

Local Government Information Unit

News release

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**Votes at 16 rejected for poor reasons**

Local democracy think tank the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) has welcomed today's announcement by the Electoral Commission recommending reducing the age of candidature to 18, but has criticised the reasons given for not recommending reducing the voting age to 16.

The LGIU has been campaigning for the voting age to be reduced to 16 and the age of candidature to 18.

Dennis Reed, Chief Executive of the LGIU, said: "It is unfortunate that the Electoral Commission is not recommending that 16 and 17-year olds should enjoy democratic rights that reflect their responsibilities.

"Some of the reasons given for sticking with the existing voting age are extremely dubious. In particular, the idea that reducing the voting age would produce a short term fall in voter turnout demonstrates that a range of causes of low electoral turnout need to be tackled. This is exactly what the LGIU and others have been saying. It is a poor and defeatist reason not to proceed with votes at 16.

"By their own logic, the Electoral Commission should consider raising the minimum voting age to 60, given that the tradition of higher turnouts among older voters would see the turnout figures look artificially better!

"There is also an ill-thought out notion from the Electoral Commission that they want to explore the idea of different minimum voting ages for different elections, as if some elected positions are more valued than others.

"As welcome as the recommendation on candidature at 18 is, votes at 16 remains one essential step among many needed to reinvigorate local democracy. The LGIU has never been carried away with the over-zealous idea that votes at 16 alone will transform the landscape. Along with all the new methods of voting being pioneered, there must also be other radical reforms across two broad areas.

"Firstly, the unnecessary and often petty barriers that prevent or discourage people standing for election need to be removed. One example is as the draconian political restrictions on many public sector workers from participating in local politics.

"Secondly, we must ensure that local elections become important again by making councils more influential locally and giving the young and not-so-young reasons to vote. This means rejecting the idea of scattering public service functions amongst numerous single purpose boards, tackling the unelected quango state and ensuring that the development of regional government means more devolution and not more centralisation. The local authority finance issues that are currently up for discussion are also central to the power of local government.

Having most council finance raised locally would be the real leap forward for local democracy."

ENDS

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Notes to Editors

1. Originally founded in 1983 to campaign against the ratecapping regime that was established in the 1984 Rates Act, the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) is Britain's foremost independent local democracy think tank, campaigning to extend local authority best practice, freedoms and responsibilities. The LGIU is working to influence the debate on local government modernisation. The LGIU and its sister organisations The Education Network (TEN) and the Democratic Health Network (DHN) provide research, policy briefings, information, advice, training and lobbying services to local authority and trade union affiliates. Previous LGIU news releases and statements can be viewed at [www.lgiu.gov.uk](http://www.lgiu.gov.uk) <<http://www.lgiu.gov.uk>>.

2. The LGIU's submission, made in November 2003, to the Electoral Commission's review of the voting age can be found at <<http://zazu.thestableyard.net/cgi-bin/WebObjects/LgiuBrowser.woa/2/wo/dPD8wCpuP8OyTsKHKvXHvM/5.0.1.7.1.6.13.8.2.2>>.

3. The main measures that the LGIU is advocating in its Perilous Democracy campaign to increase public engagement in local politics include:

- \* Paid time off for public duties, including full-time public service responsibilities, with the employer compensated for staff undertaking public service and the employee retaining certain employment rights.

- \* New grants and tax incentives to encourage employers to support any of their staff who undertake public service, as part of their corporate social responsibility programmes.

- \* All councillors entitled to make pension contributions in the local government pension scheme, or to a comparable alternative of their choice.

- \* There should be a requirement for local authorities to reimburse councillors for childcare and other caring responsibilities.

- \* There should be 'councillor development grants' for parish and town councils to develop the potential of elected members.

- \* Councils should be able to apply for a 'public service promotion grant' to enable them to encourage people to undertake a wide range of public service roles.

- \* The voting age should be reduced to 16 and the age of candidature to 18.

- \* Restrictions preventing local government employees from participating in political activities should be amended to only apply to designated senior local government officers.

\* There should be a system of academic and vocational accreditation linked to experience and training to recognise the skills gained as a councillor.