

VOTESFORSCHOOLS & ACCESSIBILITY IN SCHOOLS

Guidance for Education & Teaching Staff

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This document outlines how VotesforSchools can support teachers in creating a supportive, inclusive, and effective learning environment for children & young people with SEND. In keeping with the terminology used by the DfE (as well as by other bodies such as the Education Endowment Foundation), we will use the term SEND in this document to refer to all students with educational needs and/or a disability.

We are very proud to have had input from our own schools on this guidance. They have extensive experience of using VotesforSchools in specialised settings, and we are extremely grateful to them for their input. You can find examples of how they use VotesforSchools in the “Testimonial” sections.

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WHAT WE MEAN

Ensuring that the views of all children & young people are heard is central to the work of VotesforSchools. No student should be prevented from sharing their opinions or participating in decision-making, and we ensure that all aspects of the programme enable them to do this. Our resources and platform are inclusive by design, and accessibility is at the heart of our design practice.

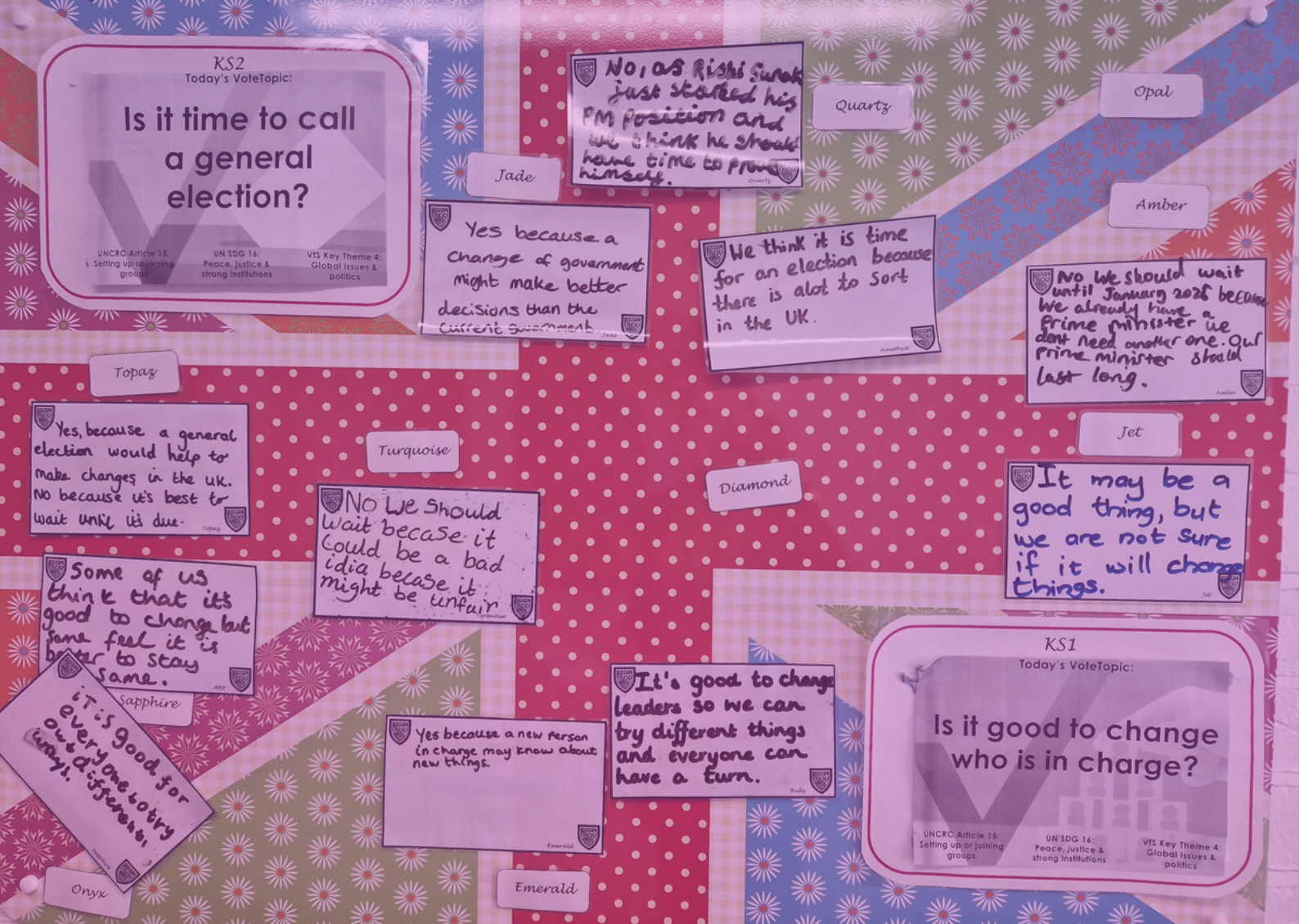
Removing barriers to learning requires a whole-school approach, and VotesforSchools supports schools in doing this. The information in this document outlines the ways in which the resources and wider programme helps to promote improved accessibility and therefore greater inclusion and cohesion.

