

ENGAGING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE THROUGH YMCA



Liam Preston, Public Affairs Manager at YMCA, discusses how the YMCA uses events to engage young people in politics and local decision making.

Whenever there is an election in this country – be that local, county, general or, most recently, the EU Referendum – the numbers of young people participating is always criticised. As a group, they are labelled ‘apathetic’, ‘disinterested’, ‘lazy’ and ‘unengaged’ and, in truth, the numbers participating would support some of those assertions.

However, while participation in traditional democracy is not as high as other age groups, at YMCA we know that young people do engage in political and campaigning activities. In fact, they actually participate in their own forms of democracy in staggeringly high numbers.

For instance, there are currently about 620 local Youth Councils operating around the UK, where young people discuss issues important to them, engage with decision makers and, in many cases, operate their own budgets to improve their communities. There is also a network of Young Mayors, who are directly elected by their peers or elected from a Youth Council or Cabinet.

Another well-known form of participation, which you might know locally, is the UK Youth Parliament where 300 11 to 18-year-olds are elected annually to represent the views of their communities and shape national policy.

Furthermore, in schools, sixth forms and universities, hundreds of thousands of young people participate in electing their peers to represent them. In the past two years alone, almost one million young people voted to decide their representative to the UK Youth Parliament.

As the Public Affairs Manager for YMCA England, one of my responsibilities is helping local YMCAs – of which there are 133 in England and Wales – engage the young people they support in politics and the democratic process. While the young people we support are unlikely to want to be involved in anything as formal as a Youth Council, we can still raise their interest closer to home. A fantastic example of our work with YMCAs and local authorities recently was through YMCA hustings nights held during this year’s London and Welsh Assembly elections. YMCAs work with many young people who are going through or

are dealing with challenging circumstances in their lives and this engagement opens up democracy to them in ways that helps them realise their voice really does matter and that people really are listening. Likewise, for many politicians and policy makers, these events are among the very rare occasions where they will get the chance to speak to real young people only usually accessible via statistics.

We’ve learned over the past few years

that engaging young people in politics in this way gives them the chance to ask questions and raise concerns with politicians. However, we’ve also found it doesn’t need to be as grand as a hustings event, something as simple as our ‘pizza and politics’ nights also work extremely well – who wouldn’t want free pizza?

So whether it is through hustings, social action debates among the 33,000 young people who access our youth clubs or YMCA

working closely with the Cabinet

Office to support change nationally, we are committed to bringing the voices of young people to the forefront of both local and national democracy.

If you are keen to see how you can engage more young people in local decision making, I would encourage clerks to contact their local YMCA or youth organisation and see how they can collaborate on supporting young people democratically in their area.

A General Election candidate talking to young people at YMCA (2015)



Our ‘pizza and politics’ nights also work extremely well – who wouldn’t want free pizza?