

Meaningful Participation and Engagement of Children and Young People

Children in Scotland's Principles and Guidelines





Introduction

Our vision is that all children and young people in Scotland have an equal chance to flourish. We cannot achieve this without actively listening to their voices and responding to what they tell us.


These principles and guidelines have been developed to inform the way we involve children and young people in our work.

One of Children in Scotland's key strategic priorities is to champion the participation and inclusion of children and young people. In line with how rights are described by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, our goal is to engage children and young people in meaningful, ongoing dialogue and enable them to have effective and fulfilling participation in our work. This will help ensure that their voices influence our organisational practice, as well as, more widely, the decisions and practices of policymakers and practitioners.

Participation

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that children have the right to be heard, listened to and taken seriously in all decisions which will affect them. Article 12 forms one of the General Principles which should be considered in the interpretation and implementation of all other rights.

The term participation is broadly used to describe practice, policies and methodologies which enable children and young people to be heard in decision-making. Children and young people should be supported to participate in decision-making in all relevant contexts and stages of their lives. These include, but are not limited to family, health care and education,



**"Everyone has a voice
that needs to be
heard and listened to
as well as valued"**

There are various models of participation that can support practitioner understanding and improve practice. We would particularly highlight the work of Laura Lundy at Queens University, Belfast.¹

Participation can take many forms. Focus groups, champions boards, advisory groups, consultation processes, co-design projects and youth-led peer research all offer children and young people an opportunity to share their experiences and opinions and make suggestions for change.

There are many benefits to children and young people's participation in decision-making, not least of which is the positive impact on the children and young people themselves. It can also improve policies, services, resources and relationships that impact across society.



¹ <https://hubnanog.ie/participation-framework/>

For Children in Scotland, the participation of children and young people is an important mechanism to ensure that, as an organisation, we are listening to the views and perspectives of children and young people on a wide variety of issues, and sharing them with our network and the wider community.

**"Sometimes
we think of
things that
adults don't"**

Sharing our learning

We are happy to share these principles and guidelines with individuals and organisations that engage or plan to engage children and young people directly in decision-making processes.

We would highlight that these principles and guidelines have been developed to support Children in Scotland's organisational practice and would encourage other organisations to consider them in relation to their own specific context.

These principles and guidelines aim to support different types of engagement with children and young people, but are particularly relevant for group work. They do not provide a step-by-step guide on the delivery and methodologies of participation work because every context and every child is unique. Instead, they should be considered as tips and considerations from which appropriate practices, methodologies, tools and resources can be developed.

We acknowledge that achieving best practice in all our participation work will be an ongoing process and there will be barriers and challenges to overcome. We consider it as our participation journey and strive to ensure these principles and guidelines underpin everything we do, and that we learn from our mistakes when we do not get it right.

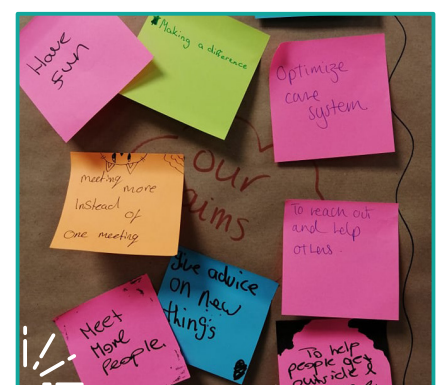
This is the third version of our principles and guidelines. They have been updated in response to feedback received from Children in Scotland staff, our members, partners and children and young people. We will continue to review and update as appropriate.

If you have any feedback to help inform future versions, please contact Elaine Kerridge: ekerridge@childreninscotland.org.uk

Key stages

These principles and guidelines outline things to consider at three key stages of working directly with children and young people:

- Planning and coordination
- Delivery
- Reporting, evaluation and next steps.



Key elements of inclusion, safeguarding and child protection are overarching principles which are interwoven throughout. They should be considered at every stage.



1. Planning and coordination

Participation and engagement with children and young people should begin as early as possible in the design and development stage of any piece of work.

Rationale and scope

Ensure the participation activity is necessary and meaningful – it should never just be a quick tick-box exercise. Have children and young people shared their experiences and opinions on this before? Can their voices be built upon?

“It makes me feel empowered and valued”

Build in sufficient time and budget to plan, develop and resource meaningful participant and engagement activities. Think about what is possible with the resources available.

Ensure costs of participation, such as travel, refreshments and any additional expenses such as IT support, are included in project budgets.

