Participation through the Pandemic
Final Report

Peer Researchers:
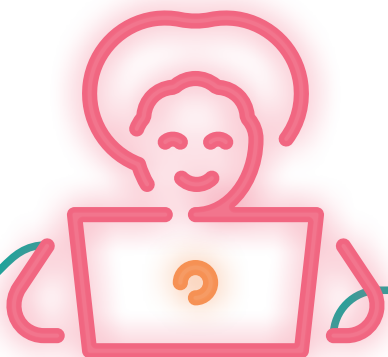Ishan Barnes, Emma Bell, Katie Gillies, Ellie Roy

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June 2022

Children in Scotland   youngstart

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Introduction

About Children in Scotland

Giving all children in Scotland an equal chance to flourish is at the heart of everything we do.

By bringing together a network of people working with and for children, alongside children and young people themselves, we offer a broad, balanced, and independent voice. We create solutions, provide support, and develop positive change across all areas affecting children in Scotland.

We do this by listening, gathering evidence, and applying and sharing our learning, while always working to uphold children's rights. Our range of knowledge and expertise means we can provide trusted support on issues as diverse as the people we work with and the varied lives of children and families in Scotland.

Background

Children in Scotland delivered the Participation through the Pandemic project from May 2021 to June 2022. The project aimed to explore the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on how children and young people engaged with different projects and services that affect their lives.

Funded by Young Start, we used a peer research approach to explore how different organisations engaged with children and young people across the pandemic. We aimed to explore how projects changed and developed their approach when traditional face to face methods were not always available.

This project was delivered by our team of peer researchers: Ellie, Emma, Ishan and Katie. With support and guidance from project staff, they have engaged with projects across the country and developed six case studies based on the experiences of children and young people who had been involved in participation and engagement work since the pandemic began in March 2020.

We believe the learning gained from this project can be used to improve participation and engagement work with children and young people as we move beyond the pandemic.

The report has been written by project staff but is based entirely on the work of the peer researchers.

Children's rights and participation

Scotland is currently in the process of incorporating the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into domestic law. In June 2021, the Scottish Parliament unanimously passed a bill to fully incorporate the convention into Scot's law. The Bill has since been challenged in the Supreme Court and will return to the Scottish Parliament with amendments. In the meantime, work to get ready for UNCRC incorporation continues across Scotland.

Article 12 of the UNCRC states that all children and young people have a right to be heard in matters that affect them. This project was set firmly within Children in Scotland's rights-based approach to participation and engagement. At every stage, we have ensured that the young people involved were supported to take the lead

Peer research

Peer research is an approach where people with experience of the research topic are involved in delivering it. The decision to adopt a peer research approach for this project was taken because we know it can lead to better research and brings additional benefits to the peer researchers involved.[1] In this case, the research was conducted by four young people during the coronavirus pandemic and focused on the experiences of young people during the pandemic.

All Children in Scotland's projects are informed by our Principles and Guidelines for the Meaningful Participation and Engagement of Children and Young People.[2] We see peer research as an approach that can support meaningful and insightful participation where projects are led by children and young people, whilst making sure they have the right support available.

We know from previous projects, such as our Health Inequalities research published in 2020, that the peer research approach works well when investigating a topic relevant to children and young people's experience.[3] It empowers young people to explore ideas and develop their own work. They are able to identify and focus on issues that matter to them.

The peer researchers learned about how to fulfil research goals, whilst also developing their project based on what they thought would work for them. We will discuss this further in the methodology section of this report.

It was important to us that throughout this project we built up trust between staff and the peer researchers. We always aimed to provide support and guidance so the young people could create and work towards their own ambitions for the project. We focused on activities that developed relationships and built confidence, supporting the group to lead on different sections of the project.

We will be publishing a separate report exploring the impact that being involved in a peer research project has had on the four researchers.

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[1] https://www.youngfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/TheYoungFoundation-PeerResearchInTheUK-final-singles.pdf

[2] https://childreninscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/CiS-Participation-2019.pdf

[3] https://childreninscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Health-Inequalities-Report-Chris-Ross.pdf

Covid-19 pandemic

The project was devised in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. We know from a range of projects and research from across the sector the significant impact the pandemic has had on children, young people and families, as well as the organisations that work with them. The pandemic has affected children and young people's mental health and wellbeing, causing mounting anxiety about personal health, 'lost' learning and future employment opportunities.[4] Children and young people have experienced huge disruption to their education, had to learn from home and missed out on time socialising with friends and enjoying leisure activities.[5] Taken altogether, the reported negative effects on wellbeing have created a significantly increased demand on support services.[6] Many organisations, including Children in Scotland, also experienced a complete shift in how they worked with children and young people over this time, with in-person activity shifting to online delivery while nationwide restrictions were in place.

This project provided an opportunity for children and young people to share their views on the pandemic. It demonstrated that young people have ideas and solutions to key problems in society and adds further weight to the need to create a space for them to be involved in driving forward change.

Moving forward, the findings can be used to support better policy and practice.

Methodology

As we have discussed, the project was based on a peer research approach. This meant the young peer researchers designed, developed and delivered the project with the support of staff from Children in Scotland. We have provided a full methodology in the Appendix 1 of this report (see page 19). A short methodology outlining our approach is discussed below.

