



together

Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights

State of Children's Rights in Scotland

by Together

2024

Lie detector goggles

Green bands

(representing 'hug me')

White heart headdress

(representing acceptance)

Blanket cape

(to give warmth and comfort to children)

Stops war, litter and climate change

Metal detector hands

Blue band

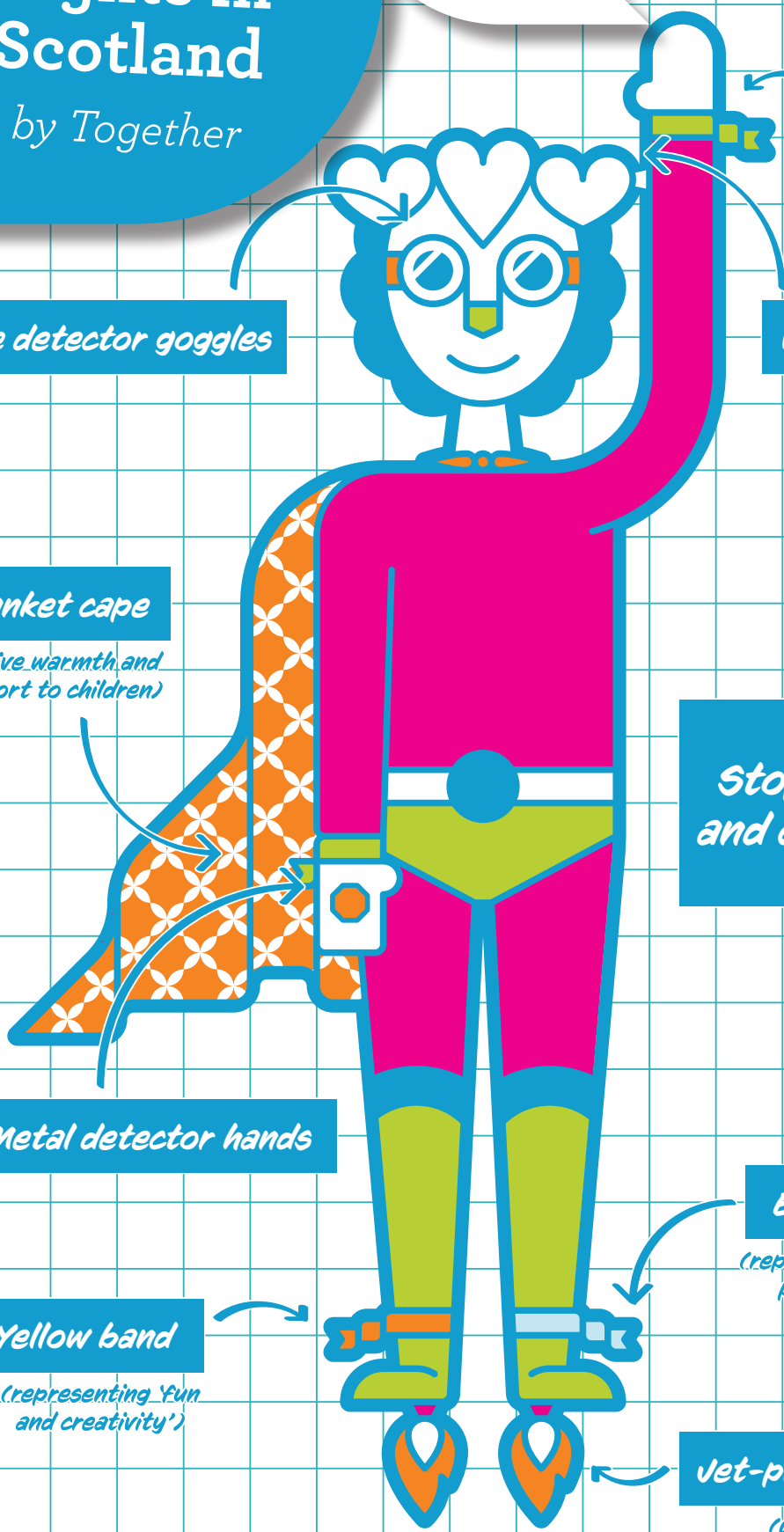
(representing 'calm, peace, love')

Yellow band

(representing 'fun and creativity')

Jet-propelled flight

(using biofuel)



Special thanks

Together would like to thank the 220 babies, children and young people who shared their stories for this report. From the youngest at just nine months old to the eldest at 17, your stories have given us great insights into your lives and your experiences of your rights.

