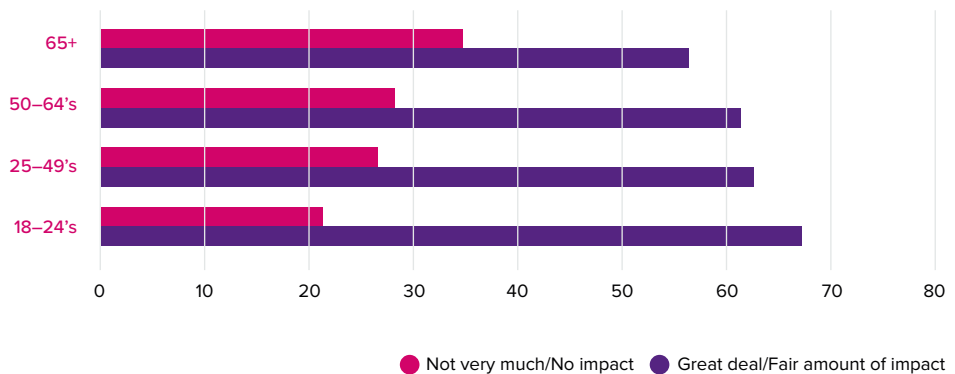
(YouGov). They were less likely to rank 'Equality and Diversity' and 'Green and Environment' as priority policy areas in 2023 than they were in 2021 and only **5%** felt that stopping small boats should be a top 3 priority for the Government (YMCA). Evangelical Christians reported that the top 3 influences on their votes were policies that 'help others most in need', 'reflect Christian/Biblical values' and show a party can 'manage the economy'. When ranking priorities, they placed the Economy at number 1, followed by Poverty and Equality & Justice in third place (EA).

Will a new Government make any difference?

The YouGov survey shows that younger voters are more likely to say that which party is in power has a direct impact on their day to day lives (Figure 2). However, they might not think they have any influence on which party that is with **30%** in the YMCA survey saying they didn't feel their vote would make any difference.

Figure 2. % of voters who say which party is in power has or doesn't have an impact on their everyday life (YouGov).

Does which party is in power make a difference to your day to day life?



3. We took the difference between the % of respondents who felt that under a Labour Government they would see improvement and those who felt things would get worse to give an average score for each age group for each policy area. We then compared the average scores between age groups.

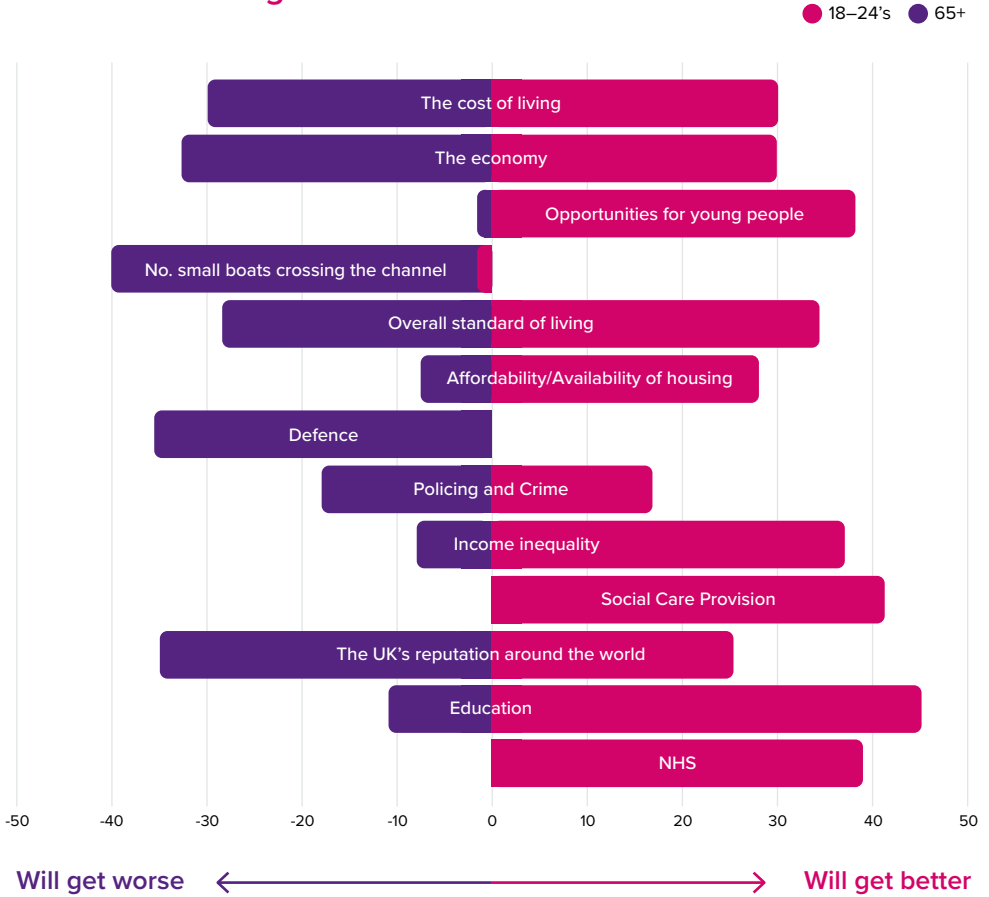
Despite feeling they may lack influence younger voters were much more optimistic about how things might improve under a Labour Government with significant differences seen between their views and those of the over 65s³ (YouGov). There was a clear trend across pretty much all the policy areas of voters becoming less optimistic the older they got. But when we directly compared the results for 18–24-year-olds against 65+ year olds the contrast was stark! (Figure 3).

