**About EYST**

Ethnic Minorities and Youth Support Team Wales (EYST) is an award-winning and unique organisation which aims to support BME young people, families and communities living in Wales. Established in Swansea in 2005, it is now a registered charity which aims to help BME people in Wales achieve their full potential through the provision of culturally sensitive support in the areas of education, employment, health and community, as well as through challenging racism and increasing public understanding, awareness and appreciation of diversity and BME communities.

With head offices and a full-time youth and community centre in Swansea, EYST now employs 30 people, who deliver a range of services in Swansea, Cardiff, Carmarthenshire and Powys. Core services including a daily after-school drop in centre, schools-based outreach work, family-based support, one-to-one mentoring, support and guidance, and advice and support for refugees and asylum-seekers. We also deliver educational awareness sessions to schools and youth groups and training to a range of professionals around topics including Racism, Islamophobia, Refugees & Asylum-seekers.

I have been a youth worker at EYST for nearly 3 years and have primarily worked with volunteers on youth led cultural and identity projects. The young people I work with are from very diverse backgrounds including marginalised groups such as BME young people and those from asylum seeker and refugee backgrounds.

**Considering the minimum voting age**

*Have 16 or 17 year olds made any comments regarding not being able to vote in recent or upcoming elections?*

Many young people have shared views regarding a reduction in the voting age in Wales. The discussions surrounding this topic became much more common directly after the EU referendum. Young people that did not have the opportunity to vote in this election, due to their age, felt very frustrated as they felt that this decision was made by elders when younger people would feel the biggest impact if the UK leaves the European Union. Please see video where a group of young people at EYST decided to share their views about the EU Referendum decision - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MpAdMnTVGV4> - a fantastic example and evidence of young people wanting to engage with political discussion and how they feel marginalised by the current systems in place.

Apart from the EU referendum there has not been much discussion around political engagement with young people under 18 years old. In EYST we have welcomed various speakers to our youth drop in centre, they have discussed the Welsh Assembly and youth engagement on boards - some of our clients have taken roles on youth banks, youth panels and trustees on voluntary organisations boards. Once young people are given the opportunity to actively participate in an influential role they are interested but usually need this role to be clearly outlined and signposted from someone they trust. Regarding lowering the voting age, many young people had not thought about it prior to these sessions – mainly from Welsh Assembly outreach officers – as it isn’t something that is discussed through formal learning environments such as school. However, after discussing this and seeing it as a prospective opportunity, young people felt that they too should have the opportunity to vote, particularly as when they leave school they can get a job and pay taxes, actively contributing to society.

*Would a reduction in voting age have an impact on youth engagement or political participation? Are there any other ways that a similar impact can be achieved?*

From working and supporting young people at EYST I have seen how they have many informed opinions and views about living in Wales and decisions made that affect them. However, many feel that their views are not important as they do not have the option to vote, to formally engage with politics. I think that a reduction in the voting age would empower young people to feel like they can legitimately engage with political issues and will give them more confidence to project their ‘voice’ to influence others.

Aside from the lowering of the voting age I think that politics becoming part of the curriculum in schools could be very helpful to increase youth engagement in political issues. If young people had the opportunity to engage with politics in a school environment – in a holistic way encompassing many themes surrounding community – it could encourage young people to value their individuality and place within society. Teaching young people using this approach could result in politics being taught in a way where the focus isn’t wholly upon political parties. Young people are already politically active by sharing their views on social media and between friends. However, they may not always be aware that they are actively engaging with politics and that their views are powerful, particularly as they are the next generation.