Most names in this report have been changed to protect children's privacy. We invited everyone to choose a 'made up name' so they could recognise and claim their story. As such, we would like to say a huge thank you to:

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Alexa	Brenda	Erin	Lachlan	Paige
Alfie	Brenna	Erin	Lena	Pal
Ali	Brodie	Euan	Leslie	Penny
Alice	Brooke	Evelyn	Lewis	Perry
Alicia	Bud	Evie	Lewis	Phil
Amelia	Cadence	Eyelee	Liam	Phoenix
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Anna	Cerys	Garfield	LMHM	Robert
Anna	Charlie	Gerald	Lola	Robin
Anne	Charlie	Grace	Louis	Robin
Annie	Charlotte	Hannah	Lucas	Robin
Anonymous	Chaz	Harry	Lulu	Rory
Arnie	Cheetah	Hayden	Lydia	Rose
Ash	Christina	Hayley	Marie	Rosie
Ashley	Ciara	Helena	Marley	Rowan
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Ayla	Clara	Ilham	Messi	Rowpow
Aylina	Connor	Imogen	Messi	Rupert
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Bartholemew	Dave	Jacob W.	Mimi	Saint Herrington
Bb16	Declan	Jaiden	Misha	Sally
Bella	Delilah	Jas	Mohamed Ali	Sandra
Belle	Diamond	Joe	Mohammed	Senna
Ben	Dragon	Joseph	Morgan	Shane
Big G	Drew	Jules	Niamh	Shanice
	Eden	Kai	Nick	Sidney

Skye	Sumer	Tina	Tut	Xavier
Sophia	Sydney	Tina	Vanessa	Yes
Sophie	Taylor	Toby	Where now?	Zelda
Sophie P.	Taylor Swift	Toby	William	Zoe
Stacey	Tiglo	Trevor	Willow	Zoe.D.Squire
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Highlander	Penelope
Hummingbird	

Supporting organisations

We would like to thank our 14 partner organisations for going on this journey with us. Thank you for your ongoing support and feedback which helped us to shape the methodology and resources, and for supporting the babies, children and young people to share their stories:

Aberlour Children's Charity	Families Outside
Action for Children	Play Scotland
Art at the Start, University of Dundee	Relationships Scotland
Barnardo's Scotland	Salvesen Mindroom Centre
Children and Young People's Centre for Justice (CYCJ)	Scottish Refugee Council
Circle	Scottish Youth Parliament
East Ayrshire Advocacy Services	YouthLink Scotland

Special thanks also go to the following organisations who contributed to our methodology interviews, supported engagement sessions or shared evidence with us in other ways:

Carers Trust Scotland	LGBT Youth Scotland
Children's Commissioner for Jersey	Romano Lav
Children First	Scouts Scotland
Children's Parliament	Starcatchers
Forces Children Scotland	Women's Empowerment Project
Intercultural Youth Scotland	YMCA Paisley

This report is based upon wide consultation but may not necessarily represent in all respects or detail the views of every member of Together, nor every organisation that has contributed to this report. Views expressed separately should also be taken into account.

We would like to acknowledge financial support from Scottish Government and Cattanach towards core operating costs. Funders have had no editorial input to this report.

About Together

Together (Scottish Alliance for Children’s Rights) is an alliance of over 600 children’s organisations, academics and interested professionals. Our vision is that Scotland becomes a place where every baby, child and young person grows up in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding. Working with our membership, we act to ensure that all babies, children and young people growing up in Scotland have all their human rights respected, protected, and fulfilled. We put babies, children and young people at the centre of everything we do, prioritising those whose rights are at risk.

Artwork

The artwork in this report was created by project participants, with additional images provided by Children’s Parliament.