After recruiting our four peer researchers, our initial work focused on developing their knowledge and understanding of participation and of research. Our sessions with the peer researchers were planned to support learning and understanding through different activities, discussion and games.

Our peer research approach was designed based on what worked best for the peer researchers and the young people they spoke to. We worked collaboratively to develop research questions and methods. The peer researchers decided on a mixed methods approach which involved online sessions with a mix of focus groups and creative activities.

To gather examples that they might want to include in their research, the group ran a survey in August 2021. Organisations were invited to submit examples of their work. The group ultimately chose six projects and services to include in their research.

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[4] https://syp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/lockdown-lowdown-final-report.pdf
[5] https://www.childrensparliament.org.uk/corona-times-journal-edition-3/
[6] https://childreninscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/CPG-CYP-Pandemic-Impact-Survey-2022.pdf

All six projects were invited to participate in online sessions which included children, young people and staff from the projects. These sessions were delivered by the peer researchers with support from staff at Children in Scotland.

The four peer researchers analysed their findings and developed case studies together. The group first looked at what they had heard on each project to draft the individual case studies. They then worked together to consider the common themes across all six.

The approach to the project had a number of limitations, some of which arose from the ongoing impact of the pandemic. You can find out more in Appendix 1.

Participant data

In this section, we will lay out the numbers of participants involved in the project. This includes the peer researchers, the survey responses and also the participants from each case study.

Peer researchers

In total we worked with four peer researchers on the project. All four had worked on projects previously with Children in Scotland. At the start of the project all the peer researchers were aged between 15 and 18 years of age.

The researchers were based across four different local authorities in Scotland.

Survey responses

Our survey ran from 12/08/2021 – 15/09/21 on survey monkey. In total, we received 30 responses to the survey, covering a range of different topics and issues.

We received responses from projects and services based all over Scotland including East Ayrshire, the Lothians, Aberdeenshire, Glasgow, the Highlands, Dumfries & Galloway and several national projects.

Case studies

In total, we chose six projects to explore in more detail. Projects were chosen based on level of interest from the peer researchers but also to ensure we explored a range of topics, age ranges and locations. You can find out more in *Table 1* in Appendix 2 (see page 24).

In total we spoke to 31 people as part of the engagement sessions. This included 21 young people and 10 staff members. Staff members fulfilled a range of roles from practitioners to senior managers to graphic designers. You can find out more in *Table 2* (see page 25).

Case studies

Our six case studies have been produced in a standalone document to allow people to explore them outside the whole report. You can access the **standalone document here**.

We have included a brief introduction to each project below:

CAMHS Participation Project

The CAMHS Participation Project was delivered by NHS Dumfries and Galloway with support from SAMH to engage young people in a creative art project with the aim of improving the delivery of mental health services for children and young people in the area.

The project worked with young people aged 12-24 who lived across the region. This fun, friendly and inspiring project brought together a group of young people who had experience of mental health issues to discuss their experiences and to use these to improve the services available in the area.

As part of the project, the group created an animation for professionals to improve how they work with young people in mental health settings and to raise awareness. Young people's views were used to develop the script and the animation includes their original artwork. **Click here** to see the final "Be Kind" mental health animation.

Carers Trust Scotland

The Media Ambassadors project was created by Carers Trust Scotland, a charity who provide support services to carers across Scotland. The aim of the project is to raise awareness of the experiences of young carers in Scotland.

The project brought together a group of young carers aged 17-21 who took part in filmmaking training with Media Education and created a film that raises greater awareness of the experiences of young carers in Scotland. The project was entirely led by the young people who got involved. Staff gave them the choice to do what they wanted with the project and provided any support needed.

Click here to watch the Media Ambassadors 2021 short film.

CELCIS Participation Project

This project is delivered by CELCIS in partnership with the Care Inspectorate, Clan Childlaw and Liminal Studios to co-produce creative and interactive digital resources for young people to access and increase their awareness of their rights in relation to continuing care.

It works with young people with experience of care aged 17-26 from all over Scotland. This creative and thoughtful project brought young people together to develop resources that support other young people to be aware of their legal rights.

The group are still in the process of finalising their postcards but you can see some of the artwork below.
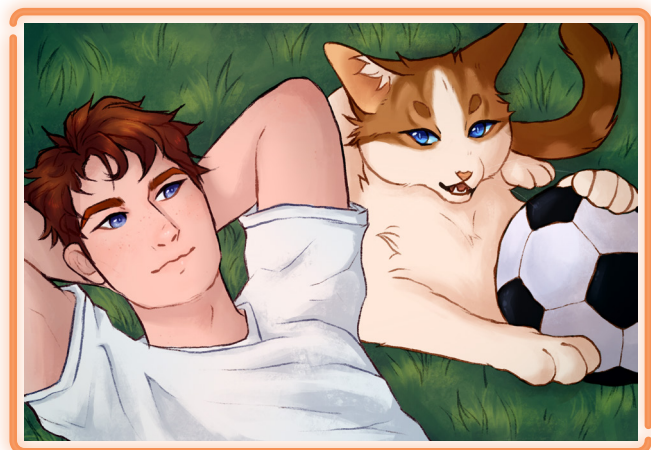
Scottish Badgers & Scottish Wildlife Trust

The Earn Your Stripes project is delivered by the Scottish Badgers and the Scottish Wildlife Trust. Scottish Badgers are a charity who promote the study, conservation, and protection of Scotland's badgers. The Scottish Wildlife Trust work to ensure healthy, resilient ecosystems across Scotland's land and seas.

