

Children and young people's perspectives on sharing their views and information with the UK government: March 2026

Discovery findings from the Young Voices project, which explores perceptions about engaging with government-led research among 11- to 24-year-olds.

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1 . Summary report for young people

We have produced a young person-friendly summary report for research participants and other interested young people, [What do young people think about sharing their views with the UK government \(PDF 141KB\)](#).

2 . Main points

- Young people participating in the focus groups did not necessarily differentiate between politics, politicians, or government departments and institutions, reflecting both lack of knowledge of government and, for some, an associated reluctance to engage in government research.
- Although participants expressed a desire to help improve services for young people by sharing their views with government, they felt existing engagement channels were not well suited to young people's needs.
- Young people discussed the importance of clearly communicating research outcomes and their impact, so their contributions feel meaningful.
- Social media was described as a useful mechanism for engaging young people about research value and purpose, but was not seen as a serious or appropriate space to invite participation.
- In-person and trusted settings such as schools and community hubs were deemed important for enabling young people to feel comfortable in sharing their views, particularly where other young people are involved in facilitating this research.

This discovery research is a first step in a larger project aiming to better understand the underlying beliefs influencing young people's engagement with government-led research. The work is being carried out to inform the Government Statistical Service and has been developed to be grounded in cross-departmental need. The findings in this report focus on providing insight into how and why young people feel as they do, rather than recommending changes to survey or other data collection practices.

For the purposes of this research report "younger participants" refers to young people aged 11 to 15 years who took part in our focus groups, while "older participants" refers to young people aged 16 to 24 years.

3 . Understanding of government and politics

The young people we spoke to had differing levels of understanding of politics and government institutions and how they interact, and struggled to differentiate between the roles and responsibilities of different government departments. They also described being more aware of international rather than domestic politics. Participants' level of civic knowledge and their underlying beliefs and perceptions about politics and government are reflected in the perspectives they shared about engaging with government-led research.

Civic knowledge

Participants described gaining most of their political awareness through social media and the internet. While discussions around government and domestic politics were said to be rare in school and at home, participants described consuming information about international politics from in-person discussions, as well as social media. Participants reported feeling unsure about what politics means and how it relates to government systems and institutions. This became evident where participants used the terms interchangeably throughout the focus groups.

For me, it's just one big entity.

(16 to 24 years)

Younger participants (11 to 15 years) felt that domestic politics is not something that features in their lives and, as such, is not of interest. However, participants did have more awareness of, and interest in, topics that were perceived as frightening, such as international wars or climate change; or that were deemed important to them personally, or to their family. Participants felt that government prioritises issues relevant to older generations and should focus more on important topics for young people.

Yeah, there's a bit of a detachment, I feel like. When it comes to the government, they seem more focused, at least from my point of view, on the adults or the older people, as opposed to the younger people, and I think that's why they're probably struggling to know what we want, because they don't really know us enough.

(16 to 24 years)

Participants who were more inclined to share their views with government cited family influence as an important factor. It was suggested that coming from more politically minded families supports the development of a sense of civic responsibility and encourages the "habit" of engaging with government, with information and views being passed down through generations.

I think that the mindset just gets passed down, because as far as I'm aware everybody in my family has always been like that.

(16 to 24 years)

Underlying beliefs about politics and government

The young people we spoke to felt that politics and government should be about ensuring all views are heard. However, a perceived lack of representation of young people within government institutions contributed towards a belief among younger participants (11 to 15 years) that government engagement is not for their generation to worry about, particularly when under the legal voting age.

I don't think it's really that important. It's good to know about it, but you don't really need to know about it until you're older.

(11 to 15 years)

There was also a perception of politics being chaotic and the young people we spoke to were overwhelmed by the potential for it to have detrimental impacts on ordinary people's lives.

It's a bit overwhelming. Like a lot of the times, especially when it comes to, you know, specific kind of issues that happen that affects politics. So, for example, the Black Lives Matter movement as well as the Palestine movement... there's just so much that politics plays a part of that is more negative and detrimental to people's actual lives.

(16 to 24 years)

Older participants (16 to 24 years) described a sense of frustration and hopelessness with politics, which affected their willingness to engage with government. Participants cited a perception of a decline in public standards and a sense that politicians are untrustworthy leading to overall disillusionment towards the political system.