The cover illustration was inspired by children and young people’s ideas about what a child rights superhero should look like. The image combines ideas from Zoe, Catriona, Zelda, Vanessa, Ilham, Lewis, Lola and Olivia.

Editors

Gift Ayodele, Maria Doyle, Juliet Harris, Judi Martin and Shilla Shomai.

With special thanks also to Jacqui Dunbar, Participation Lead.

Glossary

BSL – British Sign Language

Concluding observations – recommendations from a UN treaty body that set out further steps a country should take to implement human rights.

FASD – Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder

MCP – Member of Children’s Parliament

MOD – Ministry of Defence

MSYP – Member of Scottish Youth Parliament

RSHP – Relationships Sexual Health and Parenthood education

SFA – Service Family Accommodation

SQA – Scottish Qualifications Authority

UN Committee – The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child

UNCRC – United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Share your feedback!



We’d love to know what you think about this report. Scan the QR code to share your views.

Contents

Executive summary	7
Introduction	10
1. All about me	12
1.1 Our stories	13
1.2 What the adults have been saying...	14
2. Life at home	15
2.1 Who I live with	16
2.2 Where I live	33
2.3 What I do at home	43
2.4 What the adults have been saying...	47
2.5 Ideas to help	48
3. Life at nursery, school and college	50
3.1 Nursery	51
3.2 Getting to school	52
3.3 Classes	54
3.4 Taking breaks and having fun	81
3.5 Support with transitions	84
3.6 Going to college or university	87
3.7 What the adults have been saying...	90
3.8 Ideas to help	91
4. Life in the local community	93
4.1 The local neighbourhood	94
4.2 Getting out and about	107
4.3 Things to do	114
4.4 Getting help when I need it	125
4.5 What the adults have been saying...	138
4.6 Ideas to help	139
5. Life online	141
5.1 Screentime	142
5.2 Keeping in touch	144
5.3 Learning new things and having fun	146
5.4 Staying safe online	149
5.5 What the adults have been saying...	160
5.6 Ideas to help	161

6.	Life in Scotland	163
6.1	Introduction	164
6.2	Children’s rights	164
6.3	Equality and diversity	175
6.4	Tackling climate change and environmental harms	184
6.5	An end to war and violence	187
6.6	What the adults have been saying...	188
6.7	Ideas to help	190
	Appendix 1: methodology	192
	Appendix 2: project timeline	202
	Appendix 3: participant demographics	204

Executive summary

This report explores babies', children and young people's experiences of their rights through their own words, artwork and other means of expression. These 'stories' offer a picture of life in Scotland in the year that it incorporated the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into law.

The report is a key part of Together's #RightsOnTrack campaign¹ which is dedicated to ensuring that Scottish Government and other duty bearers follow the latest recommendations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UN Committee).² #RightsOnTrack is all about keeping children's rights on the right path and making lasting progress before Scotland is next reviewed by the UN Committee in approximately eight years' time (2032).

To create the report, we partnered with 14 organisations who facilitated participation with babies, children and young people across Scotland through interactive story-gathering sessions. We also created routes for children and young people to share their stories with us directly. These approaches helped us to discover what life is like for them and the changes they would like to see to help them grow up happy, healthy and safe. The report highlights ways in which particular groups of children can be more at risk of having their rights breached. This includes Care Experienced children, young carers, disabled children, those from armed forces families, neurodivergent children, young refugees, those with experience of the justice system, and children with a parent in prison. The report provides babies, children and young people with a platform to express their realities, hopes and needs, while emphasising the important role of adults in ensuring their rights are fully realised.

In short, the report is a commentary on how well Scotland is fulfilling its commitments under the UNCRC in 2024. It uses children's own perspectives to highlight areas where Scotland is doing well and areas where improvements are needed. It represents a baseline against which future progress can be measured, and outlines practical steps that everyone can take to help make Scotland a place where children's rights are fully realised, where every child can grow up in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding.

We hope that this report will be a catalyst for change, offering inspiration, ideas, and practical guidance to bring the UNCRC to life across Scotland, rooted in the views and experiences of babies, children and young people themselves.