The project worked with young people aged 16-24 with additional support needs in Glasgow, South Lanarkshire, North Lanarkshire and West Dunbartonshire. The aim of the project was to build knowledge and awareness on environmental issues and to work with the young people to developed techniques they could use to act on the issues that mattered to them. Online sessions included live tracking in the woods, wildlife crime scenes and how to make your garden more wildlife friendly.

St Columba's Hospice Care

St Columba's Hospice deliver a bereavement support service for children and young people aged 4-18 across Edinburgh and the Lothians, who have experienced a bereavement or who have a family member with an incurable illness.

The service aims to provide support to help children and young people deal with grief and to explore the impact of this on their lives. During the pandemic, this positive, supportive service was working with young people at an extremely challenging time and provided a vital support to the young people using it.

The Place

The Place is a youth club in Alness, Ross and Cromarty that provides support to young people aged 12-25 in the area. The Place has been supporting young people for more than 30 years and provides a range of youth work opportunities. This exciting project has found different ways to provide support to young people in challenging circumstances.

In early 2020, The Place was told that it was losing access to its usual building where it delivered youth work services. The Place engaged with its young people to respond to this issue and as a result of a period of consultation secured a 99-year lease on an outdoor space – a field on which they've set up a large tent to provide protection from the elements.

Findings and key learning

We identified a number of different areas of learning from across the six case studies. In this section we will discuss each of these areas and explore why the peer researchers thought they were particularly important. We have illustrated each section with examples from some of the projects.

Putting children and young people first

Across a number of the projects we heard about how organisations gave young people opportunities to lead in ways that suited them and where staff put the wellbeing of the participating young people first. This included building in flexibility into session delivery, enabling young people to make decisions and learning from feedback and evaluation.

Creating an environment where wellbeing was prioritised, ensuring young people were engaged on their own terms, was particularly important. Giving people more choice within projects helped to give the young people a sense of some control in their lives, during a time when freedom and individual choice were severely restricted. It also supported young people's enjoyment of the projects. Going forward, we need to consider how the participation projects that young people take part in can create a space for them to take control and make decisions.

Flexibility in sessions

As the pandemic was a taxing time for young people and especially young carers, Carers Trust Scotland worked in flexibility with young people and adapted the project to suit their needs – for example participants were free to join or leave sessions when they wanted or were able to. With CELCIS's participation project, young people told us how they were able to join from the location that suited them best, which could be anywhere from their bedroom to on the bus. In the CAMHS Participation Project we heard how they adapted the approach to in-person sessions to ensure that a member of the group who was high risk for Covid-19 could join them at these meetings virtually. These adaptations to sessions made the projects more accessible to young people and meant they could continue to take part despite different things going on in their lives.
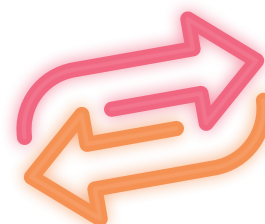
It was clear that the flexibility offered by staff, which acknowledged the other commitments existing in young people's lives, including caring responsibilities, school work and exams, was appreciated. Young participants were clear that they didn't like activities that gave off strict, inflexible 'school vibes'.

Allowing young people to make decisions

Projects such as Carers Trust Scotland's and the CAMHS Participation Project supported the young people to make decisions on how the project was delivered, such as choosing topics to focus on or organisations to reach out to or work with. Other projects allowed the young people to have free reign on how they did things, such as deciding the activities for the meetings and what they wanted to do in the community. At The Place, the young people organised and implemented all of the project activities because "we know what people our age need".

The ability to drive and influence a project can make young people more engaged as they feel like activity is directed towards their needs and interests. In contrast to staff, young people are not paid to attend projects or services and are not obliged to be there. If projects are made interesting, enjoyable, and reflect young people's needs, ideas and preferences, then young people are more likely to become and to stay engaged.

Feedback and evaluation

We also heard how in projects such as the CELCIS participation project and Carers Trust Scotland's Media Ambassadors project, staff encouraged feedback from young people, evaluated activities and importantly, were keen to make changes based on their findings.

This is vital as it showed that staff were open to changing things based on what the children and young people involved were saying. It is important for staff to make a safe space for young people to give feedback as it can be a daunting proposition. Creating that safe space can be done through anonymous surveys or by doing creative activities. It is also important to build a trusting relationship where young people feel comfortable to say what they think and feel it will be taken on board.

Our group of researchers felt that having opportunities for evaluation were particularly important during the pandemic as it was harder for staff to identify how a child or young person is actually feeling when working online and speaking through a screen.

