



Volunteering Matters Submission to the Youth Select Committee Inquiry

PSHE in Secondary Schools: Preparing Young People for Adult Life

Submitted 13 November 2025

We are delighted to respond to this year's Youth Select Committee inquiry examining Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) Education.

About Volunteering Matters

Volunteering Matters is a nationwide charity that exists to create stronger communities through the power of volunteering. We work with local partners to develop impactful programmes that support individuals and communities across the UK.

Since 1962, we've used our influence to champion volunteering as a powerful tool to build a thriving, resilient society. Our projects are co-created with the people and communities we work alongside: an approach that encourages our participants to become future volunteers and leaders, not just beneficiaries.

Volunteering Matters and UK Youth have a partnership to coordinate #iWill. As the #iWill Movement, we collectively invest in young people's passions, talents and skills and they in turn, challenge systems and encourage decision makers to share power. As such, the #iWill Movement has an impact both within communities and within the young people themselves.

As part of a consortium with My Life My Say and Savanta, the iWill Movement drove the consultation for the development of the National Youth Strategy. #iwill Ambassadors from across England co-designed and co-led creative and engaging research, consultation and the communications campaign "Deliver You" to bring the National Youth Strategy consultation to the nation. **We would welcome the opportunity for some of the Ambassadors to meet the Youth Select Committee in person and to discuss directly the campaign and analysis.**

Summary

At Volunteering Matters, we strongly advocate the importance of involving young people in making decisions around PHSE and point to the current and potential role of youth social action within PSHE. Youth Social Action, led by young people, helps young people develop real-life skills, improve their wellbeing and participate in democracy.

We also urge the consultation to not see PSHE as something stand-alone from other aspects of the curriculum. As one element of this, Youth Social Action allows PHSE to be incorporated into other areas of the curriculum - and helps support those with different learning styles. For example, social action on civil rights can be linked to historical topics.

This response is based on three main sources:

1. The National Youth Strategy (NYS) 2025 consultation, Deliver You, which involved 20,000 young people across the UK.
2. Research from the Behavioural Insights Team / UCL, the #iwill Fund Learning Hub, and the University of Exeter showing that taking part in youth social action makes young people more likely to vote and take part in their communities later in life.

3. The Brighter Futures project in Scotland — an example of how social action in schools helps young people build confidence, wellbeing and a sense of belonging.

Format of this response

We have answered each question set out in the terms of reference for the committee.

1. Making PSHE more consistent across the UK

The National Youth Strategy (NYS) aims to give young people more say in decisions that affect them and to make youth services more joined up across the country. This approach should also apply to PSHE.

Currently, how PSHE is taught can vary a lot between schools and regions. Some schools do brilliant work on topics like mental health and life skills; others have less time or support.

Those in alternative provision and with Special Educational Needs are those least likely to have their needs addressed. Our experience has been that many SEND/ACE young people are more likely to have found that through youth social action, they are able to learn PSHE, find their voice and agency and reduce vulnerability. Evidence of this has been shown through the #iwill movement and programmes such as Team London Young Ambassadors which enabled youth social across London.

What young people said in the NYS consultation:

- They want education that focuses more on real-life skills and political education.
- They want consistency so that young people in every area have access to the same quality of support.

What could help:

- A national PSHE Practice Exchange where teachers, youth workers and young people share ideas and lesson plans.
- DfE and DCMS should connect PSHE policy with the new NYS regional youth partnerships.

2. Helping teachers feel confident with sensitive topics

Young people in the Deliver You consultation said that mental health, inclusion and belonging are top priorities. PSHE is where these topics are explored, but many teachers say they need more support and training to deliver them well.

The National Youth Agency's 2025 survey found:

- 83% of youth workers deal with poor mental health among young people.
- 67% deal with online harms and safeguarding issues.
- Over half work in or with schools.

Ideas for improvement:

- Create joint training standards for teaching sensitive topics, bringing together the best practice from youth work and schools.
- Connect PSHE leads to local NYS networks so they can access specialist training in mental health, online safety and relationships.

3. Filling the life-skills gap

Lots of young people say school doesn't always prepare them for real life. The NYS consultation found a strong demand for practical learning — managing money, understanding politics, dealing with relationships, and building confidence.

The NYS found that demand for mental health support has risen sharply. PSHE can help prevent these issues by giving young people the knowledge and confidence to look after their wellbeing and relationships.

Ideas for improvement:

- Make sure PSHE includes proper lessons on life skills, wellbeing and political literacy.
- Measure PSHE success not just by knowledge, but by real-life outcomes — confidence, wellbeing and participation.

4. Giving young people a voice in PSHE

The NYS has shown how powerful youth voice can be. Through the Deliver You campaign, young people shaped national policy by sharing their views in surveys and “Democracy Cafés”. The PSHE agenda is a chance to increase youth voice, including inking with school participation schemes such as school parliaments and other forums.

Ideas for improvement:

- Create Youth Advisory Panels for PSHE at both national and local level.
- Ask every school to show how they involve pupils when planning and reviewing PSHE.

5. Youth social action — why it's so valuable

Youth social action includes volunteering, campaigning, mentoring, fundraising or taking part in community projects. It's about learning through doing — and it fits perfectly with PSHE's aims to build confidence, empathy and active citizenship.

Research shows that young people who take part in social action are more likely to vote and engage with democracy later in life. It also improves wellbeing, confidence, teamwork and leadership skills.

What schools could do:

- Include social action projects as part of PSHE or citizenship lessons.
- Link projects to teaching about democracy: how elections work, how to register, and how to make your voice heard.
- Make sure all young people can take part, so that social action reduces inequality instead of reinforcing it.

Case Study: Brighter Futures (Edinburgh)

Run by: Volunteering Matters | Age group: S2–S4 (13–15) | Setting: Secondary schools

Brighter Futures supports pupils who might be struggling at school to volunteer with local charities. Each young person has a mentor and time to reflect on what they learn through helping others.

Results (2024–25 Impact Report):

- 100% of students said it was worthwhile.
- 83% said their confidence and social skills improved.
- 52% felt more positive about their future.

Why it matters: Brighter Futures shows that social action in schools helps young people feel part of their community, boosts wellbeing, and builds citizenship skills.

6. Connecting PSHE with youth services

Schools and youth services often share the same goals — building confidence, wellbeing and community participation — but don't always work together closely. More collaboration would make it easier to link what young people learn in PSHE with what they experience in youth clubs or volunteering projects.

Ideas for improvement:

- Make PSHE a formal part of the National Youth Strategy delivery plan.
- Create Education & Youth Partnership Boards to bring together schools, youth organisations and local authorities.

7. Collecting better data

The National Youth Strategy has already reached tens of thousands of young people, but there's still a gap in the data about PSHE — especially around teacher training, curriculum content, and real-life outcomes.

Government should measure not just what's taught, but what difference it makes: do young people feel healthier, more confident and more engaged in their communities?

Ideas for improvement:

- Publish detailed results from the Deliver You consultation related to education and democracy.
- Fund research tracking whether taking part in school social action leads to higher registration and turnout when young people reach 16–17.

Conclusion

Young people are clear: they want an education that prepares them for life, relationships and democracy. PSHE is the subject that can make that happen — but it works best when it's active, inclusive and connected to real life.

Youth social action is key to that. It gives young people the chance to do something, not just learn about it. It builds confidence, empathy and leadership — and it makes people more likely to vote, volunteer and stay involved later in life.

As the UK moves towards Votes at 16, every young person should have the chance to practice active citizenship before they enter the voting booth. That means making social action a central, supported part of PSHE in every school.