Does anyone actually trust politicians to deliver?

Despite **86%** of young voters indicating some likelihood to vote in the next election over **30%** don't actually trust political parties to deliver what they promise (YMCA). This compares to **93%** of evangelical Christians who intend to vote but only **6%** who say they trust politicians. Interestingly, despite all the political scandals in recent years for adult evangelical Christians this is a **100%** increase on the **6%** that said in 2014 they trusted politicians to keep to the promises in their manifestos (EA).

Figure 3. Differences in views between 18–24-year-olds and 65+ on whether they think things will get better or worse with a Labour Government. (YouGov).

If Labour win the General Election do you think these areas will get better or worse?



What we don't know is whether respondents' optimism or expectation things will get worse is based on how much they think they will personally be affected or whether it's a broader population-wide view. In reality, it's probably a combination of both, but what is clear is that younger voters are leaning more towards a view that "Things can only get better".

References:

YouGov General Election 2024: Do Britons think things will get better under Labour? [ygo-assets-websites-editorial-emea.yougov.net/documents/YouGov_-_What_Labour_do_differently.pdf](https://yougov-assets-websites-editorial-emea.yougov.net/documents/YouGov_-_What_Labour_do_differently.pdf)

YMCA Winning Hearts and Minds Report www.ymca.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ymca-winning-hearts-and-minds-2023.pdf

The Evangelical Alliance Thinking Faithfully about Politics Report www.eauk.org/general-election/thinking-faithfully-about-politics

WHAT CAN WE DO AND LEARN IN THE LEAD UP TO THE GENERAL ELECTION?

From the previous three sections of this volume of *The Story*, we can draw out three (amongst many others!) key themes:



Young people do not think the people who run the country listen to their views.



The voices of marginalised young people identify clear disparities, but youth ministry spaces offer opportunity for these to be activated and heard.



There are clear generational differences in political priorities, voting intentions, and optimism for change.

With the General Election looming, we want to leave this Volume on a more practical note, equipping you to engage, listen to, and respond to the voices of young people when it comes to politics and the discussions which feed into it beyond just “Who will be our next Prime Minister?”.

So, in this section, we have put together some practical steps to respond to the above three themes covered within this volume: engaging young people in discussions about politics, creating a welcome environment for marginalised voices, and helping young people to disagree well.

Engaging Young People in Discussions About Politics

Across all the research included in this volume, there is a fairly universal consensus amongst young people that they do not feel those in power listen to their voices. Working with young people provides the opportunity not only to model listening and responding to their voices but also to speak about politics in an environment founded upon respectful listening. Here are some things you might like to try:

- Facilitate opportunities for young people to engage in 'deliberative dialogue' around different topics that matter to them. This means creating space for young people to deliberate over different topics with others who have different views to identify 'courses of action they can take to make positive change, expanding their idea of what it means to be a citizen in a democratic system' (Corrie, 2020:238). The [National Issues Forum](#) has lots of materials on this. They also offer several ground rules which include: encouraging everyone to participate, no domination of one or two individuals, discussion to maintain a focus on the topic, consider all major choices and positions, maintain an atmosphere for discussion, and remember that listening is important (Corrie, 2020; National Issues Forum, 2024).
- Use the wealth of materials provided by the [Democracy Classroom](#) which is helpfully divided by age groups. As the election draws closer, they will also upload the party manifestos which are suitable for young people – you might want to look at these with your group and engage the above model to discuss their feelings about each one. What

do they agree with? What don't they agree with? What topics that matter to them have they missed out? What do they say about young people?

- If you are able, engage your youth group in the [Our Generation. Our Vote.](#) initiative which enables young people to take part in a mass-scale election following political education. They have two upcoming information webinars on 6th and 13th June, both at 4pm

Creating a Welcome Environment for Marginalised Voices

As noted on [Page 6](#), in youth work and ministry, we can offer young people from disadvantaged backgrounds opportunities that they may be denied within school or in other settings. It is important that we think about, therefore, how we might encourage marginalised voices to participate and be heard in discussion and debate, draw out leadership skills from those who might not be the usual candidate, and provide volunteering opportunities for those who might grow up with experiences of civic engagement. Here are some things you might like to consider:

- Do you have any young people who might be considered marginalised or disadvantaged? Think about disability, race, sex, being in the care system, mental health institutions, not attending school, and so on. Try to learn about the barriers they might face in day-to-day life, how they feel their difference affects them, and how they would feel included and heard in your setting.