Relationships and connections

The importance of relationships was clear across the six projects. All of them spoke about how they took time for those involved to get to know each other, to feel comfortable and to relax. Often, they made the effort to develop these aspects early in the project as they knew the benefit they would have.

Boundaries and support

Across the six case studies, we saw how the relationships built between staff and young people ensured that the young people felt comfortable in participation sessions. In the CAMHS project, staff took the time to meet with participants 1-1 to get to know them as individuals before they came on board with the project. We also heard how, in the CELCIS project and in the Scottish Badgers and Scottish Wildlife Trust project, they focused on relationships at the start to create a safe space that supported young people to contribute. This involved having fun and allowing the groups' participants time and space to get to know each other before getting into the actual focus of the project. We also saw that on projects like St Columba's Hospice Care building relationships with the young people who accessed the service allowed them to develop a more person-led service.

We saw from across different projects that when staff knew and understood the young people they were working with, they knew how to adapt things (such as the length of the session for that day) and any boundaries the young people had. When young people have good relationships with staff, this makes them feel comfortable contributing and giving feedback if they wanted anything about the project to change.

Relationships with peers

The relationships built between the young people themselves were also significant in ensuring that they felt comfortable engaging in the projects. Positive relationships between the participants meant that they were able to work together well on a range of activities despite the project moving online.

We saw on a range of projects where young people formed good relationships with each other as they worked. These connections provided opportunities to socialise during a time when many felt isolated and enabled opportunities to talk about shared experiences. We saw in the CAMHS participation project that young people kept in touch outside the project and clearly provided peer support to one another. This was also particularly important in Carers Trust Scotland's Media Ambassadors project as being involved gave them opportunities to socialise with people with similar experiences when opportunities for this were limited due to the pandemic.

Working together also helped the projects develop their work as people became more open to each other's views and more able to work together. This also reflects the experience of the peer researchers who delivered this project – they have regularly highlighted that forming good relationships and connections with each other over time has made a big difference to how they have worked together and that having a safe space meant that they were comfortable in sharing ideas.

Support received through the project

It was clear from all our case studies that the projects the young people were involved in during the pandemic provided support to them in a number of different ways. This involved formal support from adults but also more peer support that came from seeing other people in a time that was isolating for young people.

Support with health and wellbeing

Some of the children and young people we spoke to received direct support from staff as an explicit part of the participation projects they were involved in. The Place has a 24/7 support policy where young people can reach out anytime for support. Our researchers felt this policy would help ensure that the young people did not feel like a burden for contacting them out of usual working hours. Services such as St Columba's Hospice were available outside of the time of meetings to chat, catch up and discuss how they were feeling. This showed an appreciation that the young people have things going on outside of project meetings or may need support outside the hours that a service usually runs. This was particularly important during the pandemic due to the impact it has had on children and young people's health and wellbeing.

Being available more regularly outside of the normal time of sessions also takes account of the fact that young people may not be able to wait until the next scheduled session to access support.

> *"This group has honestly been one of the best things that has happened. Without it, I don't know where I would be! Being involved has improved my mental health and my confidence. Even a couple of months ago, I couldn't have talked in front of as many people. I would have been scared that people would judge me."*
>
> *(Young Person)*

Support to take the lead

Many of the children and young people also received support from staff to fulfil their role on that specific participation project. Young people involved in the CELCIS project spoke about not being thrown in at the deep end but also about not being patronised by staff. In The Place's project, young people were able to work with those who deliver the service to gain a youth work qualification and then lead on the delivery of the service in a supportive environment.

This is an important balance for adults delivering projects with children and young people because it ensures that young people have the support they need but still feel empowered to take the lead when the opportunity arises.

"Thank you for allowing me to be part of the Media Ambassadors. I've really enjoyed being part of it and I think the film was really successful and can definitely facilitate change. I found the presentation to Carers Trust good, I liked that we prepared beforehand with roles and scripts, this helped me be less nervous."

(Young Person)

Projects as a source of support

We also heard about how simply participating in the projects was a source of support for the young people. We heard from Carers Trust Scotland about how the project provided something for the young people to do outside of their caring responsibilities. They told us how it provided a feeling of routine and normality and the chance to socialise with other young people in similar situations. The young people working with the Scottish Badgers enjoyed meeting other young people who share their experiences and interests, as this offered a respite from things that were on their minds during the pandemic.

We also saw from the CAMHS participation project how they were able to provide peer support to each other and also to use their experiences to support others who were having similar experiences through social media.

Inclusive, accessible, relaxing and secure environments

Projects also told us about how they had made sure their work was inclusive, accessible and a safe environment for children and young people. This was really important for our peer researchers as they felt it allowed people to open up and share their views.

Relaxed environments

We heard how projects worked hard to create a relaxed environment and atmosphere. As we have highlighted, there were projects where young people could join from wherever they wanted while at the CAMHS participation project we heard specifically about how young people came with blankets during online calls. Projects also focused on having fun, they spent time doing ice breakers, playing games and chatting so that people felt happy to take part. This worked well as it made meetings feel less formal and prescriptive, which could have discouraged participants from attending future meetings.

We also heard about how the projects used simple things like working agreements to make people feel safe when talking about sensitive issues like mental health. Having a set of boundaries that everyone would stick to meant people could share their perspectives freely.

