HeadsUp Forum # 31 **www.HeadsUp.org.uk**

Youth Citizenship Commission… the Commission reports back

(15 June – 3 July 2009)

The Youth Citizenship Commission was set up to look at ways of developing young people's understanding of citizenship and increasing their participation in politics. The Commissioners were tasked with finding out what citizenship means to young people, whether they think they should be able to vote at 16 and how our political system can best listen and respond to their concerns. They used the HeadsUp forum to find out what young people up and down the country think about these issues.

The Commission reported back to the Prime Minister including the opinions of HeadsUp users in the findings and recommendations. The recommendations were launched in the second week of the forum and HeadsUp users were given the opportunity to respond to them.

The Commissioners from the Youth Citizenship Commission along with MPs, MSPs and peers took part in the debate or offered their views on the topic and support for the forum. Their involvement and support was, as always, crucial to the success of the forum.

Twelve decision-makers pledged their support for the *Youth Citizenship Commission* forum, were involved in providing a statement for the Backup materials or took part in the debate.

www.headsup.org.uk is a safe, online space for under 18s to debate the political issues important to them. **Young people** share viewpoints with their peers and **decision-makers** up and down the country. Through the forums, HeadsUp develops **young people**'s political awareness and promotes active citizenship so they can play an effective part in the democratic processes that affect them.

HeadsUp enables **politicians** to consult with **young people,** to find out their ideas, experiences and opinions. There is ample background information to prepare **young people** for the debates, as well as **teachers**' notes and activities.

They decision-makers involved in this forum were:

- **Professor Jonathan Tonge** – Chair, Youth Citizenship Commission
- **Dame Tanni Grey-Thompson** – Paralympic Gold Medallist
- **Hazel Rees** – Newly Qualified Teacher
- **Dr Andrew Mycock** – Senior Politics Lecturer
- **Richard Demby** – Citizenship Teacher
- **Natasha Engel MP** – Chair, All Party Youth Affairs group
- **Theresa May MP** – Shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions
- **Phil Willis MP** – Chair, Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee
- **Fiona Hyslop MSP** – Cabinet Secretary, Education and Lifelong Learning
- **Karen Whitefield MSP** – Spokesperson for Children and Young People
- **Lord Rix**
- **Baroness Garden of Frognal**

Youth Citizenship Commission…
the Commission reports back

Forum Summary

There were 195 posts[∞] made in the forum from 53 student HeadsUp users - with an average of 104 unique daily visits to the site over the course of the forum. The discussions on the forum were broad but the general themes and directions of the debate are highlighted in the pages below along with practical suggestions given by forum users.

The debate was split into four different forum threads addressing the significant findings of the Youth Citizenship Commission, with the last thread about the recommendations added at the end of the second week. These were:

- Citizenship education – do you think you get citizenship education at your school?
- Your community - how do you want to be involved in your area?
- Generational trust – do you feel that older people look down on young people?
- Recommendations from the Youth Citizenship Commission

Citizenship Education

Citizenship education provoked some strong reactions from HeadsUp users. Most of those posting either felt that they didn't get enough citizenship education or that it wasn't taken seriously enough by teachers and students. *This fits in with the Youth Citizenship Commission's findings, and their recommendations for more consistent and effective citizenship education in all schools, as well as opportunities for students to be involved in active citizenship projects whilst still at school* - such as school councils and registering to vote.

Students offer some good explanations below for why citizenship education is seen so negatively and what could be done to improve lessons:

> *I think the negativity is stemmed from perceptions of politics, and other things involved in citizenship. Most people at our age have pretty extreme views, and some believe that citizenship is aimed at making everyone believe in one thing. A lot of what people believe is from the papers. i.e. High crime, social*

[∞] Includes: young people, moderators, teachers and decision-makers.

meltdown, economic failures. This suggests that it's all the government's fault and that they shouldn't be trusted. Thus, they close their mind to this stuff, and aren't willing to learn about it.

Our school has a strong connection with our local community, we hold fund-raising events with the proceeds going to help local people in need, there is a strong emphasis on community and citizenship. Then in year 8 and 9 we study Citizenship as an actual GCSE- however it was a classified as a new subject for our year so most pupils thought it was a bit of joke and didn't take the subject seriously. Post GCSE our school encourages participating in community enrichment and offers studying politics as an A-Level which i found followed on well from Citizenship.