Key findings

Life at home

Children and young people wanted to tell us all about who they live with, what they enjoy, and the challenges they face. Their stories highlight the strong and loving relationships they have with parents, carers, siblings, extended family members, and even pets. Children and young people shared that their parents and carers are important sources of support, comfort, and guidance, helping them feel valued and secure. For those in kinship, foster, or residential care, caregivers and social workers also play significant roles in providing stability and reassurance.

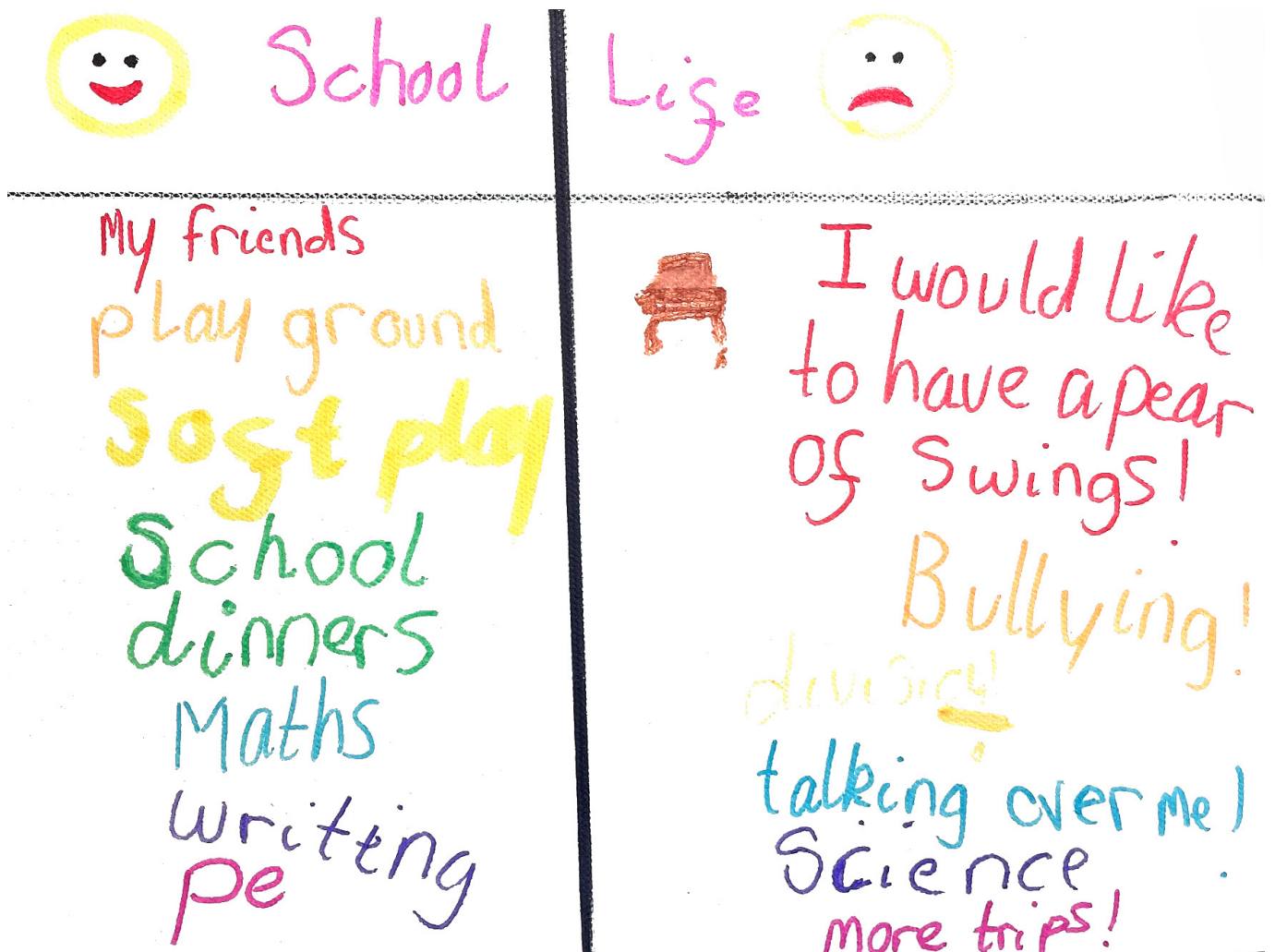
Many children and young people shared that their home is the place where they feel safest and most understood. However, some children and young people face difficulties, such as separation from family members, housing challenges, and the strain of the cost-of-living crisis. All of these issues impact significantly upon their rights and sense of wellbeing. Young carers and children in armed forces families often experience different pressures to their peers but also express pride in their identities. Overall, children and young people emphasise the importance of home as a supportive and safe space where they can enjoy routines, personal space, and activities they love with family members.

