

## **How the UK Youth Parliament and the British Youth Council Changed My Life**

### **By Elspeth Dennison MYP for Allerdale & Copeland**

When I was elected on March 16th 2018 as Youth Parliament member for Allerdale and Copeland, I felt ecstatic and so humbled that so many people deemed me worthy enough to represent them in such an important way. However, I had no idea of the adventure that I was about to be thrown into, and how such an impromptu decision to nominate myself as election candidate would go on to change the course of my life.

As MYP for Cumbria, I feel that I have achieved many things and have successfully been that voice for my constituents who felt that they did not have the power to speak up. Here is a list of things that I am most proud of:

**- Bringing the Red Box Project to Allerdale.** In September 2018 I joined a team of incredible ladies from the Red Box Project West Cumbria. I was made Red Box Co-ordinator for Allerdale, and with the invaluable help of the team, we started Red Box in Allerdale. After months of planning and fundraising, we finally were able to say that there was a Red Box in every secondary school in Allerdale. It was an amazing achievement. Shortly after this, Philip Hammond announced that he would be funding the period poverty crisis in all schools, meaning that eventually, the Red Box Project will shut down. If it wasn't for all the amazing Red Box Co-ordinators around the country volunteering and making noise, I don't believe that this would've happened. **We changed our communities.**

**- Holding events for our Syrian and Iraqi refugees to welcome them into our community.** We held a 'Life in Cumbria' exhibition for refugee young people and families that were involved in an art day at the Florence Art Museum. Young refugees were able to express the difference between Cumbria and life back home, and what they missed. It was moving to see that young refugees felt that people in Cumbria are friendlier. We also took them to the Holocaust Exhibition in Windermere where they were able to see what the 'Windermere Boys' experienced, which was similar to their own journeys of having to leave their countries due to war.

**- Fighting for Mental Health with *We Will*.** *We Will* is an award winning mental health group from Ewanrigg, made up of 15-19 year olds, some of which include my youth councillors. With *We Will* I have presented to education boards about what schools can do to support students who are suffering with mental health problems. Some of the group went down to Parliament to discuss mental health services with the Mental Health Minister, and we were also honoured to meet and talk to the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge about the work that we've done. We have filmed mental health films to spread awareness about issues and support, and we have won multiple awards including a Diana Award. They also hold free Mental Health First Aid Training sessions for people, and encourage schools to hold the same sessions. The *We Will* group is independent of youth Council, but Youth Council has given me the courage to embark on different groups like this to campaign on the issues I feel are important.

**- Being a POSH Ambassador.** POSH stands for Pioneers of Sustainable Hope. I have presented to other youth councillors and MYPs around the country about what we can all do to help the climate - for example, turning vegetarian, using less water, etc. Our youth council have organised beach cleans with a local charity called Zuza Trading, which was very successful. We have done workshops making seed bombs, and have done some 'urban planting' at the Maryport railway station, planting flowers to encourage bees.

- **Striking for Climate Change.** Two of my youth councillors have lead the climate change strikes in Cumbria, supported (but not encouraged) by their schools. They have won community engagement awards for fighting for the climate and even went on an inter-rail trip to Switzerland to debate with other young people (including Greta Thunberg herself) about climate legislation.

- **Curriculum for Life.** A variety of different organisations across West Cumbria came together to discuss how we can support young people in school and change the curriculum so that young people receive more support on career and finance advice. This came from several young people requesting that they are taught life skills in school so that they feel more prepared and ready to live independently. We are now planning different sessions and workshops for school where young people can hopefully feel like this wish has been fulfilled.

- **Hygiene Poverty.** Following on from the Red Box Project, I am in the middle of setting up my own Hygiene Poverty Charity to support those in homeless & refuge shelters, schools, youth clubs, etc, who doesn't have access to hygiene products. We have already had some requests for this. I put a motion forward to all the UK MYPs at our annual sitting to 'End Hygiene Poverty' which was passed by 85% of MYPs there.

- **Knife Crime/Crime Awareness Events.** We have sent out surveys across schools in Allerdale and Copeland to find out what young people know about knife crime, and if they have experienced any cases of it personally. It proved that there is a problem with knife crime and young people in Cumbria, but that in almost all cases it linked to drug problems. We have held crime awareness days with the Youth Perspective Board about what young people can do if they see or experience a crime, what they are most afraid of in terms of crime, and what we can do about it.

- **Events with local MP Sue Hayman.** Local MP Sue Hayman has supported a lot of our events over the year. We have also ran surgeries together to find out what matters most to people in our community and what we can do to raise awareness and highlight to cabinet members.

- **CAMHS redesign and School Support Tabs.** When I first joined youth council we were asked about what would help young people when waiting for treatment at CAMHS. We suggested that group therapy might be helpful for some young people whilst they wait, so that they are at least not left alone and feel they have some support. CAMHS Cumbria now offers therapy groups whilst waiting for treatment. Additionally, before I left secondary school I put a list together of what you can do, where you can go, and the treatment you can receive if you are struggling with mental health problems. I also put a directory together full of contacts for a range of different topics so that people would know that there is support available. Because of this, the school created a 'Support Tab'. Myself and some of my youth council members are also Mental Health First Aid Trained. This list is just a taste of the things that we have been up to this year. We have done many more things.