It just feels like they're all the same and they're all very self-serving and they just care about each other.

(16 to 24 years)

Participants felt that they are not sufficiently consulted in decisions affecting them and when they are engaged to share their views, that their opinions are not listened to or acted upon. A belief that older generations are prioritised in government decision-making led to a perception among the young people we spoke to of engagement being futile and a strong sense of having been let down by government and decision makers.

I feel, I mean, frustrated and tired, you know, when adults make decisions that affect young people and it feels like we're not really listened to.

(11 to 15 years)

Some participants spoke specifically about how feeling overlooked would influence their decision to participate in government-led surveys. They discussed the importance of authentic opportunities to share their views and felt that seeing the benefits of their contributions would increase their confidence in the value of participating.

I feel like if I responded to it, I probably, like, wouldn't get a response or reply back, so I wouldn't know if you actually saw my response.

(11 to 15 years)

So I would like to hear more opportunities to actually get involved with things and not just in a tokenistic way where they say yes we're recruiting people because we want to hear from you and do a survey and then you never hear anything else about that again and they're just like yep we tick the box. So I want to hear about more actual things I can do to be a part of our politics instead of only voting, which is important but it shouldn't be the only way I can engage meaningfully.

(16 to 24 years)

Demonstrable change in government policy affecting young people was said to be particularly valuable for encouraging engagement, but also for creating more positive perceptions of government and building trust in these institutions.

Facilitator: What might start to help you build trust?

Participant 1: Changing some policies which actually will help our generation. Like genuinely doing something. Like, any proof of doing something.

Participant 2: Yeah, action over words.

(16 to 24 years)

In response to feeling overlooked and unheard by government, participants suggested young people are increasingly choosing to share their views outside of traditional pathways including voting and government-led research. Participants thought young people see greater value, and are increasingly turning towards, protests and demonstrations to push for change.

[Young people] feel like that voting through a piece of paper, through a kind of a formal link or something, isn't kind of helping them to get their message through. So they're resorting to, you know, the only means that they feel that they can be heard in, which is, you know, actively, you know, protesting, demonstrating, you know, which of course they have the right to do.

(16 to 24 years)

4 . Factors influencing young people's engagement with government-led research

The young people we spoke to pointed towards a range of factors influencing their willingness and comfort to engage in government research and share their views. This included their underlying beliefs about politics and government discussed previously, alongside:

- the perceived importance of the research topic
- their level of confidence and fears around taking part
- the engagement mode and materials used
- the role of social media in research engagement
- the use of trusted settings to facilitate meaningful engagement

Participants in different age groups did have differing perspectives in some areas. For example, younger participants (11 to 15 years) had a strong sense of civic responsibility but did not feel sufficiently knowledgeable to contribute to government-led research; while older participants (16 to 24 years) felt disillusioned with government and were more disinclined to take part in government-led research. Instances where findings were not universal and were specific to younger or older participants have been noted in the following sections.

Perceived importance and relevance of government research

Participants described a need for a clear, short-term, personal or public benefit from participating in government-led research. They felt it was important for government to highlight how research relates to young people's lives and the potential benefits participation could bring.

I think it [should] probably be prioritised maybe specifying how it would benefit the young people who are filling these forms out.

(16 to 24 years)

Participants suggested the perceived relevance of the research topic would influence their engagement and said they would most likely ignore a survey that did not feel relevant to their daily life. Research from government departments that they recognise as having public benefit, such as health or transport, was said to be more likely to prompt them to share their information, as it is more obvious to participants what their data would be used for.

I know what [the Census] is and what statistics they're trying to gain but I don't know how that benefits me as a citizen after it's completed.

(16 to 24 years)

Linked to a perception of government prioritising older generations, younger participants (11 to 15 years) discussed their desire for government to ask more directly about the things that matter most to them, including mental health, education, and social media-related concerns.

I think the government should ask young people like me about the effects of our daily life like school stress, mental health support, after-school activities and how social media affects us...because it really matters to us and it can actually make a difference.

(11 to 15 years)

Time and effort

Concern around the personal relevance and potential benefits of participating was linked to the time and effort required to complete surveys and data collection exercises. Participants found it difficult to justify spending time on something they perceived as irrelevant, particularly where they feel more concerned about other priorities including their education and mental health.

