

5.1 General context

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Main concepts

There is no official definition of youth participation. This article adopts a broad definition of participation:

- It can be referred to the political participation of young people, where as active citizens, take part in, express views on, and have decision-making power about issues that affect them. This typically takes place in formal structures and institutions of representative democracy.
- It can also be used to refer to young people's civic engagement and participation in society in general, or their communities; this includes, volunteering, national service and political activism.

In line with this definition, the UK Government's ambition is to ensure that all young people have the tools and opportunities they need to fulfil their potential, regardless of their background or life circumstances.

The [Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport](#) (DCMS) is the government department responsible for youth policy. The [Office for Civil Society](#), which is located within DCMS, holds policy responsibility for youth services - charities, social enterprises and voluntary organisations and, with specific relevance to youth, aims to ensure that:

- high quality opportunities are provided for young people to build their skills and networks outside of school,
- young people's voices are heard, and
- the value of youth services is advocated and, by supporting the youth sector to adapt and transition to a tighter financial landscape, the sector will be able to continue to deliver high quality services for young

people.

However, there is overlap between government departments, and cross-departmental effort is required in developing, implementing and delivering youth related policies and initiatives successfully. For more information, visit '[Administration and governance](#)' in Chapter 4.

Institutions of representative democracy

England is a constituent part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The United Kingdom is a Parliamentary democracy which has a constitutional sovereign as Head of State.

Unlike the devolved administrations, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which were granted devolved powers in 1998, England has no separate government of its own. Legislation for England is passed by the United Kingdom Parliament in Westminster, London.

Parliament is the legislature and the supreme legal authority in the UK which can create or end any law. Parliament consists of:

- the Sovereign (currently the Queen) in Parliament,
- the appointed or hereditary House of Lords, and
- the publicly elected House of Commons.

The [House of Commons](#) is the lower house, where most of the work of Parliament is conducted. It is composed of 650 elected members, known as Members of Parliament (MPs), 533 of which represent English constituencies. Note, however, that a review of parliamentary constituencies is currently underway; proposals include reducing the number of elected members in the House of Commons to 600, with England being allocated 501 seats out of these. The Boundary Commission [report](#) was published in September 2018, and more information can be found on the Boundary Commission for England 2018 [website](#).

The Prime Minister selects a Cabinet of Ministers, and these, together with the civil servants working in government departments, form the executive.

The structure of local government varies across England:

- In some areas, there are two tiers which have distinct functions, but overlap in some matters. These are known as county councils and district, borough or city councils.
- In other areas, unitary authorities carry out all local government functions. There are three main types: unitary authorities in areas outside the main conurbations; London boroughs; and metropolitan boroughs.

Information on the structure and functions of local government in England is provided by the 2018 House of Commons Library Briefing Paper [Local Government in England: Structures](#).

The first-past-the-post system, a simple plurality system in which each constituency across the UK returns one MP, is used to elect MPs to the House of Commons and for local elections. The Closed Party List system is used to elect Members of the European Parliament. Details of these different voting systems can be found on the [UK Parliament](#) website.

Voting is not compulsory in the UK, although the issue has been discussed in the context of falling rates of turnout, as highlighted in a 2015 [House of Commons Library Briefing Paper](#).

Voting can take place in person, by ballot; by post; or, in certain circumstances, by proxy. Further details on ways of voting are on the [GOV.UK](#) website.