



Skills for Democracy



Satellite event for the World Forum

20 October 2016, House of Commons, UK

This event was hosted by Lord David Blunkett of Brightside and Graham Allen MP, Nottingham North. It aimed to give an overview of the state of education for democracy in the UK and identify priorities. Over 120 people booked and about 80 came. It was chaired and organised by Titus Alexander.

Speakers

- David Blunkett, Professor of Politics in Practice at Sheffield University, MP for Brightside & Hillsborough 1987-2015, Education and Employment Secretary, Home Secretary, Work and Pensions Secretary, Leader of Sheffield City Council, 1980 – 87.
- James Weinberg, Research Associate of the [Crick Centre](#), and Chair of the Political Studies, Association Early Career Network, on the state of citizenship and political education in schools;
- David Kerr, [Association of Citizenship Teachers](#) (ACT,) and Professor at University of Reading;
- Samira Musa, [Bite the Ballot](#), on engaging young people;
- Ruth Spellman, CEO, [Workers Educational Association](#), on adult education;
- Sue Tibballs, CEO [Sheila McKechnie Foundation](#) on campaign training and support for civil society
- Sarah Allen, [Involve](#), on participation for a stronger democracy
- Ashok Viswanathan, Deputy CEO, [Operation Black Vote](#) on engaging minorities
- Rosemary Bechler, Editor, [openDemocracy](#) about the young reporters at the World Forum
- Dan Gallacher, [Parliament's Education Service](#);



The government was invited to send a speaker or comment, but has no policies on education for democracy.

Skills for Democracy survey

We surveyed participants beforehand and 68% had NOT heard about the World Forum for Democracy. Only 37% had heard of the Council of Europe's Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship, although almost 60% said their work was about education for advocacy, citizenship, democracy or politics.

Key points and next step

The three main messages I took from the meeting were

- 1) The need to organise a movement for the right to political literacy, like Make Poverty History, with concerts, debates and demonstrations.
- 2) The sorry state of citizenship education and political literacy in schools; and
- 3) The wide range of initiatives in adult education and civil society.

We will hold a follow-up meeting in 2017 on outcomes from the World Forum, the [Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture](#) and proposals for a [Speakers' Commission on Learning for Democracy](#)

Summary

The presentations gave a detailed overview of education for democracy, including the following points:

1. Political knowledge and participation is very unequal, particularly among younger, poorer people, but sustained, focused work makes a difference, of which there are many examples;
2. Citizenship education and political literacy in schools are in danger of disappearing, due to being merged with PSHE; the lack of specialist teachers, political support and support from school leaders; and the [Progress 8 Indicator](#) for school accountability, in which Citizenship is a third tier option competing with Art and Design, Drama, PE and other subjects.



Citizenship ceases to be an A-level subject from 2017, although Politics A level will continue.

3. The government priorities of Prevent, British Values and character education could be addressed through good citizenship education, but they have a much narrower, more functional focus.
4. The [National Citizenship Service](#) offers young people aged 15-17 one residential week of adventure, social action and citizenship skills: David Blunkett is on the Board of the NCS Trust and the [National Citizenship Service Bill](#) goes to the Lords on 25 Oct (follow progress [here](#)).
5. The UK is going through rapid constitutional change without any coherence (the Queen and House of Lords are the most stable parts), which makes the need for political literacy greater than ever.
6. Universities need to revive their historic role of outreach to communities, through extra-mural education and community action.
7. Social movements need to engage with the formal political process to influence power structures.
8. The BBC needs to be bolder in providing political literacy.
9. Social media can engage young people on their own terms.
10. [Bite The Ballot](#) showed the importance of engaging young people from the beginning, so they can share their experiences and be part of the process of building the skills for democracy
11. We need automatic voter registration when people turn 18: Lord Roberts of Llanduluno has tabled a Private Members' Bill for [Automatic Electoral Registration \(School Students\)](#) – get [email update here](#)
12. Just 6% of government education spending goes on post-19s, including apprenticeships.
13. School premises should be used for education in evenings and weekends, including political literacy.
14. The [Sheila McKechnie Foundation](#) runs campaign training for charities and community activists, and an annual campaigners' award.
15. There is widespread lack of knowledge about how parliament works, how change happens and how to influence government, even among experienced campaigners.
16. The Lobbying Act has had a chilling effect on campaigning by charities and voluntary organisations.
17. Deliberative democracy promoted by [Involve](#) creates more inclusive ways for citizens to have a say in decision-making (see their [Participation Compass](#) and [People and Participation programme](#), or the [Open Government Network](#), the [Participation Works Partnership](#), [What Works Scotland](#) and the [Citizen Participation Network](#))
18. [Operation Black Vote](#) has championed political participation by black and ethnic minorities since 1996 and run an MP shadowing scheme since 1999: former participants include the Mayors of Bristol and London, MPs Clive Lewis and Helen Grant.
19. [openDemocracy](#) is organising a youth citizens' newsroom at WFD2016, where some of the 70 young people from around the world will work cover the World Forum for Democracy in November.
20. Young people can have a voice through organisations like [Student Voice](#), Youth Councils, and the [Youth Parliament](#), for which 11 – 18 year olds elect representatives to debate issues in Parliament chosen by ballot through [Make Your Mark](#), involving 978,216 young people in choosing topics for debate on Friday 11 November.
21. Parliament's [Education](#) and [Outreach](#) services are a fantastic resource for schools, universities, adult and community education, providing training and support across the UK as well as in Parliament.
22. [Use Your Vote](#) is a new all-party and non-aligned national campaign to build political literacy and enhance democratic engagement and active citizenship across all age groups.



[Parliament Week](#) (14 – 20 November) is a programme of activities to connects people with Parliament and democracy across the UK.

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