Life at nursery, school and college

Children and young people describe learning environments as key spaces for growth, play, and self-expression, especially when settings are vibrant, welcoming, and fully uphold their dignity. Teachers play an essential role in creating safe, inclusive spaces where rights are respected. Children and young people appreciate teachers who take time to understand their individual needs, treat everyone fairly, and model rights-respecting behaviour.

Children also share their concerns, including limited access to early learning and childcare, school transport cuts, bullying, staff shortages, unfair punishment and use of restraint. Issues like outdated curriculums and environments that fail to meet additional support needs add to their frustrations, making some feel singled out and unsupported.

Children and young people call for schools to adopt holistic, inclusive approaches that celebrate each child's strengths, whether in mainstream or specialist settings. They seek consistent support that fosters a sense of belonging, recognises their unique contributions and helps them to reach their full potential.



Artwork by Cheetah, age 9, Dumfries and Galloway

Life in the local community

Children and young people share the specific opportunities and challenges of living in urban and rural areas. Public spaces and town centres are important social hubs where children can meet friends, access amenities and participate in community events. Yet, children and young people face a range of challenges – including safety concerns for girls and young women, poor public transport, and negative assumptions from adults.

Green spaces are highly valued for providing a much-needed escape, promoting physical activity, and supporting mental health. However, issues such as litter, broken glass, lack of maintenance and accessibility barriers can make these areas less appealing. Children and young people call for outdoor spaces that everyone can enjoy.

Access to public services such as libraries and sports centres is seen as vital for education, health, and social life. However, rising costs and cuts to services limit children's participation. Many children and young people note the negative impact this has on their wellbeing and call for better and more affordable provision.

Life online

For many children, being online is a daily routine, offering ways to connect, explore interests, and enjoy entertainment. Yet balancing screen time is challenging, with some spending over six hours a day online. While the internet offers social and learning benefits, children and young people recognise that excessive screen time can disrupt other aspects of their lives. Many also share worries about safety, with risks like cyberbullying and harmful content. Children often rely on parents and carers to help them develop positive habits. They feel that social media companies should be doing more to create a safer online experience.

Some children and young people face barriers including limited access to devices, unreliable internet, or low levels of digital literacy by their parents and carers. This impacts on their learning and social lives. For young carers and children in armed forces families in particular, online spaces are crucial for maintaining connections and supporting their mental health.

Life in Scotland

Children and young people share both appreciation and concerns about life in Scotland as a whole. They share their appreciation for the natural landscape and their commitment to protecting it. They express a strong desire to make Scotland a fairer and more inclusive place, emphasising the need for children's rights to be fully upheld in practice.

While incorporating the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into Scots law is seen as an essential first step, children and young people highlight gaps between this legal promise and their real-life experiences. Children and young people call for greater action on poverty, discrimination, and climate change, emphasising these as barriers to creating a more inclusive Scotland. They also call for greater involvement in the decisions that impact their lives.

Overall, children and young people are calling for stronger protection and respect for their rights across all aspects of their lives. The stories in this report are a call to action: they call for a Scotland that listens, empowers and supports them to grow up in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding. Each chapter concludes with practical steps that Scottish Government, wider duty bearers, organisations and individuals can take to bring us closer to that point.

Introduction

This report explores babies', children and young people's experiences of their rights through their own words, artwork and other means of expression. These 'stories' offer a picture of life in Scotland in the year that it incorporated the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into law.

