



The Kickstart Scheme has been one of the UK government's flagship recovery policies to assist young people who are the age-group most economically impacted by COVID-19. The scheme is designed to encourage job placements for 16-24-year-olds in England, Scotland and Wales by providing grants to employers. Like many of these policies, the small print says that it excludes Northern Ireland; however NI Economy Minister Diane Dodds has since responded with a locally focused initiative.

This is all welcome but young people will certainly hope that the Chancellor's Budget in November contains much more to assist them, given the extent to which recessions, and perhaps this one in particular, affect the young.

Indeed, the kickstart that younger generations perhaps need most is one that spurs them on into becoming more politically engaged. If we look at all elections, young people are the

least likely to vote, and in turn they are the most likely to lose out in policymaking. It's not by accident that terms like 'triple-lock pensions' are often the most high-profile phrases used in the lead up to polling day as politicians seek to court those most likely to enter the voting booth.

There has been much talk about the speed of digital transformation during the pandemic to date. Digital change that might otherwise have taken years has taken weeks instead. But is there the potential for significant transformation in our politics as well when it comes to the attitudes and engagement of young people? Given the scale of the challenge younger generations now face, they certainly need to advocate for their own interests, and the best way to do it is at the ballot box.

The impact of the pandemic on young people covers education, job prospects, housing, their ability to travel, and their social lives. On the education front, we've already seen young people out of the classroom and lecture theatre for months and significant disruption to their education now that they are back in school, college or university. University students may feel that they are accumulating the same levels of debt as previous year-groups without the same level of lecture face-time nor the experience. Those who have already graduated face both a very uncertain jobs market and limited options if they can't find a job. Many companies have postponed their graduate schemes, and the ability to undertake a gap year overseas has all-but been taken away. Youth unemployment is likely to rise significantly in the months ahead and is expected to hit 25 percent during the course of next year. Sectors such as hospitality and retail which are going to be hardest hit in terms of employment have a disproportionately high percent of young people working in them.

For those who have or get a job, the experience won't likely be as enriching as for past generations, without the networking and social side of worklife, nor the intangible things like learning by osmosis. And development opportunities are likely to be few and far

between. Equally those school, college or university students seeking work experience will be disadvantaged by the inability to be in offices.

When it comes to apprenticeships, principals of further education (FE) colleges in Northern Ireland have warned that about half of employers who would previously have offered roles to apprentices have said they can no longer do so.

For example, figures from the Department for the Economy show apprentice electrician places are down almost 50 percent so far in 2020, and engineering apprenticeships are down a massive 77 percent.

In this context, policy-makers need to shift their focus more towards younger generations. They need to view the economic emergency through the lens of the younger generation. During the pandemic to date, older generations have been a key focus of the health emergency; young people need to be the focus on the economic one.

Young people could be forgiven for thinking the political world is against them. Political policy-making rarely favours them, and they have the very real prospect of a no-deal Brexit coming down the tracks. Brexit was something most young people didn't vote for. Arguably, it will impact negatively on them with for instance freedom of movement curtailed. Will the UK government / Stormont Executive fund the EU's Erasmus scheme whereby students can study, train and gain experience abroad?

So, politicians and policy-makers need to step up and deliver policies in the interests of young people now when they need it most. But young people also need to recognise their role in serving their own interests. They need to get more politically active, which includes voting more, questioning policy-making more, and better articulating the measures, policies and actions that need to happen in their own interests.

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