Different methods of communication

Across our research, we saw how projects considered how they could use methods of communication that were inclusive within the new online environment. We saw how projects such as the CAMHS Participation Project and Carers Trust Scotland were using platforms like Instagram direct messaging or WhatsApp to keep in touch. This made the projects more accessible as the young people were already familiar with these platforms and more inclined to respond on them.

Giving options

The Scottish Badgers and Scottish Wildlife Trust project made sure to have a range of activities so that there was something for everyone, including activities that could be done by looking out a window or happen in a garden or a nearby park. We know the importance of having a range of approaches from our own work; it means different people feel comfortable to participate as they can engage on their own terms.

The Place told us how they wanted to make coming along to their meetings as accessible as possible for young people and ensured that there were no financial barriers to participating by not charging for food. This is an important recognition that not everyone is on the same economic footing and if there are charges for certain elements of a project, some young people might be less likely to attend.

Lived experience, advocacy and making a change

The CAMHS participation project in particular gave a route for young people to use their experiences to make a change. Young people explicitly talked about this within the sessions, however it was also clear that other projects did give a route for this, even if people didn't speak about it so much.

Identifying important topics

We heard how the group involved in the project had discussions at the initiation stage to see what they thought was important to work on together based on their experiences of what had worked well before and what hadn't. We also heard about how participants were motivated to get involved to help others and to make mental health services in their area better.

This is significant because these children and young people have lived through these issues and they have a unique insight into what is best to help others in similar situations. It is really important that adults make space for young people to do this if they feel comfortable doing so, but they also need to be aware it might not be appropriate for everyone.

Meeting directly with decision-makers

The group got to meet with decision-makers including people involved in local decision-making about health services and Scottish Government Ministers to share what they

were working on. This provided these young people with the opportunity to speak directly to those who can make change and made their contributions feel valued as they were listened to and hopefully acted upon.

It is important that organisations use the links they have with decision-makers to support young people to influence policy and practice.

"This whole experience has been incredible, with so many more opportunities that we have been able to get involved in, speaking with policymakers, sharing our experiences within a national webinar, co-producing and designing resources alongside health professionals. I am excited about being a part of the change."

(Young Person)

Range of methods used and ways of working

As was to be expected, all six projects and services had to move online when the pandemic started, and all found different ways of doing this. Carers Trust Scotland ensured that they used a variety of online platforms so young people could join from wherever they were and in ways that worked for them. The different types of projects involved in the research meant online methods were used differently.

We saw the Scottish Badgers and Scottish Wildlife Trust project carry out live animal trails; St Columba's Hospice Care used creative therapeutic art activities; the CELCIS participation project used Miro boards to develop post cards, while others used online spaces for chat and discussion. This response shows the creativity applied to participation work over the pandemic.

Working online versus in-person

Working online had the benefit of giving children and young people some more freedom about how they participated. We heard from Carers Trust Scotland about how young people could juggle meetings alongside school/college. It also meant they did not have to travel or put themselves at risk during Covid and young people from remote parts of the country could be involved. We also saw that for the St Columba's Hospice service, working online allowed young people who had experienced a bereavement to access the service from their own home, as doing so supported them to join from a space they felt comfortable in and meant that when their sessions finished they were already in a safe space.

However, despite the readiness to adapt to working online, all six projects and services valued being able to meet in-person. It was clear from across the projects that young people valued this as they could socialise, get to know one another and work even better together. As there was no consensus on what worked best (it depended on the individual young people), this demonstrated the importance of asking the young people themselves how they want things to be done.

Going forward, the young people on the Scottish Badgers and Scottish Wildlife Trust project want to make use of in-person meetings to go out and explore nature as a group. This would allow them to gain the experience of being outside, socialising and putting what they have learnt about wildlife into practice. They have also seen the benefit of online working as it was more accessible and they could learn things at their

own pace. Across a number of the projects, we saw examples of moving back to face-to-face delivery and the benefits that brought to the projects and the young people involved. The Place, for example, has been able to expand and create a drop-in for young people on their local high street.

However, it is also worth noting that we heard regularly from staff that they are going to use a hybrid approach and both ways of working had value. The CAMHS Participation Project and Carers Trust Scotland's Media Ambassadors project said they will take a hybrid approach from now on, as working online has benefits for bringing people together but meeting in person is better for building relationships and socialising.
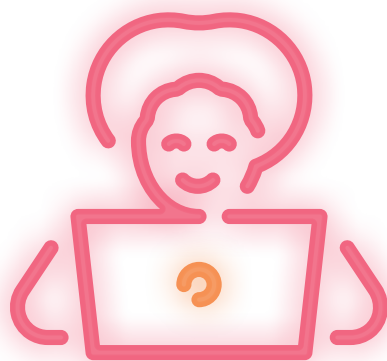
Implications and recommendations

In our research we have explored how six projects/services have adapted to the coronavirus pandemic and how these adaptations have affected the children and young people involved.

The pandemic has clearly been an extremely challenging time for children, young people and the organisations that work with them. Children and young people reported many concerns, including education worries, Covid-related anxiety and feeling like they had no choice or control.[7] Staff also faced difficulties in adapting their work quickly so things could be delivered online, seeing what worked, and coping with drop-offs in sessions.