- Listen to The Children’s Society [Roots to Change](#) podcast which focusses on systemic change in Youth Work and how to create change for young people, focussing on voices which are often not heard
- Read this insightful document (co-written by Isabelle Brodie, one of our Research & Ethics Board members!) [Hearing Young People’s Voices – Reflective Questions for Strategic Leaders](#) (2021:2) which offers you the opportunity to ‘reflect on a number of key questions, which will inform and underpin the development of local approaches to youth engagement, consultation, participatory practice and co-production’.

accept an ‘us vs them’ position but, instead, ‘teaches skills in transforming conflict away from division and violence’ (Corrie, 2020:239) and toward finding ‘common ground amid differences’ (Molnar-Main, 2017:20).

- [Watching the video](#) released by Christians in Politics during their #disagreewell campaign in 2016.

How to Help Young People Disagree Well

Andy Flanagan (2015), in his book *Those Who Show Up*, says ‘[p]olitics would be extremely dull if we all agreed on everything. There is joy in diversity, and we should not be afraid to disagree with one another, but in a way that models the reconciling love of Jesus. Good disagreement is a gift that the church can offer the world around it – and our political system could certainly do with a healthy dose of it’. It is integral, then, in the lead up to the election (and always) we help young people to disagree well both with their peers and those of different ages. To do so, you might think about:

- Engaging, as above, young people in ‘deliberative dialogue’. Not only does this offer the opportunity for young people to identify their own stance on different topics but also provides a model which does not

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- Corrie, E.W. (2020). Deliberative Democratic Theological Education: A Proposal for Youth Ministry That Builds Peace. *Religious Education*, 115(3), pp 233–244. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2020.1768471>
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- Molnar-Main, S. (2017). *Deliberation in the Classroom: Fostering Critical Thinking, Community, and Citizenship in Schools*. Ashland: Kettering Foundation.

YOUTH WORK DIAGRAMS: What is Youth Ministry?

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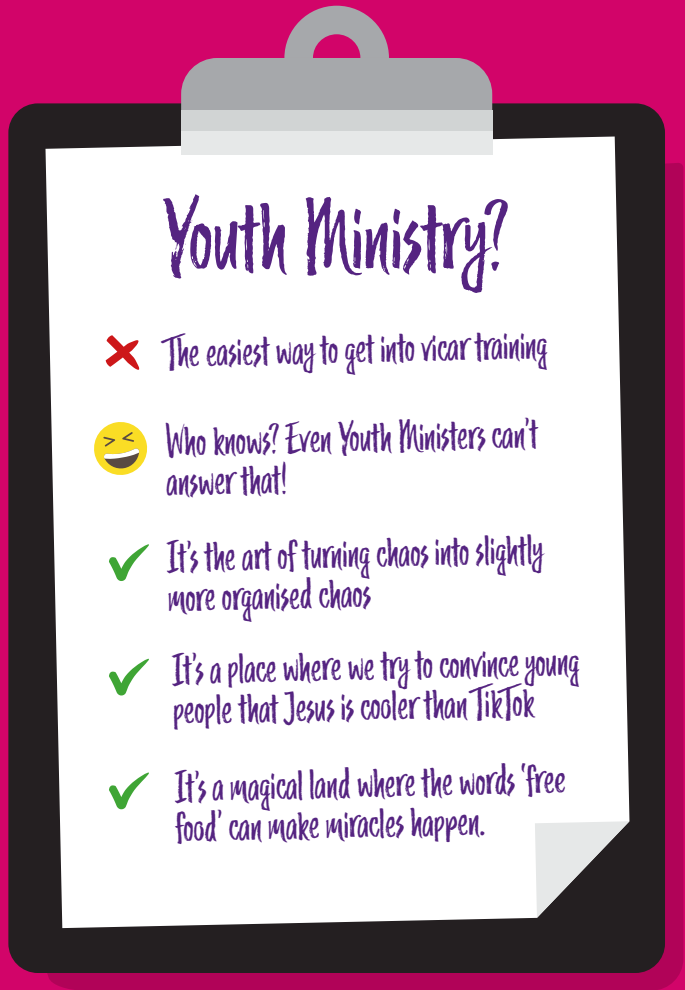
Youthscape

Bute Mills, 74 Bute Street,
Luton, LU1 2EY

hello@youthscape.co.uk
01582 877220

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TWITTER POLL:

What should the lower voting age in the UK be for general elections?

