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30 March 2019

Dear Member,

County Council - Friday, 5 April 2019

Please find enclosed a briefing note for the motion to be debated at the meeting of the County Council to be held on Friday, 5 April 2019.

Agenda No	Item
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10(c)	Motion on extending the vote to 16 and 17-year-olds in local and national elections (Pages 3 - 4)
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Briefing note on factual background information attached.

Yours sincerely

Tony Kershaw
Director of Law and Assurance

To all members of the County Council

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County Council – 5 April 2019

Agenda Item 10 (c) – Notice of Motion by Dr Walsh

Extending the vote to 16 and 17 year olds in local and national elections – Briefing Note

A debate was held in September 2018 attended by county councillors and the West Sussex Youth Cabinet regarding lowering the voting age to 16. At that debate, a majority of members present agreed to support extending the vote to 16 and 17-year-olds in local and national elections.

The current voting age for UK elections is 18, lowered from 21 by the Representation of the People Act 1969. The first Parliamentary consideration of a further reduction of the voting age to 16 was given by the Home Affairs Committee inquiry in 1998 and the Howarth Working Party on Electoral Procedures in 1999; neither recommended a reduction. In 1999, Liberal Democrat MP, Simon Hughes proposed an amendment to the Bill that became the Representation of the people Act 2000 to lower the voting age to 16. It was opposed by the then Government and was defeated in the Commons by 436 votes to 36.

Under the Scottish Independence Referendum (Franchise) Act 2013, 16 and 17-year-olds were given the right to vote in the referendum on Scottish Independence. This was introduced through the Scottish Parliament only. Final registration of 16 and 17-year-olds resident in Scotland for the referendum was around 89% of those in that age group.

The Electoral Commission published its review of the voting age in April 2004. Although most responses to its consultation paper supported a voting age of 16, more general opinion polling suggested strong support for keeping to the present minimum of 18. The Commission recommended at that time to retain the 18 year age qualification.

The Liberal Democrats adopted the policy of reducing the voting age to 16 in their 2001 manifesto. The Labour Party, SNP, Plaid Cymru and the Green Party are also members of the Votes at 16 Coalition. The Conservative Party has not adopted a formal position on a reduction in voting age.

The Office of National Statistics end-year population estimates for 2018 show that there are 1392,000 16 and 17-year-olds in the UK. In the 2015 general election, 43% of 18 to 24-year-olds voted, compared with 78% of people aged 65 or over.

In April 2018 an All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on votes at 16 in coalition with the British Youth Council and Fair Votes Campaign, was established to help develop the case for lowering the voting age. The Group is chaired by Danielle Rowley (Lab) with Norman Lamb (Lib Dem) and Vicky Foxcroft (Lab) as Vice-Chairs, with Sir Peter Bottomley (Con) as Treasurer.

Most recently, a Private Member's Bill introduced by Peter Kyle (Labour) MP had its second reading debate on Friday 11 May 2018 but the debate stood adjourned at the end of business. The Bill is unlikely to make any further progress.

Arguments put forward at the debate held last September in support of lowering the voting age to 16 include that young people are well equipped to engage and participate in all elections across the UK. Also, that young people have been denied the chance to influence decisions made by politicians about issues that have a significant impact on their lives, such as tuition fees, the EU referendum, transport and the living wage. At 16, the law allows a person to give full consent to medical treatment, pay income tax and National Insurance, obtain tax credits and welfare benefits in their own right, consent to sexual relationships, get married or enter a civil partnership, with parental consent, change their name by deed poll, become a director of a company and serve in the armed forces but not deployed on the front line.

Arguments against lowering the vote put forward at the debate centred around young people not being interested in political issues and current affairs, not being educated well enough in politics and lacking in life experience to make an informed vote. The age of 18 is seen as a symbolic cut off point, representing the age of adulthood and full acceptance of responsibility for a person's actions in society.

Other councils in the UK have considered and supported motions to recommend the lowering of the voting age to 16, including Rotherham and Bristol.

Tony Kershaw

Director of Law and Assurance