The stories reflect a wide range of backgrounds, experiences and perspectives. They illustrate the ways in which particular groups of children can be more at risk of having their rights breached. This includes Care Experienced children, young carers, disabled children, those in armed forces families, babies and early years, neurodivergent children, those with experience of the justice system, young refugees, and children with a parent in prison. Many of the children's stories highlight their intersecting identities. This report aims to give space to their experiences, particularly those who face barriers to being heard.

Realities, hopes and dreams

The stories show the realities, hopes and dreams of Scotland's children and young people. From the very youngest to those leaving school, each account highlights their evolving sense of self as they navigate their daily lives. Each story paints a collective picture of what it means to grow up in Scotland today.

When exploring what they need to grow up happy, healthy, and safe, many children point to universal values: love, respect, security, and the opportunity to reach their full potential. They highlight where adults, communities and systems must do more to support them.

Children and young people also share the challenges they face, particularly in environments where they do not always feel supported or heard. These experiences often leave them feeling anxious and ignored.

Despite these challenges, many show remarkable resilience, finding ways to navigate their environments while at the same time calling for adults to do more and to recognise their agency as rights holders.

The babies, children and young people in this report are clear about what is important to them, and what they need to grow up happy, healthy and safe. Children and young people want a Scotland where they can thrive without fear of judgement, where they are supported and empowered to participate in decisions that affect them, and where they can pursue their dreams with the understanding and support of the adults around them.

The chapters ahead

The chapters ahead explore children's experiences at home, at nursery, school, in their communities, online, and in Scotland more broadly. Each builds upon their insights and highlights the challenges faced by those whose rights are most at risk. For the youngest, pre- and non-verbal children, we are grateful to their parents and carers for helping to narrate their perspectives by observing their non-verbal communication and reactions to the world around them. More information on our methodology can be found in [Appendix 1](#).

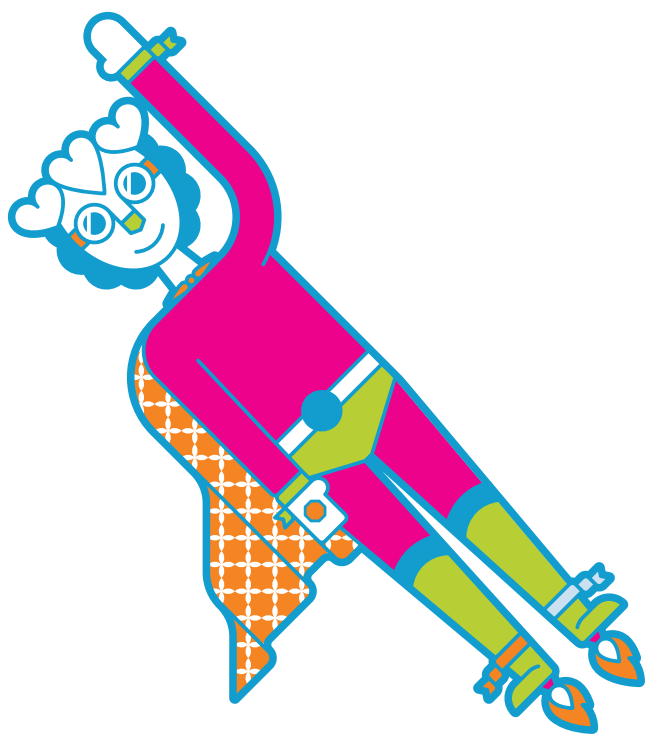
As we explore children and young people's stories, we reflect on recommendations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and Scottish Government's response to these recommendations. Each chapter concludes with actionable steps that individuals and organisations can take to drive positive change.

The stories in this report are a call to action. Through their words, artwork and other means of expression, Scotland's young human rights defenders are asking us to recognise their needs, talents, and potential. They call for a Scotland that listens, empowers and supports them to grow up in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding.

This report is a step towards realising that vision.

Terminology used in the report

In general, this report uses identity-first language (e.g. 'autistic child') and follows the social model of disability (e.g. 'disabled child'). Where children prefer to describe their identity in another way then we have used the language they have chosen.