TESTIMONIAL: FIVE ELMS PRIMARY SCHOOL

At Five Elms Primary School, **VotesforSchools lessons are taught in class, every week, to Years 1 to 6, as part of our PSHE curriculum.** The lessons are pre-taught to the pupils in our Additional Resource Provision (ARP) for Deaf and Complex Needs, and revisited in their mainstream classroom.

The **VfS PowerPoints are visual, interactive and exciting, meaning that it is very rare that weekly resources need adapting.** If we do need to add more pictures or change the text, it is **very easy** to do so. Of course, we teach the lessons alongside British Sign Language if a Deaf pupil is present.

All teachers find VfS lesson plans very simple to follow, from the teaching of the lessons via the PowerPoints provided, to voting online as a class. The **pupils are always highly engaged and especially enjoy having discussions and debates** about the topics. Pupils are not fazed by potentially tricky topics, and will listen to and challenge the thoughts and opinions of their peers. Voting takes place at the end of each lesson. This is shown on



the interactive whiteboard where pupils are invited to place their vote. Once the vote is complete, pupils are asked to create a “Class comment” that is then displayed on our VfS display board. This is **a fantastic way to ensure that pupil voice is shared with the entire school** over the course of the week.

We have **taught VfS at Five Elms since 2018**. During this time, our **pupils’ way of thinking has evolved** and we now see pupils that are **more confident and eager to share their views** with their peers. **Discussions are deeper, richer and pupil-led**. Within the ARP, this topic-specific learning is essential. Hearing pupils experience incidental listening every day, whereas this is not always the case for Deaf pupils. **Having the time, space and resources to teach specific topics is critical to their knowledge and understanding of the wider world**. For us, VotesforSchools is **invaluable!**

WHAT WE DO

We know that being informed and curious about the world is key to having resilient, inquisitive, and proactive citizens of the future, who are equipped with the qualities of empathy and tolerance, and the skills of critical thinking and political literacy.

For us, doing this successfully is all about balance. We strive to provide the full picture to both voters and teachers in all that we do, but also do not shy away from challenging and controversial questions. This is because we believe all teachers deserve to feel empowered to have big conversations with their school communities, whether about global conflict, the climate crisis, or the increasing prevalence of artificial intelligence. All our topics give voters the relevant context they need to understand these issues and to consider how they relate to the world in which they live, so that they can contribute meaningfully to not just their peer groups, but to wider society. This is always done in an age-appropriate and differentiated way.



ALIGNMENT WITH CURRENT GUIDANCE

Under the Schools & Families Act (2014), schools have statutory duties & responsibilities to the children & young people in their care. [Schools: guide to the 0 to 25 SEND code of practice advice document](#) from the DfE (September 2014) has been used as a basis for this guidance.

The DfE's guide also highlights that "children and young people who have SEN may also have a disability under the Equality Act 2010." For more information on how VotesforSchools supports schools in fulfilling these duties, see the [What we do](#) section of this document.

