Our set up in Jersey is quite different as we don’t have established party politics and it falls to our Department to oversee the public elections legislation which governs the way in which elections are run. We also are responsible for running the voter registration and voting campaigns to encourage public engagement in the election process (a very hard job in Jersey where our turnout is generally low – 27% at the last by-election).

Jersey changed its voting age to 16 in 2008. It was Deputy Carolyn Labey who proposed this in 2007. In her report accompanying the proposition she argued that young people should be asked to be more responsible and play an active part in our Island Community. It was adopted 4th July 2007, 25 votes in favour 21 against.

We have been increasing our efforts to engage with voters aged under 25 since 2008 as we recognise that if you start voting as a young person then you are more likely to continue to do so throughout your life.

A survey of young people in 2012 gave us an insight into their voting habits and we realised that one of the key factors in not voting was lack of information about the process. We sought to remedy this for the elections in 2014 by implementing a number of initiatives.

Firstly we increased our use of social media as we recognised that most under 25 year olds have grown up in a digital age and do not use traditional media like tv, radio and newspapers. We had established the vote.je website for the 2011 elections as a focal point for information but it was given an overhaul. The idea was that it would be a central hub. We also created a facebook and twitter page and a short leaflet aimed at the student population, which was circulated by the youth service at youth clubs and events and also by the Education department in schools and within the results envelopes for the GCSEs and A levels.

Our Education Department had been cautious about having politicians in schools in 2008 and 2011. They had expressed concerns about blatant electioneering and taking advantage of young people who could be easily influenced, despite the fact that in our view this is simply not the case and they are very shrewd and see through the spin.

For the elections in 2014 myself and colleagues from the States Greffe visited schools and spoke in Assemblies and Year group meetings with students to ensure all those aged over 16 knew about registering to vote and where they could access information about the candidates so they could make an informed choice at the ballot box. This was acceptable to the Education Department as we are seen as neutral and impartial. This is something we will be repeating next year in the run up to the elections in 2018.

After the elections I was approached by the Youth Service to work with them on an initiative to create a series of modular workshops which would address some of the main issues which young people had identified they wished to know more about.  One of the most popular topics identified had been politics. Together we established a workshop which talked about the importance of voting and this has been rolled out to Youth Clubs and Schools for use by Youth Leaders and teachers.

The main thrust of all our initiatives is to encourage young people to recognise that politics is relevant to them and that they have a very powerful voice – if they choose to use it.

One of the questions we ask at the beginning of our Youth Workshop is how many young people aged under 25 they think voted in the last elections – it’s a trick question because we do not have that data – only anecdotally.

But if we assume there are about 1000 people in each year group then we’re looking at 9000 people aged 16 to 25 who *could* vote and *could* make a huge difference to the outcome of elections in Jersey. When we consider that out of an electorate of nearly 62,000 only 28,218 voted in 2014 and our Chief Minister polled 14,000, we can see what a powerful voice 9000 young people could have if they did all vote.

Since autumn 2007 we’ve also run a primary schools visit programme which sees each Year 5 cohort visiting the Chamber for a tour and mini debate. Well over 9000 children have had the opportunity to find out more about the way their Island is governed.

The children who took part in the 2007 were only just starting to turn 16 when we held our elections in 2014, so it won’t really be until 2018 that we will see whether this initiative has increased voter turnout amongst the under 25’s, but we are very hopeful.

For 20 years we’ve organised an annual Youth Assembly attended by the Island’s sixth formers. Students mirror the format of a States meeting, complete with Question time and five or six debates. Each year students put forward topics for debate ranging from serious issues they feel deserve to be aired, such as the provision of greater support for young people with mental illness, to more tongue in cheek topics guaranteed to create debate such as making home economics mandatory for girls. (didn’t get many votes!)

The students are mostly from Years 12 and 13, can be up to 25 from Jersey’s Higher Education College. Around 50 students spend an afternoon sitting in the seats usually occupied by States Members. They relish the opportunity to question Ministers on local issues and also the 15 minutes they get grilling the Chief Minister. The standard of debates is very high – the students follow the same procedures as a real States meeting and for the past 2 years we have been delighted that the Bailiff has Chaired the beginning of the event.

We are very proud of the fact that two of our current States Members started their political careers in the Youth Assembly.

In essence I would say that for us there has been a huge administrative implication of reducing the voting age– but that is because we are charged with the public engagement side of the election process. I imagine that in jurisdictions where there are party machines able to undertake some of this work, the ‘burden’ will be somewhat reduced. However it is the area where I feel we do see a real positive benefit and I am hopeful that under 25’s in Jersey will be more willing to participate in the electoral process as a result of our work.