Young people just have way too many pressing problems in their own lives to....try and bear the burden of, you know, trying to get involved on a wider scale and try and have an impact.

(16 to 24 years)

Convenience was said to influence young people's willingness to share their views. Participants suggested that data collection exercises that do not take long and take place in spaces they are already in would encourage them to take part.

I would probably more inclined to fill that out if it was like a task which maybe the government had subcontracted to for like schools and universities to fill out and like you know if it had been like maybe passed around in a quick two minutes kind of thing if that makes sense.

(16 to 24 years)

Threats and incentives

Highlighting potential fines for non-completion of mandatory surveys (such as on the census invitation letter) were viewed negatively as “scaremongering” (16 to 24 years) but were also seen as effective for encouraging participation. Incentives were seen as reimbursing young people for their time and more appropriate than fines.

Rather than threatening to take money from them maybe an incentive of some kind would be a bit more encouraging.

(16 to 24 years)

However, participants also raised concerns over the use of financial incentives, questioning whether it is an effective use of taxpayer money but also whether it could impact upon the legitimacy of responses and overall survey results.

When incentives are actually attached to things, we don't know how people are going to react to those things because they can just give any random details just to be able to just get their hands on the incentives.

(16 to 24 years)

Civic responsibility

Some participants felt that the need for incentives, alongside a desire for convenience in data collection exercises, were representative of young people being more focused on individual rather than collective, societal priorities, compared with previous generations. This individualism was said to relate in part to a shift in priorities, brought about by a perception of increased financial hardship, employment precarity, and a decline in mental health for younger generations.

Financially becoming stable and just living a kind of stable life used to be much easier as well. So because that became harder, I think the priorities for young people have also changed according to that.

(16 to 24 years)

Despite feeling unclear about the political system and having a sense of politics and government as primarily for older generations; younger participants (11 to 15 years) also felt that participating in government-led research was “the right thing to do” (11 to 15 years) to make things better for their generation. When asked why they would complete a government survey, one participant said:

To help the government improve things for young people.

(11 to 15 years)

Confidence and fear of making mistakes

Younger participants (11 to 15 years) reported feeling insufficiently knowledgeable to meaningfully engage with government-led research and were concerned about misunderstanding survey questions and providing responses that misrepresent their views. This was not a theme that arose in focus groups with older participants (16 to 24 years).

You could be confused about the question and mess up the answer.

(11 to 15 years)

Fears around question comprehension and making mistakes were compounded by anxiety around the responsibility of contributing towards government-led research, which was perceived as serious and potentially resulting in big decisions and changes affecting society.

It could be, like, a big decision. They could ask you something really big and you might not know what to say...You might accidentally, like, make a big mistake. Like, you could say something that you didn't mean to say. Or...you might say a different point than what you're actually going for.

(11 to 15 years)

Younger participants (11 to 15 years) raised concerns around feeling judged for their opinions or survey responses, especially where data collection takes place in person, for example, at a school. Participants expressed a desire to learn more about politics and government, particularly around the topics perceived to directly impact their lives, so they could feel more confident sharing their views.

A lot of people could also like criticize your opinion and like you might not feel comfortable because of like there's teachers there and there's more students there that like won't like your opinion well.

(11 to 15 years)

I also feel curious, I mean, and a bit confused. Like, I wanna understand more about what's going on and how it affects my life, you know.

(11 to 15 years)

Trust and data security

Older participants (16 to 24 years) spoke about data security concerns influencing their trust in government-led research. Fear of online scams was raised, with participants describing discomfort around receiving SMS messages or communications through social media, unless from an official government account.

There's loads of scams, so I usually ignore SMS.

(16 to 24 years)

Unless it was like posted by an official like government page that was like verified by Instagram, TikTok, whatever. I wouldn't, I wouldn't trust any QR code that was just given on social media.

(16 to 24 years)

This was symptomatic of a distrust of online spaces more generally, including in information gathered through social media. Participants pointed towards misinformation online and feeling unsure about what is trustworthy but also feeling unable to receive messages clearly when feeling oversaturated with information.

I would also say that there's so much misinformation and also oversaturation of information that with the social media and the news websites and everything that people see all the time it's difficult to make decisions.

(16 to 24 years)

The young people we spoke to were concerned by personal data security and described a fear of data breaches, particularly when being asked to share personal information for government data collection exercises.