All six projects responded to the changes brought about by the pandemic and all adapted their ways of working in inspiring and creative ways. We heard about people doing live nature trials on Zoom, developing care packages for their communities and collaboratively creating things together online. It is clear that all six have had a big impact on the children and young people they work with. They have provided support, allowed them to access relationships and generated a range of creative and imaginative outlets.

While our research only looks at six examples, we received many more through our survey and are confident that what we have heard illustrates examples of good practice from across Scotland.

It is important to highlight that in some ways we have not found any big surprises – much of what we heard about is known good practice in working with children and young people. We have seen organisations adapting that existing practice in a challenging context. We were impressed to see how they had achieved this.

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[7] https://syp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/lockdown-lowdown-final-report.pdf

Implications of this research
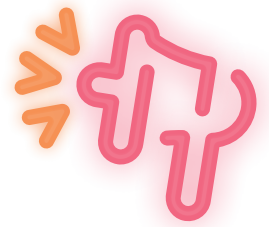
The peer researchers have identified a number of ways in which their findings could affect decision-making and participation practice in future. Below we have identified some of these key points and made a series of recommendations.

Something that came across overwhelmingly in the six projects was the importance of relationships, wellbeing and creating a safe environment.

The peer researchers felt that practitioners needed to create good relationships with the young people from the outset of projects. They identified that people can do this by running ice-breakers in meetings, setting time aside to get to know each other properly, communicating clearly and giving the young people an option to meet one-to-one before the project. Staff need time to create a safe environment and need to be able to adapt to outside factors in the lives of young people. One way of doing this could be collaboratively creating a group agreement on participation guidelines at the start of a project.

The group felt that if staff and young people know and understand each other, they are able to work well together, provide honest feedback and adapt how they do things so that they work better for everyone. This mirrors the findings of other work that has demonstrated the huge importance of relationship-based working such as The Promise.[8]

They also felt that decision-makers and funders need to understand this within their work. Their approach and funding models need to reflect that high quality participation is embedded within relationships. Timescales should allow staff the time and space to build relationships at the start of a project rather than forcing people to jump into work quickly. It will be better for the young people and will also benefit the outcomes of projects that are being commissioned.

It was also clear that young people want children and young people to have the opportunity to meaningfully lead on the projects they are involved in. It had a particular benefit across the pandemic in giving choice, autonomy and control but is just as important going forward. Tools such as Hart's Ladder of Participation and the Lundy Model both provide ways for adults to understand how to deliver projects in a way that allows children and young people to take the lead.[9][10] Such approaches must continue to be embedded in practice. We will also discuss later about how our peer researchers felt this could be taken on board by funders and decision-makers.

The four peer researchers identified that adults involved in these sorts of projects should be focused on developing a structure and a plan so that young people can get what they want done, realise their priorities and have space to lead on their work. They feel young people should set the schedules and decide how work takes place. Adults should be clearly involved in the project and participate in ice-breakers but also know when to step back and not dictate. Project leads also should not sign children and young people up to things such as conferences or events without asking them about it first and explaining what's involved.

[8] The Promise, https://www.carereview.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/The-Promise_v7.pdf
[9] https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/childrens_participation.pdf
[10] https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/lundy_model_of_participation.pdf

They also feel this means adults who fund or commission projects need to be willing to give up control and allow projects to be directed by the needs of the young people taking part. Meaningful participation is about allowing young people to discuss the issues they want to and dictate their own agendas, not about them responding to what adults want to find out.

The researchers also felt it was vital that young people's wellbeing is at the heart of development and delivery of all participation and engagement work. As far as possible, adults need to make sure that any participation and engagement work is a positive experience for young people. As well as needing to be prioritised in the delivery of projects, they felt this also should be considered by decision-makers and funders. The group felt people in these positions should view the projects they fund altruistically and be concerned about the wellbeing of the people involved. They suggested that the needs of young people should always be seen as the priority over end reports and outcomes.

The group also identified that children and young people should be able to engage on their own terms and all participation work should take account of the fact that it is only one part of their lives. However, they also felt that practitioners working with young people need to set clear boundaries about what support is available and when they can access it.

The peer researchers also pointed out that both staff and funders need to be aware that children and young people cannot be expected to be productive all of the time and so adults should be flexible, ensure that their timescales reflect the reality of children and young people's lives and that time is allowed for fun.

We also discussed how it was important for adults who are going to use the findings of projects to get involved in them. They feel that decision-makers or funders shouldn't just come along at the end to find out about a project but should be engaged throughout. Engagement should also be on the children and young people's terms; embrace fun, games and activities!

They also identified that evaluation was vital. They feel practitioners need to take feedback on board and use it to change things. However, this should not be overwhelming. Major evaluation exercises should be spread out with regular check-ins.

Recommendations

- Decision-makers and funders must plan and commission projects with appropriate space for practitioners to build relationships with participants. This will hugely benefit the outcomes of the project and allow for more meaningful participation

- Practitioners also need to be supported by their employer to develop meaningful relationships with children and young people. They must have time and space to do this and have opportunities to check in. But, be clear about what support is available and when young people can contact you.