Ensuring our resources and platform are in keeping with current guidance and responsibilities is central to ensuring educators feel comfortable having important topical discussions. That's why additionally, we make sure to follow the guidance below:

- [The Equality Act 2010 & schools \(2014\)](#). | More on this in VotesforSchools & SMSC, British Values & Prevent
- [Inspecting teaching of the protected characteristics in schools \(2021\)](#). | More on this in VotesforSchools & Inspection Bodies
- [Political impartiality in schools](#) | More on this in our Political Impartiality Guidance.

All of the VotesforSchools guidance listed above can be found on your Teacher Dashboard.

WHY WE DO IT

Creating an inclusive learning environment benefits all students, staff and the school as a whole. This begins with removing the perceived barriers and breaking down preconceived stigmas; in doing so, young people feel confident and validated in their identities, and will then be better equipped to use their voices and contribute positively to the wider world.

Holding up a mirror to our diverse society through our resources and voting process gives young people the opportunity to develop their worldview beyond that of friends, family members and online networks. We recognise the speed with which our world is changing, and seek to demystify some of the most complex questions facing young people today. In our experience, young people are always keen to talk about topical issues, and it is vital that none of them are prevented from accessing the highest-quality teaching possible in order to do this.



TESTIMONIAL: BLOSSOM HOUSE SCHOOL

I first came across VotesforSchools whilst doing some Googling, looking for **resources which might be good to use for a special needs school**. (Blossom House school is a 3-19 school for pupils with speech and communication difficulties.)

The first topic I ever used was in **October 2016**: “Does the UK need more nuclear energy?” This was then followed by “Should Donald Trump be allowed to stand for President?” Since then, we have followed the VoteTopics pretty regularly, though there have been occasions in which the lessons are too challenging - such as the Israel-Gaza conflict, bullying, and the Post Office scandal. During these weeks, we **look back through the VfS archive** to see what else we could discuss with pupils.

Wider school use started in 2020. I took the decision to **edit the presentations** on a Sunday afternoon, to **make them a little simpler, and more user-friendly**. Sometimes this means I adapt the language a little, and often reduce content on the slides. Staff then have the presentations waiting in their inboxes on Monday morning. They deliver the sessions during one of the Group Time slots, between Monday and Friday.



I also **encourage feedback** from Group Leaders in order to **modify our use of VfS**. For example, one teacher recently told me that her group finds it difficult to cope with both the Yes and No summaries being on the same slide, so I now present this over two separate slides, which is **easy to do because of the resources' PowerPoint format**.

There are many other ways we use VfS flexibly to suit the needs of staff and pupils:

- Year 7/8 go through the PowerPoints during an **assembly**, before they then return to their **smaller groups** and discuss and vote within their classes
- Presentations are **used during one-to-one sessions**, perhaps with pupils on adapted timetables, or those following a behaviour support plan
- Speech Therapists sometimes adapt the presentations I have edited by further **modifying the language** and **adding widgets** to enhance understanding and participation.

If we ever do skip a VoteTopic, it is most often due to time constraints, or because we are aware as a staff body that certain topics may not be suitable for that particular group. This ensures that **provision remains appropriate based on the needs of the pupils**, which reflects our holistic ethos.

In terms of impact, **I have seen the difference VotesforSchools has made at all levels.** On a school level, VfS provides a real-life, functional and vital way to capture and promote pupil voice; Group Leaders frequently report **excited discussions** with their pupils!

I also compare our results with the votes from other London schools. If I find a disparity between these schools and Blossom House which concerns me (usually more than 20%), I will email our Senior Management Team and/or counselling therapists. This might mean that I feel **more education** in a certain area is needed, and **we can be proactive in offering this.** However, this works in a positive way too. For example, with the topic: "Would you feel comfortable having a conversation about your mental health?", a staggering 79% of our pupils voted Yes, as opposed to a London schools total of 32%. I believe that this reflects the **strongly therapeutic and individualised level of support** provided by our school, where therapy is integrated into the curriculum. This was highly encouraging for myself, my colleagues, and our pupils.

