



## Public Participation at the Scottish Parliament

**22 July 2022**

Children in Scotland is pleased to be able to respond to the Scottish Parliament's consultation on Public Participation.

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.

1.

Children in Scotland is committed to supporting children and young people to share their experience and opinions with decision-makers.

Children and young people are often on the receiving end of policy decisions but do not always have the opportunity to shape these decisions. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) outlines their right to have a say in matters that are important to them or directly affect them, and for their opinions to be heard and taken seriously. The Scottish Government has underlined its intention to incorporate the UNCRC in Scots Law. This means Children and young people must shape the policies and practices of the Scottish Parliament, not merely be passing visitors.

The Scottish Parliament should work to ensure they reach children from different communities and with a wide range of lived experiences. They should particularly commit to reaching out and involve children and young people who are 'seldom heard' and often have the least power to shape decisions, including those who experience poverty, children and young people who identify as LGBT+, those with disabilities and/or additional support needs, those with care experience, refugee children and children and young people from minority ethnic communities.

It order to understand the diversity of groups the Scottish Parliament engages with, and where any gaps may exist, it is essential that reliable engagement data is routinely gathered and published by the Parliament. This data should be used to inform future action to reach other previously underrepresented groups.

2. What could the Scottish Parliament do to make it easier for these groups to be involved in the Parliament's work?

The best way for the Scottish Parliament to include children and young people in their work is to establish connections with organisations supporting children and young people. This should include organisations working with children and young people of different ages, geographies and characteristics.

The onus should be on adults to ensure that participation with children and young people is positive, inclusive and meaningful. We recommend the Scottish Parliament follows the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland's 7 Golden Rules for Participation.<sup>1</sup> Children in Scotland has also produced our own Participation and Engagement Principles and Guidelines which may be helpful as a framework for future engagement<sup>2</sup>. We would be happy to discuss how these guidelines could support the Scottish Parliament's outreach and engagement work.

From our experience, activity that supports participation includes proactive outreach work, appropriate timescales, tailored approaches and positive ongoing communication, including providing feedback.

Where possible, the Scottish Parliament should go to where children and young people are, rather than expect them to come to parliament, which can be an overly formal, intimidating and inaccessible setting for some children. We know examples of where committees have organised visits to community groups and relevant organisations which is positive and welcome.

The pandemic also opened up greater potential for online engagement between committees and children and young people, for example during the passage of the UNCRC Incorporation (Scotland) Bill. This again was very welcome. However, while digital tools offer new ways to engage, digital exclusion continues to remain an issue for up to 800,000 people in Scotland. As such, digital engagement should only be used as one tool of many to reach children and young people.<sup>3</sup>

Children and young people must be informed about why they are being consulted and what will be the result of their consultation. When reaching out to children and young people, it is important that the resources and communication techniques used are accessible and child-friendly. Again, organisations working with children and young people are well placed to advise on this. Previously, Children in Scotland with Together and the Children's Parliament have worked with the Scottish

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cypcs.org.uk/resources/7-golden-rules-for-children/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://childreninscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/CiS-Participation-2019.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Digital-Exclusion-in-Scotland-final-full-report-1.pdf>

Parliament outreach team to develop child friendly, accessible engagement resources for the UNCRC Incorporation (Scotland) Bill. This was a positive experience and resulted in resources that were age-appropriate and easily accessible.

It is also important to learn from experiences that have not been as positive. Work around The Promise has consistently revealed care-experienced children and young people are asked to share their views but not kept in the loop about how their experiences are being shared and what changes are being made as a result of their consultation.<sup>4</sup> It is vital that the Scottish Parliament close the feedback loop and are open and transparent before, during and after the consultation process so children and young people know how their views are being used to shape decisions.

3. Is there anything the Parliament is currently doing that you think would discourage people from these groups working with us? If so, how do we need to change?

We strongly urge that the Scottish Parliament, where possible, avoid inviting children and young people into adult 'spaces' and meetings that are formatted for an adult, professional audience. Instead, create spaces where children and young people feel comfortable. Adult spaces, like Parliament, can be intimidating for many young people which can affect their decision to attend and share their views. Meetings should be arranged at a shared space, accessible to and inclusive of all. This is achieved through taking a co-production approach to strategic and practice development.

How Parliament communicates is important and they should take special care to ensure the language they use is accessible and child friendly.

4. What should we do to make sure that the people involved in the Parliament's work are more diverse and reflect the wide range of communities we represent?

As previously identified, the Scottish Parliament should commission work to identify which groups or voices are missing and then carry out targeted outreach to engage with those communities. Vital to this is building strong relationships with communities which takes sufficient time and resources.

If considering how to diversify the Scottish Parliament workforce, Parliament should consider where jobs are advertised, what skills and experiences are valued. It may be necessary to actively ensure available opportunities for individuals from groups who have experience of being excluded.

5. Thinking about the groups you have identified as being under-represented in our work, are you aware of any good examples of organisations working in a creative/supportive way to hear the views of these groups? If so, can you tell us more about what this involved?