Follow organisational project management procedure and develop a clear and concise project plan to ensure that work stays on track. This should include robust risk assessments, health and safety, and equality impact assessments.

Consider how children and young people can be involved in the design and delivery of the project. For example: Is there sufficient capacity to support this being a co-designed project? How can they inform the direction of the work and take the lead within sessions?

Staffing

Ensure every member of staff has appropriate clearance to work with children and young people. Anyone carrying out regulated work with children² will require PVG scheme membership and satisfactory PVG scheme record/s. Any adults assisting on participation projects involved in regulated work, but not carrying out regulated work themselves, should be working alongside a member of staff who is a current member of the PVG scheme.³

Ensure that all staff have a clear understanding of the project and the needs of the participants. If it is a new group, plan in time for staff to get to know the children and young people, such as an introductory visit or make it the focus of the first meeting.



² As defined by the Protection of Vulnerable Groups (PVG) (Scotland) Act 2007. Regulated work includes anyone working directly with children and young people as part of the normal duties of their post.

³ And who Disclosure Scotland has issued satisfactory PVG scheme record/s for.

Consider whether any additional training is required to support staff to work well with new groups and support their understanding of specific issues, topics or emerging themes. Does the work need support from partners with specific experience and expertise? Factor this into the project plan and budget.

Consider the impact on staff undertaking this work, including lone working and emotional impact. Ensure that measures and resources to support staff are included at the planning stage and in project budgets.

Safeguarding and Child Protection

When we refer to safeguarding, we are talking about the wider concept of promoting the welfare of children, young people and 'protected adults' and taking action to ensure best outcomes for everyone. Child protection is part of this, specifically referring to activity undertaken to prevent children suffering, or being likely to suffer, significant harm.

"I feel like I actually matter and that people care"

In Scotland child protection is everyone's legal responsibility. It is important that during the planning of any participation and engagement activity, thought is given to child protection and safeguarding issues and organisational policies are followed. It may also be beneficial to refer to the **Creating Safety** guide (2019) which provides accessible information about child protection for people working in the arts sector.

Some things to think about:

- Processes need to be proportionate to the activity being planned.
- What policies and procedures are already in place? Get to know them. If they don't exist, develop them.
- Ensure that partner organisations have child protection measures in place, including staff-wide child protection policies.
- Have staff or adults involved had the appropriate checks done?
- Are all staff aware of who the designated person for child protection is, should there be any concerns? How do you get in touch with them? What information do you need to provide? Child protection guidelines should provide this information
- Some children and young people may need support beyond the end of a project. Whose role will this be? Factor this into planning.
- Make sure the children and young people know about all this. Where possible, involve them in developing any of the policies or writing codes of behaviour.
- Ensure appropriate risk assessment is completed prior to all participation and engagement work.



Recruitment of participants

Depending on the focus of the work, sometimes a targeted approach may be taken to recruiting a new group of children and young people; at other times it is more appropriate for a universal call to go out. In either case, inclusion should be at the heart of all participation work with children and young people. When recruiting a new group of children and young people for a project, actively seek a mixed demographic. Take into consideration age, gender identity, ethnicity, geographical location, additional support needs and intersectionality⁴ of participants.

If working in schools or a youth setting, allow enough time to coordinate with the staff and volunteers there, to ensure they are fully informed and committed. Avoid unnecessary overload for the children and young people or their schools and youth groups, particularly at crucial times of the year such as during exam periods.

“Meet new people from different backgrounds”

Informed consent

Children and young people should be supported to understand the purpose and reach of their participation, what it will involve and how their information will be used so they can make an informed decision to take part. They can choose to no longer take part at any time.

A tailored accessible information document and consent form should be provided ahead of starting engagement work. This will help ensure participants (and their supporting adults) have the information they need to give informed consent to being involved in the project.



At Children in Scotland, we ask that consent forms are signed by children and young people and parents and carers if the children and young people are under sixteen.

Seek information on consent forms about any additional support that children and young people will need to be able to participate. This must be factored into planning and delivery.

Consent forms should only seek necessary information and be appropriate within the context of the project. Be clear that information will be stored securely and will not be shared. Children in Scotland's consent policy is informed by the 5rights⁵ approach and is regularly reviewed to ensure GDPR compliance.

Removing barriers to participation

Based on the principle of inclusive practice, it is important that policymaking and legislation is informed by children and young people with a range of different lived experiences, including those with additional support needs. Participation needs to be as accessible and inclusive as possible to allow all children and young people to take part. Barriers to participation need to be removed. The duty is on adults to do this.

⁴“The interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage”, *Oxford Dictionary*.