In terms of how it supports staff & curriculum coverage, Blossom House uses Gridmaker as a tool to capture our SMSC provision.

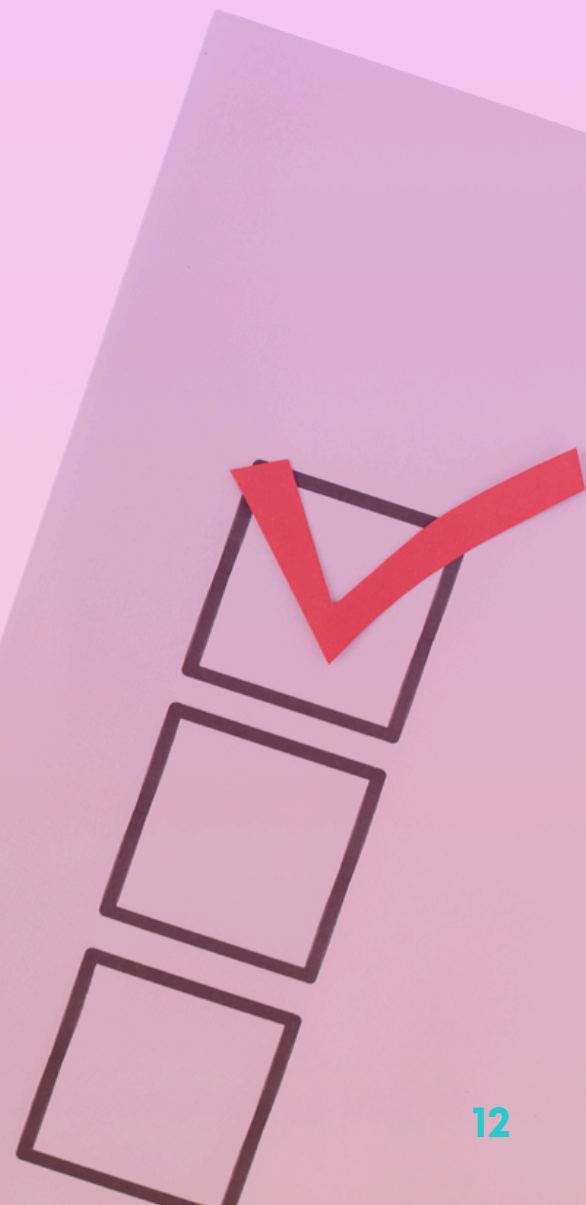
VfS provides an immense amount of material for us to be able to document strands of SMSC provision, especially under the heading "Cultural: Knowledge of UK's democratic Parliamentary system". We can also **easily identify aspects of RSE, PSHE and Citizenship covered by VfS** which provide useful evidence for us as an accountable school.



With regards to my own practice since using VfS, **it's really enabled me to evolve and develop**. On many occasions I've had to explore terms used in presentations with which, as an older person, I am clearly a little “out of touch”! As Governor of a local special school, I've also been **able to promote VfS** in order to help them meet their PSHE aims, and they have since subscribed.

And, on a personal level, I was delighted to be invited to join the VotesforSchools Education Advisory Board in September 2023. This enables **interaction with users from other schools which is invaluable**. I suggested at a recent Advisory Board meeting that an “Undecided” button could be added as an option, as sometimes pupils find it too difficult to decide one way or another and so don't vote. This would give equal weight to the “undecided voice”.

In summary, **VotesforSchools has provided a highly enriching asset and addition to our provision**. It means that the **pupils feel valued** as they know that their votes “are really going somewhere”. VfS have always **responded well to feedback**, and their bank of resources has grown to ensure that all areas are covered. I would 100% recommend and promote VfS as an invaluable learning resource for any school, and am **really thankful that this wonderful initiative can be adapted for use with even the most vulnerable of our SEND pupils**. I'm delighted to be involved with the Education Advisory Board as a representative from the world of special needs education, and feel that my involvement reflects the **highly inclusive mission** of VotesforSchools.