- Projects should always be designed and developed with space for young people to lead on all activity. Practitioners need to understand their role and find ways to involve young people at all stages. Funders should actively look to fund more meaningful participative approaches to participation and engagement and service delivery. Truly child- and young person led approaches must be given priority.

- Avoid 'school vibes' ie inflexibility and rigid requirements that don't respect other commitments in young people's lives.

- Wellbeing and positive experiences for children and young people should always come first. Funders and decision-makers need to acknowledge the people involved in projects as individuals and ensure they are able to understand the wider context in which work takes place.

- If you are funding or commissioning projects, get involved in them at the appropriate time. Be willing to meet up during the delivery on the terms of the participating children and young people to hear about what they are doing and to get an understanding of the wider project.

- Evaluation should be built into all projects – you should have space for young people to say what they think and influence how things are delivered.

Appendix 1 – Methodology

As we have discussed, the project was based on a peer research approach. This meant the young peer researchers designed, developed and delivered the project with the support of staff from Children in Scotland.

This methodology section is divided into a number of sub-sections. The capacity building section lays out our approach to supporting the peer researchers. In the project methodology section, we describe the specific techniques applied by the peer researchers in the project. In the final section, we explore our approach to evaluating the impact of the project on the peer researchers themselves – basically what they gained in terms of their own personal development.

Recruitment

We recruited peer researchers to the projected in May 2021. We held an open recruitment on social media, shared information with partner organisations to pass on to young people they worked with and also distributed recruitment materials to young people that we already worked with to share with their peers.

Young people had to answer the following two questions as part of the recruitment process:

1. Why do you want to get involved?

2. What projects have you been involved in during the pandemic? (Tell us about the organisations you worked with, who else was involved and what the project was all about).

Capacity building

The four peer researchers all had previous, individual experiences of projects with Children in Scotland and of participation and engagement more broadly. However, none of the participants had been involved in a peer research project before. In response to this, our approach focused on empowerment and skill development. This ensured they had the skills and knowledge to take forward a research project in the way they wanted.

Our sessions with the peer researchers were planned to support peer learning and understanding through different activities, discussion and games.

Initially, we explored what meaningful participation and engagement is and should be. We talked about the good and bad. The group thought about their previous experiences and shared what they liked about projects that they had been involved in.

We then explored what research is and the different ways in which people conduct and apply research. Initially we discussed what people had done in school or university and then explored other ways to do research. We also explored the practical skills needed to do research such as how to ask good questions, avoiding bias and leading questions and how to analyse information. We used games and role play exercises to develop our understanding.

We also discussed the different risks involved in undertaking research such as participants disclosing potentially sensitive information to us or giving up personal information about ourselves by accident. We developed a visual guide for staying safe while doing the research that was shared with the peer researchers. We also discussed how to approach any issues that might be concerning and the route for reporting any safeguarding issues.

Research methodology

Our peer research approach was designed based on what worked best for the peer researchers and the young people they spoke to. We worked collaboratively with the peer researchers to develop research questions and methods. We thought about what sounded fun and interesting for us to do as group and what methods would give us interesting information and why.

Together we developed a call-out and survey for organisations to submit examples of participation that took place during the pandemic. We selected success criteria to mark the submitted examples against and the researchers chose their final six case studies based on these criteria. You can find out more about each step below.

Identifying projects for inclusion

To find out information about different examples of participation that had been carried out during the pandemic, the peer researchers decided to create a survey for those organisations interested in taking part to submit information about their projects. The group worked together to identify the sorts of information they would need from projects to be able to choose six to include as case studies.

The survey was opened for a month from 12 August 2021 and shared on social media and directly to Children in Scotland networks. Alongside the survey responses, the

peer researchers chose to give projects the chance to provide supplementary creative submissions (such as video recordings). The researchers thought that allowing for creative submissions alongside the survey might make it more accessible and allow us to extract different or more varied information than you might receive through survey responses alone.

Survey questions

Projects and services were asked:

1. What is the name of your organisation? Please list the name of any partner organisations working on the project as well

2. What is the aim of your project?

3. Please briefly describe the project and its main activities

4. What Local Authorities was your project based in?

5. How often did the group meet up since March 2020?

6. Was how often you met with CYP more or less frequent than pre-Covid?

7. What is the age range of the children and young people involved in the project?

8. How long has the group been running for?

9. What methods did your group use to engage with children and young people (please tell us about activities, approaches, etc)?

10. How has Covid-19 changed or impacted your project?

11. Is there any other information about your project that you would like to share?

12. Are you able to participate in a data collection session between September – November 2021?

Thirty responses were submitted to the survey and creative submissions call (see Participant data on page 6). Prior to selecting projects, the group created a series of criteria for how we would identify 'good applications'. These were:

What makes a good submission?

• They actually answered the questions

• They showed good understand of their work and gave clear answers (which weren't too long!)

• Good understanding of the children and young people they work with.

What makes a bad submission?