⁵<https://5rightsframework.com/the-5-rights/>

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2. Delivery

Venue/environment

Ensure venues used are appropriate. The physical space must be physically accessible and feel safe, comfortable and informal. The choice of venue must also demonstrate cultural sensitivity.

There are simple steps that can be taken to make an environment feel relaxed and welcoming, such as music, lighting and soft furnishings. A separate designated quiet space is also essential for anyone who may need time out.

Be aware of the needs of the children and young people in the group. Things that create a relaxed and welcoming environment for some can create barriers for others, such as background music and very bright lights. Refer to information collected at the planning stage on participants' needs and remain flexible in your approach.



Take time to create a safe space by establishing a group agreement together. This is an agreement that children, young people and staff should all adhere to and can be referred back to and added to as needed. It will ensure that there is a shared understanding of mutual respect.

Food is also an important factor. Offer snacks and refreshments, ensuring all participants' dietary and cultural needs are met.

Communication

Good communication must underpin all participation and engagement work with children and young people.

Ask children and young people for advice and guidance on their preferred methods of communication and adapt according to their feedback. Are specialised support services needed such as interpreters?

"Don't use jargon and complicated language"

Age should not preclude younger children engaging. Children use multiple ways of communicating and interpreting their world. Thus, multiple methods of communication can be used to engage children and young people. Stories, characters and play are great ways of supporting younger children's participation.

Do not assume children and young people understand. Give them opportunities to clarify and ask questions. At the same time, be careful not to oversimplify and appear patronising.

Make sure all information is presented in an accessible way. Make discussion topics, information and key questions clear and easy to understand. Consider:

- Avoid complicated words, acronyms and jargon.
- Avoid an over-use of metaphors.
- Provide information on different coloured paper and in different sized fonts.
- Use images to support wording.

Be open to discussion about the appropriate use of social media for the purpose of participation and engagement work, remembering that most social media platforms have age restrictions.

Relationships

Children and young people often identify the importance of practitioners being kind, non-judgemental, trustworthy and good at listening. Developing positive relationships with children and young people is essential to the success of any participation work. It supports the development of a safe space for children and young people to reflect on their own experiences and develop their own understanding, thoughts and perceptions

"Be patient and understanding"

Listen carefully and compassionately to the contributions made by every child or young person.



Be self-aware about interactions. Practitioner approaches should be professional but friendly. Respect personal space. Think about this in relation to greetings and activities.

"Valued, confident, respected, appreciated"

Try to use first names. Personally designed name badges can help with this.

Wear comfortable and appropriate clothes. This is partly because of the activities involved, partly to remove a physical representation of the power dynamic that can exist between adults and children.

Purpose and reach

The purpose behind any participation activity should be clearly explained to the children and young people at the outset. Be realistic and honest. Children and young people should know the difference their participation can make.

**“Share my
experience ... help
people understand”**

Ensure that the children participating understand how their views will be used and attributed. It may be appropriate to anonymise all of the data collected or it may be fine to seek consent to use participants' first names.

Always make it clear to the children and young people that there are no right or wrong answers when being consulted about their views.

Take time to develop the children and young people's understanding of choice and decision-making. This will ensure they feel relaxed and able to share their views. Create an ethos that encourages children and young people to ask questions and allows staff to check understanding.

Be clear about involvement. Children and young people should know that their participation is voluntary and that they can withdraw at any point. If a child or young person wants or needs to stop participating at any point, make this as easy as possible for them.

Methodology

Consider how different approaches and resources encourage interest and support children and young people's participation. This will also support the removal of barriers to some young people's participation.

Be creative. Discuss ideas with colleagues. Seek out useful resources or training.

Reflect on how well the participants are engaging and allow time and flexibility for methods to be adapted if initial approaches are not working well.

Take on board feedback from children and young people about what works and does not work for them and get them involved in planning and delivering activities when possible.



Safeguarding/child protection

Be aware of who is the on-call Designated Child Protection Officer and ensure all staff are aware of how to contact them.

Ensure staff are clearly identifiable as a staff member when liaising with young people – consider wearing branded t-shirts or ID badges. This is particularly important when at a large event or out in the community.

Have a copy of the risk assessment and people's contact information to hand when delivering sessions.

Be aware of appropriate use of social media in participation work. Staff should not engage with children and young people on social media sites through personal accounts, such as Facebook profiles. However, public-facing social media tools such as Twitter can be used appropriately by staff to engage with children and young people as part of specific project work. Staff should familiarise themselves with relevant social media guidelines if this approach is being taken.