I think if I got asked to [complete the Census], if it was basic information, I'd more than happily do it, but if they were asking more personal information and stuff, you'd be a bit more hesitant. Even if they were saying it will be anonymous, you'd be hesitant in case there was a data breach or something and your information got out.

(16 to 24 years)

Engagement methods and materials

The methods government use to reach out to young people was said to influence their willingness to participate. However, across the focus groups, different methods were shown to appeal to and be trusted by different young people, irrespective of their participant age grouping.

Responding to surveys sent by post was reported to be time- and effort-intensive, however, participants suggested that because receiving post is rare for young people, it is also something they would be more likely to take seriously, particularly when compared with emails, which they said they already receive too many of.

For some reason it would be more serious, I don't know if that makes sense. Because things don't really come in the post, apart from exceptions, I'd take it a bit more seriously, but also, yeah, just make sure I get it done as soon as possible.

(16 to 24 years)

While SMS was associated with concerns around scams, it was also regarded as an effective method for reaching young people, who regarded it as an infrequently used communication channel, so messages would not get lost among others. It was also felt that SMS would be more appropriate than the use of WhatsApp, which was regarded as a social and not official communication channel.

SMS would actually maybe be effective because it's still at the top of your, like, most recent messages, if you, rather than getting lost in emails.

(16 to 24 years)

Participants discussed the importance of engagement materials looking formal and serious. Materials containing official logos and recognisable organisation names, particularly from across government, were said to look mandatory rather than optional and therefore encourage young people to take them seriously.

Also, when it has the logo on it somewhere at the front, even seeing that, I'd be like okay, this is serious.

(16 to 24 years)

The importance of simple, clear language was also discussed by younger participants, to lessen their fears around misunderstanding questions and providing inaccurate responses, as discussed in the previous section: Confidence and fear of making mistakes.

The survey should have words that, like, someone between the ages of, like, 11 and, like, 13 can understand. Like, not, like, scientific words because people might not understand it.

(11 to 15 years)

Social media

Participants described a need for more accessible communication channels between young people and government, and felt social media has a role to play in this. Participants said they would find it helpful to watch a video of someone talking about their experiences of engaging in government-led research, including what they did and their reflections on the process. They also said there should be an emphasis on why sharing their views is important and what it could help to achieve.

If the government wants to encourage people, young people, to do it, then they should get people... to go online talking about their experience, because I think that'll be more effective.

(16 to 24 years)

The most important thing I would say is your opinion matters. It can actually make a difference. That's the most important thing that I would put in the short video. So that way young people will want to take part.

(11 to 15 years)

Ensuring social media communications are engaging and interesting to young people was said to be important. Participants thought that while the involvement of influencers would help to make government social media posts more interesting, it would not help them to take the messaging seriously.

If someone I know, if someone I follow, yeah it'd be more interesting but wouldn't trust it really.

(16 to 24 years)

However, social media was not considered an appropriate space to receive invitations or directly share their views with government. Participants suggested they would most likely scroll past any QR codes or survey invitations they saw.

If I saw [an invitation to complete the Census] on Instagram, I'd be like... I'm here for a reason. I'm not here to see this. My attention span is already fried once I get on something on Instagram. It's like, if I see that, I'm not going to acknowledge it. I'm just going to be like, next Instagram reel, please.

(16 to 24 years)

Familiar settings

Participants discussed the importance of research taking place in trusted settings to facilitate sharing their views. Older participants (16 to 24 years) described spaces including coffee shops, community hubs, universities, schools and colleges as comfortable and convenient places to encourage young people's participation. Face-to-face interactions were deemed important for participant comfort but also for encouraging in-person socialising between peers.

I feel like social media makes people lonely. So, it's also a way to just, like, if you're encouraging young people to gather in one space, it's also a really good, like, social thing to do as well.

(16 to 24 years)

Participants discussed the potential for government representatives and decision-makers to be involved directly in discussions, to hear young people's priorities firsthand and to answer queries.

You could have maybe certain department or government representatives who are given a specific amount of time to...talk to a class.

(16 to 24 years)

Participants also favoured the idea of other young people facilitating data collection activities. It was felt that speaking to someone of a similar age who can relate to their experiences would increase participant comfort and allow meaningful discussions.