HOW WE DO IT

The way we embed and promote accessibility is fivefold.

Firstly, and most simply, we use imagery of children, young people & adults with visible disabilities across all our resources, not only when referring specifically to SEND-related topics. People with disabilities are displayed positively, to help dispel any pre-existing stigmas or stereotypes that children & young people may hold, and to empower all children & young people to aim high and embrace what makes them unique. This focus on positive representation also applies in scenario-based activities; if a “character” happens to have a special educational need or disability, this is described in the same way as any other characteristic - something to be better understood and celebrated. This said, children & young people are also



encouraged to be mindful of and empathetic towards the barriers people with SEND may face, and to consider their role in breaking these down.

Secondly, we focus on SEND-specific topics at various points in the academic year, such as International Day of Persons with Disabilities and Neurodiversity Celebration Week. These topics allow all students (and staff) to think openly about the lived experiences of people with SEND and reflect on the obstacles and stereotypes that still persist today. We encourage active participation from all young people on these topics, and actively promote the benefits of improved understanding and awareness for everyone. Schools are also provided with signposting for students and staff who would like more information or support.





Thirdly, we ensure that our resources are differentiated, meaning that the weekly topics are accessible to everyone, no matter their age or ability. All our lessons are built on the same “hook”, whether this be plastic pollution, elections, or gaming. This means that every member of a school is discussing the same topic no matter which lesson staff use across different classes. This helps to build cohesion and encourage cross-class discussions, thereby supporting inclusion from the bottom up.

Fourth is our use of additional information boxes. Usually yellow in colour, these will either give further context to what is being discussed, or help define an unfamiliar word. This is intended to support all students, but is particularly helpful to those with SEND (as well as those with EAL).

Lastly, but certainly not least:

VotesforSchools resources are all fully editable. On a weekly basis, we keep the accessibility of these resources in mind, and do all that we can to minimise the possibility that staff need to make edits of their own. However, because the resources are produced in PowerPoint, staff are able to add or remove information, change images, or alter colours & patterns to suit students’ needs.

EDITING THE RESOURCES

Making minor edits to VotesforSchools resources is simple; just open the PowerPoint and amend text or images as you see fit. All we ask is that you do so in a way that doesn't compromise the resources' political impartiality and balance.

To make more substantial changes, follow these steps:

- Go to "View" in the top toolbar.
- Click "Slide Master".
- In "Colours" and "Fonts" you can change the colour schemes and font for the entire presentation.
- In "Background Styles", you can set the background colour to one of your choosing. Once you have done this for one slide, you can select "Apply to All" to change the entire presentation.

If sourcing alternative images, the most convenient repository is Microsoft Office 365's own collection, which you can browse via the "Insert Pictures" function. Alternatively, Unsplash has a diverse range of engaging free images.

The Testimonials in this document also include additional ideas from VfS schools on adaptations.





WHO WE WORK WITH

The VotesforSchools Team is always striving to improve the resources and make them accessible to all.

To this end, we regularly seek feedback from our Educational Advisory Board, which is made up of teachers from a diverse range of schools. They provide us with invaluable insights into how the resources work in their settings, and also share their own ideas for best practice. We are also fortunate to have an even broader range of educational providers subscribed to VotesforSchools, including alternative providers, special provision, SEMH schools, and SLD schools. We seek feedback from them throughout the academic

year, via channels such as polls and surveys.

We are also lucky to work with a diverse range of organisations, who generously offer their insights and advice on discussing topics relating to SEND. In turn, these organisations are kept informed of young people's thoughts on issues such as SEND provision, accessibility, and stereotypes or stigmas that endure today. As a result, this helps to drive forward contemporary research and influence decision-making.



WHERE TO FIND US

If you would like to know more about the information outlined above, please contact us:



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