Recording views

The voices, opinions and experiences of children and young people should be recorded honestly and as accurately as possible. There should be no paraphrasing or interpreting of their words. Any other adults supporting participation and engagement work – such as interpreters, advocates or associates – should be careful to ensure the views recorded or reported are genuinely those of the child or young person.

Be clear about the process. Explain to children and young people that when writing up the results of a consultation as a report, their comments may be condensed but that every effort will be made to capture accurately what they have said. Meaning and context must remain unchanged. Ideally, particularly in cases where children and young people are contributing their own written content, involve them in the editing process and seek their approval of the final draft before sign-off.

**“It makes me feel happy
knowing that people
are listening to me”**

**“I feel included.
I feel listened to”**

3. Reporting, evaluation and next steps

It is vitally important that children and young people know how their voices have been listened to and will be reported, the impact their contribution has made and what the next steps will be.

Reporting

Closing the feedback loop means that children and young people know what happened with the views that they shared and whether this led to any actions or changes. If no change was possible where they asked for it, this should still be communicated, and the reason given.

“More connection and understanding between generations”

It is important to consider how the final output is presented. Think about the audience and purpose of the final output. It may be that a more detailed, technical report is required to go alongside a more accessible summary report. Perhaps the final output will be a film, or a new policy document or procedure.

Wherever possible, run the draft final output past the children and young people who were involved. This should include checking if they are satisfied that their views have been correctly represented and they are happy with any photos and images that are included.

Make results and reports easy to access and understand. The language in any report or feedback should be clear and accessible. In particular, avoid using acronyms or jargon. Images and infographics are useful. Participants should know where reports are being stored and should receive a copy.

Always give children and young people recognition and thanks for their contribution, both in any reports and to them directly. A letter, certificate, formal accreditation or payment may be appropriate, based on the project.



Evaluation

Children and young people should have the opportunity to provide feedback on their involvement in the project.



Think about the areas feedback is being sought on and the best way to collect this information. Options to gain feedback could include:

- Responding to standardised questions at the end of each session
- Dot votes
- Emoji scales
- Anonymous surveys
- A designated evaluation session or evaluation stage in the project.



Depending on the work, this should include opportunities to feed back at the end of a session. This will help tailor delivery to best suit the needs of the group.

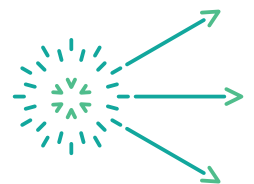
They should also be provided with opportunities to share what they think about the process of engagement and the decisions made following it, and to ask further questions or continue the dialogue.

Consider collecting baseline data at the beginning and end of the project to monitor the impact and progress of participants and track any changes.

Where possible, aim to monitor and evaluate the impact of the engagement work on the wider community involved and on national policy. Keep a record of future developments related to your work and feed them back to children and young people involved if you can.

Next steps

The findings from the report and evaluation should influence the direction of future work and project plans. Share the findings across the staff team.



Conduct an appropriate debrief with staff. All staff involved should have the opportunity to have a debrief meeting with a senior manager at the end of a project. This should cover any key successes, challenges and areas for organisational improvement.

Work in partnership with the wider children's sector community to share good practice in participation and engagement and learning from the project.

Upload outputs containing children's voices on the Children and Young People's Evidence Bank (evidencebank.org.uk). This will help others working in similar areas to be informed by the views of children and young people.

Collaborate with other teams internally, partner organisations and decision-makers. By sharing progress and good practice, it will be possible to influence change based on best available evidence and the views and perspectives of children and young people. This will help to ensure that the participation work is meaningful, employed to its full potential and contributing to positive change in the lives of children and young people.

We want to hear from you!

We are interested in hearing how our Principles & Guidelines are being used by individuals, practitioners and organisations to support participation and engagement work with children and young people. We want to find out how the guidelines are being applied practically, in particular the practices, methodologies, tools and resources that have been developed as a result. Feedback provided may be shared in the form of case studies on our website, in our online magazine and members' publication *Insight*, or other publications. We value your views and would be glad to hear from you. See below for contact details.



Further information

Further details about Children in Scotland's participation and engagement work can be found on our website. [Click here to access them.](#)



Please contact Elaine Kerridge if you have any further queries or feedback about our participation work or these principles and guidelines.

Email: ekerridge@childreninscotland.org.uk

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. Visit childreninscotland.org.uk

Thanks to members of Changing our World for sharing their views, experiences and advice.

Photographs used in this document were taken at Changing our World and Invoice sessions.