Get like a young person to go and talk to them just because I feel like in order to get a good response from somebody, especially young people, you need like a young face that's like around their age who have their opinions on it as well and they're all going through the same as what the other young people are.

(16 to 24 years)

Younger participants (11 to 15 years) did raise concerns over in-person engagement, stating that they would be concerned about being judged for their opinions by their peers. This led to discussions around the importance of supported engagement, with younger participants wanting an opportunity to discuss their opinions with family and friends before sharing with government. This was linked to a lack of confidence around their knowledge and instincts, but also a desire for their views to be representative of the wider public, rather than just themselves.

So, you could, like, get opinions off, like, people you trust, like your family or friends. So, like, it kind of, like, simulates the public.

(11 to 15 years)

Next steps

Response rates for social surveys and government engagement across all demographics and sectors have fallen in recent years. Understanding Society (2024) have reported [falling survey response rates \(PDF, 450KB\)](#) for both their youth self-completion questionnaire for those aged 10 to 15 years; and lower response rates for 16-to-21-year-olds completing the adult survey, compared with other groups. Similarly, [response rates for children in the Crime Survey for England and Wales \(CSEW\) have been reported to have fallen significantly](#), making it difficult to collect sufficient data to meet user needs (CSEW, 2023).

In response to falling social survey response rates, the Office for National Statistics (2025) has published their [Social Surveys Improvement Plan](#), which includes trialling measures to increase response rates for young people.

The Young Voices project aims to examine the beliefs and perceptions underlying young people's views about government-led research. In developing this research, we consulted experts from across the UK government, the devolved governments and the third sector to help shape the research focus so that it reflected the priorities of young people and those who work with them, as well as being relevant to policy priorities.

The findings in this report are from the discovery phase of this project. This phase was not designed to seek answers to operational challenges, but to provide context and help identify research priorities for future phases. The work reported here is a first step towards better understanding young people's willingness to engage with government and participate in government-led research, including:

- what deters them from taking part
- what makes them feel interested, motivated and safe taking part
- how meaningful, confident participation can be supported

Future phases of the Young Voices project will seek to understand children and young people's perspectives at a more granular level, including those of different ages, socio-economic characteristics and circumstances from each country of the UK, to develop a more nuanced understanding and create more actionable insights. To do so, we will collaborate with young people as well as cross-government stakeholders in the design, data collection, analysis and reporting of the next phase of work.

5 . Glossary

Civic knowledge

Understanding of how political systems and government institutions operate.

Civic responsibility

Voluntary commitment of citizens to participate in their community and democracy potentially by volunteering, engaging in community service and voting.

Older participants

In this report, participants aged between 16 and 24 years who participated in the focus group discussions.

Younger participants

In this report, participants aged between 11 and 15 years who participated in the focus group discussions.

6 . Data sources and quality

This discovery research comprised a sample of 33 young people aged 11 to 24 years, from across the four UK nations. The young people were recruited to broadly reflect the UK population. Acumen Fieldwork recruited participants through their research database, social media and youth groups.

A purposive sampling approach was used to boost representation among groups whose voices are often underrepresented. The sampling frame focused on achieving a spread of personal characteristics, which included:

- age
- sex
- ethnicity
- long-term mental and physical health conditions
- rural and urban settings
- those typically less engaged with research

The focus groups were conducted by our research partner, Hopkins Van Mil. Three were held in-person, in London, Manchester and Swansea, while two were held online. All focus groups were facilitated in English.

The discussions followed a flexible topic guide with several interactive elements. Young people were invited to say how they would respond to various survey invitations, use a selection of images to facilitate discussions around how they feel about politics and government and use sticky notes (physical or online) to describe the barriers and motivators to engaging with government-led research. Finally, they were asked to create what they viewed to be an appropriate and accessible strategy for encouraging young people to participate in a government survey.

Participants and a trusted adult provided written consent for each young person's participation. Focus groups were recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were analysed using open, descriptive coding, with initial codes being organised into a coding framework. This was used for thematic analysis in NVivo 14 software, with codes being further developed and adapted as analysis progressed.

The Inclusive Research Team at the Centre for Equalities and Inclusion would like to thank our research partners Hopkins Van Mil for their work throughout the scoping and data collection phases of this research. We would also like to thank the organisations who helped to identify and recruit participants.

7 . Cite this article

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