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.carereview.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/The-Promise.pdf>

Children in Scotland is very pleased to be working with Intercultural Youth Scotland (IYS) on the anti-racism Diversity in Scottish Education project for General teaching Council of Scotland (GTCS). We have learned a great deal from IYS on the essential steps to be taken to ensure adults create safe spaces for all children and young people to take part and share their views. With regards to taking an anti-racist approach this must be a space free of the threat of re-traumatising participants.

Children in Scotland also lead on the national Young Ambassadors for Inclusion project, ensuring the voices of young people with additional support needs are heard by decision-makers. Members of the Scottish Parliament have met with the Inclusion Ambassadors, to hear about and understand the children and young people's experience in schools. We know that long-term relationships between decision-makers and children and young people are important and more meaningful than one-off engagement sessions, providing an opportunity for continued engagement. We recommend that Parliament continue build on links with this group and others like it.

6. Are there other ways we can involve these groups in the work of the Parliament? What are they and when should we use them?

It is vital that we avoid over-consultation and make best use of what children and young people have already told us they want and need. We have a significant body of evidence covering children and young people's views on education, home and belonging, poverty, diversity, and inclusion as a result of project completed by Children in Scotland and with partners across the sector. We would be happy to discuss this and the policy areas covered in more detail

In addition, in 2019 we publicly launched our Evidence Bank to share the voices of children and young people on a range of diverse topics. This is publicly available via the Children in Scotland website and at <http://evidencebank.org.uk>

Whilst we recommend utilising the work that has already been completed or is underway to engage with young people, we understand there can be gaps. Commissioning a literature review or overview can be a helpful starting point for any engagement work, used to highlight where work has already been completed in this area as well as where further specific engagement work may be required.

Being open, honest and able to view any criticism in a constructive way will be key to progress. When working with Intercultural Youth Scotland (IYS) to reach those underrepresented in our own engagement work, it has been essential that Children in Scotland take this approach to ensure the partnership works and we are able to safely support all children and young people to participate. This includes acknowledging where we had not been getting it right previously, and being open to change.

Critically, engaging with groups should be done on an ongoing basis and not in one-off meetings. The Scottish Parliament should commit to this approach in order to

achieve ongoing change. We would also recommend commissioning equalities training for staff, including parliamentarians.

It is possible groups may not always be aware of the different routes open to them to get engaged. The Get Involved page (<https://www.parliament.scot/get-involved>) is a helpful starting point, but not all groups may be aware of this resource. The Scottish Parliament could consider ways to promote the page and all the opportunities for consultation in creative ways. Again, this may involve a proactive approach to engagement and going to where people are instead of anticipating those interested will come to you. This may involve a physical presence highlighting ways to get involved, promoting on social media and keeping up to date with online trends, as well as partnering with different organisations to collaboratively promote opportunities to communities they support. Appropriate guidance materials should be produced alongside these communications, explaining the consultation opportunities and how groups like children and young people can engage with them.

7. We want to involve under-represented communities in designing improvements to the way that we work. In your view, how can we best do this?

In Children in Scotland's experience, meaningful involvement begins with strong relationships. The Scottish Parliament should seek engagement with organisations that have established, trusted relationships with key communities and be willing to meet children and young people in spaces that feel safe and familiar to them. Relationships take trust and understanding, both of which develop over time. The Scottish Parliament should think of engagement as a process – not just a short, one of exercise, but a commitment to continuous improvement, involving stakeholders in co-producing change.

8. Which networks should we connect with to make sure we reach people in the under-represented groups you've highlighted?

The Scottish Parliament should engage with national and local organisations who support children and young people from specific communities or target demographics. For example, Who Cares? Scotland, LGBT Youth Scotland, Intercultural Youth Scotland and Enable Scotland are all good places to start. As a membership organisation with more than 400 members across the Scottish children's sector we at Children in Scotland are also in a unique position to facilitate and lead some of this work. We would be happy to help identify and discuss how best to engage with our growing membership.

9. To make sure that the groups you've identified are involved in the Parliament's work from now on, which changes should we prioritise (do first)?

We believe that a mapping exercise to understand which groups are less likely to engage with the Scottish Parliament is a great starting point. For example, the

Scottish Parliament could do an analysis of which groups committees have engaged with for example over the last three years and identify any gaps in representation.

The Scottish Parliament should begin as soon as possible to extend networks and broaden connections with community groups who champion unrepresented voices. They should hold conversations and be willing to really listen to what the barriers are to participation and actively involve them in finding solutions. This should be an ongoing endeavour.

#### 10. How will we know if we have been successful?

It is essential to gather feedback from participants and give groups supporting underrepresented voices the power to judge if progress is being made.

We also want to highlight how deeply important meaningful participation is. We know that the children and young people we work with feel empowered when they feel listened to. After one young person met an MSP in the last year they shared "She actually listened...it was quite powerful her giving commitment to things".

Ultimately, success should be reflected in better legislation and policy making that reflects and responds to the needs of those most disadvantaged in society.

In the more immediate term, a repeat of engagement analysis (identified in Q9) should also reveal an improvement in the spread of voices represented and the proactive engagement work across varying communities and representative groups. We would recommend this activity is undertaken on an annual basis, or other regular time frame.