## **But for me, the biggest achievement of them all is a bit more personal.**

When I put myself forward as an election candidate in 2017, I had only just started year 13. I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life, I had almost dropped out of sixth form, and I was finding life very difficult. I was shy, unconfident, and insecure, but I still had a spark of passion in my heart, and discussing politics with my family would always briefly relight this spark of passion within me. And then in October, I saw this advert from Cumbria County Council. *Become a Candidate for the Cumbria Youth Parliament elections*, it said. *If you think you have what it takes to represent the young people of Cumbria at a regional and national level, then get it touch today.*

I had no idea what I was nominating myself for, but after discussing it with some of my friends and family, I finally plucked up the courage to nominate myself. All I knew was that I desperately wanted to make a difference, and if I was able to change only one person's life, then I would be happy. Well, after meeting my Youth Participation officer (who would support me throughout the nomination process) and all the other candidates, we began campaigning. By January, I had written a manifesto, filmed a candidate video, created PowerPoints and spoken in assemblies - my friends even made me my own posters and T-shirts for when the voting began! I was the type of person who preferred to blend in as much as possible in school so that nobody would be able to make fun of me for anything. I was fighting anxiety, and even waiting outside my form room whilst everyone walked past me sent me into a panic because I thought everyone would be making fun of me. And suddenly, when I was campaigning to be elected, I was forced to put myself out there. I had to talk to people, encourage them to vote, ask them what mattered to them. I considered stepping down from the election process many times due to how anxious it made me feel, and I couldn't help wondering whether putting myself on the line would be for nothing.

When I found out that I had won the election in March 2018, I was halfway through CBT treatment with CAMHS for diagnosed anxiety and depression. The first 'YouthForia' residential that I attended with all the North West MYPs was in Ambleside a month later in April. It was an overnight weekend trip in which I knew I had to share a room and bathrooms with 6 strangers, and as I type this I can still feel the overwhelming stress that I felt just thinking about that scary prospect. This trip was my first taste of what my next two years as MYP would be - full of excitement, opportunities, new friends, and the chance to make my mark on this world. Despite being very timid on my first couple of YouthForia trips, I managed to make friends and enjoy myself - two massive achievements for me at the time. I came back feeling inspired and I knew that the UK Youth Parliament would change me for the better.

Later on that year, I attended two big Youth Parliament events: the Annual Conference, and the House of Commons Debate. I still feel so incredibly privileged to be even given the chance to attend these events. They are both events in which all the MYPs from across the UK come together and debate on certain motions put forward and voted in by young people.

The House of Commons Debate is something that I will remember for the rest of my life. By this point, I had been elected onto the North West Steering Group as a Cumbria Rep, and my confidence was slowly growing. I had finished my A Levels, I was on a gap year, and I had also just finished my CBT treatment. I was running the Allerdale and Copeland Youth Councils with my Participation Officer, Anna, and I was finally able to say that I truly felt happiness for the first time in several years. I think that Youth Parliament had a lot to do with this.

Fast forward a year later. I have run workshops for young people **on my own**, I have protested in public for Climate Change, I put forward my own motion for MYPs on the 2019 Annual Sitting and spoke in front of 200 people. I have made noise and protested with my youth councillors, we have planned community events, and we have made a big difference. Additionally, I am now a Youth Police and Crime Commissioner, and a POSH Ambassador.

My biggest achievements are the small ones. Because of the UK Youth Parliament and the British Youth Council, I dropped my plan of pursuing primary teaching in University, changed my course and now I am about to embark on one called *Community and Social Care: Policy and Practice* which covers politics and social issues.

I would now like to be a Community Engagement officer (or at least, something to do with working in the community and helping people). Youth Parliament has given me the greatest gift of all: a *purpose*. I now know what I truly want to do when I'm older. Running campaigns & projects, being able to help people, making a difference in my community, all gives me such happiness and joy. Youth Parliament has given me the confidence I so desperately lacked and needed all my life. I have made true best friends that I would never have met otherwise. Before I became a MYP, I would not have dared to be different, to be myself. Youth Parliament helped me find who I really am. I would not have dared to speak to people or to go out in public and be myself without worrying what other

people think. As well as Youth Parliament, I also have my amazing Youth Officers to thank for all this - Chris, Lynne, and Anna. Chris and Lynne were there for me through my YouthForia adventures. They never complained when I stuck to them like glue when I was too afraid to make new friends, and they encouraged me when I **got the courage** to do things like talk to new people, or present in front of other MYPs.

Anna has supported me throughout absolutely everything that I have done over the past two years, she has given me life advice and taught me so many valuable lessons.

The most valuable lesson Anna has given me is to **believe in myself**. That I am a strong, powerful woman and nobody can take this away from me. That if I put my mind to it, **I can achieve anything**. She has been patient and kind, and has taken me under her wing and empowered me and seen me through thick and thin. I am so grateful to all of them. Being a MYP has been the **greatest adventure of my life**, and I would do it all over again if I could. I am so, so grateful to everyone who helped me get to where I am now. I look back on the girl I used to be, and I see a different person.

The UK Youth Parliament and the British Youth Council may not seem like a big deal to some. But it **literally changed and saved my life**. And for all the people that had a part to play in this - I will be forever thankful.