• Not gone about answering in the right way (haven't tried to adapt their answers for young people reading them)

• Not detailed

- Too short

- Potentially very low numbers of children and young people involved (but we are aware of the challenges of working at this time and appreciate this may not reflect how the project/service was run).

What do we want?

- Passion, seeing that people wanted to be involved in these projects/services

- A range of ages, aims and locations.

The peer researchers considered the projects against the criteria and identified if they felt each project would make a good case study. Projects could be scored as 'Yes', 'No' or 'Maybe' based on whether the researchers felt they provided enough information, met the criteria and satisfied interest.

Any projects in the 'No' pile were discounted. All those in the 'Maybe' pile were reconsidered by the whole group and reassessed as a 'Yes' or a 'No'.

All survey responses in the final 'Yes' pile were reviewed by the group of peer researchers. The researchers individually evaluated the projects and voted on their top six preferences, and gave their reasons why.

A final review was conducted to ensure there was a range of topics, ages and locations represented in the selected projects. All submissions received a response from the peer researchers to let them know if they had been selected or not.

Our approach

The researchers were supported by Children in Scotland staff to choose their approach to the data collection process on each of the six case studies. We considered what methods would be interesting and fun, but that would also provide good information and provide different ways for people to contribute.

The group chose a mixed-method approach which involved activities and group discussions.

Methods

- How were young people engaged in the project pre/post Covid?

- What methods did you use? How effective were they?

- How did the methods of communication change?

Impact and support

- What was the impact of the pandemic on participants (and how did young people feel throughout)?

- What support did you receive through the project?

- How did the support change?

- (To young people/participants): What kept you involved in the project?

Going forward

- What would you change about the project to be different in the future?

- How would young people want to project to work? In-person (like before the pandemic), online (what has happened during it), or a mix (both online and in-person) Why?

We also offered a choice of two creative activities so people could choose something which worked for them. These activities were:

- A drawing of a typical meeting, with labels explaining what is happening

- A letter to the First Minister about the project or a diary entry.

The peer researchers wanted to offer a choice for participants, so they could pick their preferred option for the creative activity. Children in Scotland staff also spoke to all the projects before the session to ensure the activities would suit the young people engaged with on those projects.

The sessions were delivered in September and October 2021 and took place on Zoom. The sessions involved both staff and young people from the projects so we could explore issues from both perspectives.

The sessions were led by the four peer researchers with support from project staff. In early sessions, staff led some aspects of the activities to demonstrate the process to the researchers. During sessions, one peer researcher took notes on a Jamboard during discussions. Participants could also added their own comments.

In March 2022, we also asked projects to tell us about one thing they had done since we spoke to them in September/October, to ensure the case studies were up-to-date.

Analysis

We conducted our analysis sessions between December 2021 and March 2022. At our first analysis session we met in person and looked at the information gathered in each individual case study. We looked at what topics came up in individual projects and what we had found interesting to form our case studies. Peer researchers were then given the chance to analyse the case studies at home. Each researcher explored two case studies at home and all projects were reviewed by at least two of the researchers.

Project staff developed initial drafts of the case studies in January 2021, based on the peer researchers' analysis and shared these with the group at an online session in February. The peer researchers had the chance to suggest changes and provide further comment and input.

The group worked together to identify the themes that had come up across the six case studies. They then considered what they heard about each key theme. Lastly the group used a characterisation exercise to think about what their findings meant for practitioners working with young people and also for policymakers/funders.

Limitations

Several limitations were identified in our approach. We were concerned that having different ways to engage in one session may affect the amount of information we gathered. However, we are confident that engagement within all the sessions went well.

We also did not have an opportunity to conduct engagement work with children and young people without staff present. However, there was no way of carrying this out online. Despite these concerns, we remain confident that the young people interviewed within the case studies shared their views honestly and freely with staff present as they had existing relationships and were used to giving feedback.

Some sessions also had low numbers of children and young people attending as they had other things on or had disengaged from the project. To mitigate this, staff sent activities out to young people to complete in their own time.

Appendix 2 – Participant data tables

Table 1 – Information on projects included as case studies

Name	Location	Type of project/ area of focus	Ages of children and young people they work with
Carers Trust Scotland	Across Scotland	The rights of young carers	16-18
CELCIS, Care Inspectorate, Clan Childlaw and Liminal Studios	Across Scotland	The rights of care-experienced young people	17-26
St Columba's Hospice Care	Edinburgh and Lothians	Young people going through a bereavement	4-18
The Place	Highland	Youth club	12-25
Scottish Badgers and Scottish Wildlife Trust	Across Scotland	Young people learning about wildlife	16-24
CAMHS Participation – NHS Dumfries & Galloway & See Me Scotland	Dumfries and Galloway	Mental health	12-24

Table 2 – Numbers of participants from each project

Name	Young people involved in research	Staff involved in research	Total
Carers Trust Scotland	3	1	4
CELCIS, Care Inspectorate, Clan Childlaw and Liminal Studios	2	3	5
St Columba's Hospice Care	4	1	5
The Place	6	1	7
Scottish Badgers and Scottish Wildlife Trust	3	3	6
CAMHS Participation – NHS Dumfries & Galloway & See Me Scotland	3	1	4
Total	**21**	**10**	**31**

June 2022