At our school we have days dedicated to learning about citizinship we have these once a term and we have casual dress on these days. However because of the dress code my peers think it is a casual day and tend to set a negativty towards learning about cizitenship.I believe it should be a compulsory lesson from primary school.

We should be taught about the news If we understood this we could understand what is going on in the world and learn more about cases such as swine flu and mp's expensive

teaching people to look at things openly and actually to be able to understand politics and the choices politicians have to make might help to ease tensions...for people of all classes...and stop the whole villification that mps are getting at the minute also, if we arent taught anything about politics, how will we know who to vote for when were old enough?

At school, we get taught lots of theoretical things. We are never taught to undertand real life, look through newspaper bias, look at things in a different life. Surely with this sort of eductation, it will help us become better, more rounded people in the future?

teachers do make pupils more aware of politics et through PSHE lessons, but they are not very active and interesting thats why not many peole pay much attention to it

Most of the students knew whether they received citizenship education in this forum but in the previous forum on the subject some could not say whether they were taught it or not – perhaps because citizenship is not as recognisable as other subjects and can be delivered in a number of ways that may make it less visible to students. Negativity towards this subject from the school or teachers was picked up by the students.

What was clear from the forum was that most students wanted more citizenship education, that had a more practical and active focus, and they wanted to learn about citizenship, politics and media from a younger age.

Volunteering, Work Experience and Civic Service

Many of the HeadsUp users commenting on the forum felt that there should be more opportunities for young people to get involved in projects in their local areas. Users felt that this should be organised by schools and councils primarily and the focus for many was improving the appearance of the area they lived in.

> *I think that the council should set up help days where they recruit schools to do things like litter picking etc..*
>
> *We need help in tidying up Boscmbe because it is completely messed up. We should hire tramps on the streets of boscombe to tidy up for money. That way, we live in a tidier place and the tramps get food.*
>
> *I have finished my exams but am stuck at home, bored. I would have loved the opportunity to volunteer in the local area, as organised through school, maybe helping at feeder schools.I also think teaching skills would be useful for later life too.*

Like the Youth Citizenship Commission's recommendation for a citizenship award, some users thought community work should earn some kind of reward or recognition, perhaps one that would be recognised on CVs once it came to work or university applications.

> *I think there should be some sort of qualification or reward at the end, which would look good on a CV… An incentive would persuade more people to sign up.As for the subject of the courses [civic service], I would imagine a mixture of adventure/residentials, volunteer work, community work, and maybe work experience would be interesting.*

Work experience and improving skills through volunteering was also popular.

> *I think that kids should go on Work Exp. earlier in our lives*
>
> *i think you should be able to do it [work experience] in year 7 so you have and idea for your options in year ten.*

Community

There were a variety of views on community and what people could or should do for their neighbours in their local area. Some felt that this was what the council were paid for and therefore didn't want to get involved but the majority were interested in doing more and creating a greater feeling of community spirit.

> *What i think would be nice and bring communities closer together is the chance to meet others from your street and your area. Would anyone else go to a comunity event if it meant the chance to meet the others in your road and the people you see evry day but dont talk to*
>
> *as england is a multi cultural society, i think that there should more events to show the whole community about each culture. this would also connect different communities together*

Being consulted on what services the tax revenue was spent on by the council was not surprisingly a popular way that young people wanted to be involved, particularly as they didn't feel they had much of a say in national politics. ***This fits in with the Youth Citizenship Commission's recommendations for advisory panels of young people at local, regional and national levels.***

> *I think we should have a bigger role in the future of all communities. I think adults and 'Big Cheeses' push us aside because 'we don't understand' or 'we're too young'. Without us, there is no future. We deserve a bigger role in our communities, because it is us that will be living there!*
>
> *If Councils take in taxes and realise we are giving the money to THEM, they should let us get involved in what we spend it on.*
>
> *I want to be involved in the local community as we are going to be living in it for the next 50 years so i think that we should decide what is best for the community as we know what needs improving or what new ideas are best for the community that we are going to be growing up in. ideas that could be put in the community are -new parks-youth clubs fun things to do and take teenagers off the streets graffiting and vandalising other peoples property.*

However some users highlighted the fact that it shouldn't always be down to young people to volunteer and do work in their community. Meeting MPs and having them involved in the community, as well as them being more visible to young people, was popular.

> *i think that our local mps should visit schools and do their bit for our community as well*
>
> *I believe schools should arange meetings with local MP's*
>
> *i think the government really needs to promote a sense of community...so encouraging young people to do things like collecting litter would be a really positive thing to do*

Inter-generational Trust

The majority view was that a lack of understanding and communication were the biggest problems facing the relationship between young people and adults. Many users felt that things were significantly different for young people now and adults couldn't identify with the younger generation – and for the most part didn't try.

> *I think the biggest gap between children and adults is caused by ignorance. We don't know their world and they don't know ours. This is what makes the different age groups mistrust each other.*
>
> *I think young people are just misunderstood. We act differently to the way that adults acted when they were at school. Things change, people change and this causes problems in translation. If adults want to understand us better then they need to see us from a different angle. Adults sometime think we are incapable of working things out for ourselves and patronise us. I dont like being treated like a small child.*

i think our different cultures has a lot to do with it like the stuff adults liked when they were kids is wayy different to what we like they dont know how to relate to us or us to them so thats hard…we have access to all sorts of stuff adults didnt when they were our age but we dont have the maturity to use it…i think people dont talk enough, really talk, adultsto kids and vice versa so with the communication breakdown its harder for people to understand each other yano and again people stereotype lol and fear whats different

Another reason for the divide between these groups was the media who were seen to be constantly talking about the negative things that young people do, over-emphasising the numbers of young people involved in these kinds of activities and therefore creating stereotypes.

The media also has a part, with over-reporting cases to do with youths. In the papers, there's loads of cases to do with knife crime in London, but that doesn't mean it happens all across the country.

Older people are always saying things like 'young people these days' and in my generation we weren't like that'. I find it hurtful because its categorizing every teengage when everyone is different.

I think that some older people look down on us, but thats only because there is so much of the bad things that youngsters do in the media.There is a threat but i think that because adults have this stereotype of young people that we are all binge drinking thugs when really not all young people are like that

However a number of forum users were aware that sometimes young people do not behave in a positive way and thought that young people needed to clean up their acts if they wanted to be seen less negatively by older people.

I think Adults do look down on kids they hold kids responsible for vandalism and lots of other things but if us kids dont want to be blamed about things then we must clean up our act we dont make ourselves look exactly like angels kids nowadays wanna grow up to quick i think this gives us a bit of a negatyive image

To be fair, some youths must have given older people a reason to dislike us so much. I think we should be less self-centred and consider other people more.

It was also suggested that this kind of attitude is cyclical. Until young people are respected more by adults they won't feel that they have to live up to positive examples of behaviour.

I think that when given the chance most young people are able to act resposibly and maturely like adults. Only with the press giving a bad setrotype of teenagers i dont think people give that chance to us. To act like an adult i think you have to be treated to like one. I dont know about everyone else but when given the chance to act like an 'adult' - to be mature and relyed upon makes me feel good about myself. If more responsibility was given to young people i think that there would be less anti social behaviour as people would not feel the need. When treated like a little kid or made to feel immature and stupid it can cause people to give up and just feel if thats how they expet me to act then thats the way i will act.

> *i think the younger and future generation are looked down on .we are not given as say in most political subjects.therefore we have no choice about are future if we were given more choice we would be happier and respect the people who make the official desisions*

So contrary to most reports from government and the media young people do want to be more involved in their communities, are interested in learning more about politics, want more responsibility and the opportunity to have their opinions respected and taken into account.

Political Context

The second Youth Citizenship Commission HeadsUp forum was incredibly timely with the political system being thoroughly questioned and scrutinised due to the House of Commons expenses scandal as well as the resignation of the Speaker of the House of Commons. The Youth Citizenship Commission launched its findings and recommendations towards the end of the forum, as well as presenting them separately to Gordon Brown in advance of the forum. Many of the things said by HeadsUp users mirrored the findings of the Commission and the suggestions for improving understanding of citizenship, more community involvement and young people involved in decision making was supported by students on the forum.

HeadsUp makes sure that young people's views on citizenship and politics are sent to the appropriate policy-makers, journalists and politicians so they can take into account young people's views on the issues.

The HeadsUp team would like to convey our thanks and appreciation to the decision-makers, young people and teachers that got involved in this important debate. We would also like to extend an invitation to interested parties, particularly legislators and government, interested NGOs, academics and journalists to respond to the findings. Responses and requests for further information should be directed to:

Beccy Allen, HeadsUp Manager

Hansard Society
40 - 43 Chancery Lane
London
WC2A 1JA

020 7438 1214
r.allen@hansard.lse.ac.uk