This is a picture of me.

Hi

Chapter 1: All about me


1.1 Our stories

Scotland is home to around 1.03 million children, which means nearly one in five people are under the age of 18. Each of our 220 young storytellers brings a unique perspective on what it means to grow up in Scotland. Through their stories, they highlight the diverse experiences that shape who they are and make Scotland's communities vibrant. Every baby, child, and young person growing up in Scotland has their own story to tell and something special to share.

 *Children need huggle-kisses.*

Ada, age 5, East Ayrshire

Many children and young people feel pride about who they are, celebrating their identities, backgrounds and achievements with confidence.

 *I love my country, my real, real country! I like the food they bring from Nigeria, like yam. In Scotland, I eat samosa.*

Ilham, age 8, Glasgow

I'm autistic...I have cards that show me what we are going to do. A card for putting on clothes, for going on the bus and for where we'll go next.

Jacob, age 2, Tayside

I'm a big sister to a baby.

Eyelee, age 6, Scottish Borders

I'm LGBTQ+. They/Them.

Marley, East Lothian

I am three belts away from black belt!

Niamh, Aberdeen

I was born in Italy and lived there for four years. My mum and dad speak Italian, but I just speak English.

Lola, age 9, Glasgow

Some stories offer glimpses into personal challenges that children and young people are navigating, often calling on adults to do more to support and understand them.

 **I AM NOT A LABEL. I AM A HUMAN BEING.**

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

People don't always understand what it's like to be a forces child.

Sumer

 *I am deaf and was late diagnosed.*

Charlie, age 5, Midlothian

I have had a few bad experiences with dogs.

Abbie, age 7, North Lanarkshire

I'm awaiting autism diagnosis.

Chaz, age 15, Midlothian

I want to feel normal person and not just a carer.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland


These stories remind us that every child's experience of growing up in Scotland is different. Some are at greater risk of having their rights breached, particularly when they have multiple intersecting identities. They ask us to look beyond labels and take the time to get to know them, their unique experiences and views.

Every child has a story to tell. Every child has a right to be heard.

1.2 What the adults have been saying...


The stories from babies, children and young people reflect many of the themes that are highlighted in the 2023 concluding observations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UN Committee).³ This section highlights some of those recommendations – drawing from Together's child friendly version⁴ – as well as the child-friendly response from Scottish Government.⁵

What does the UN Committee say?

 *The UN Committee says that governments should make sure that all children can be themselves and express themselves freely.⁶*

The UN Committee is worried that some groups of children are being bullied or treated unfairly. Some examples are disabled children, LGBTQI+ children, children who cannot live at home with their families, children who have left their country to escape war, children from minority ethnic backgrounds, Gypsy/Travellers and children whose families don't have much money. The UN Committee says no one should be treated unfairly because of who they are or what their background is. It says governments should do more to make sure everyone is respected, treated fairly and can enjoy their rights.⁷

What has the Scottish Government said?

 *In its response to the UN Committee's recommendations, Scottish Government said it wants Scotland to be the best place in the world for children to grow up. It wants everyone to live without hate or prejudice. It also wants Scotland to be a cleaner, healthier and happier place for everyone.⁸*




Chapter 2: Life at home

Artwork by Zola, age 13, Highlands

2.1 Who I live with

Children and young people wanted to tell us all about who they live with, what their home is like and all the things they love to do. They also shared some of the challenges they face and their ideas for making things better.


Children's stories illustrate their relationships with parents, carers, siblings, extended family and even pets. Each of these connections play a significant role in children's lives, offering love, support and acceptance. Children say their family members are often the people they feel closest to, even if they aren't always able to live together.

 *My family life is good – I feel safe at home.*

Cerys, age 15, Greater Glasgow and Clyde

Parents and carers

A central theme is the vital role of parents and carers in providing love, support and guidance. This helps children feel safe, valued and listened to. Whether children live with their parents, step-parents, kinship or foster carers – these figures shape the emotional landscape of children's lives:

 *I love my mum and dad, and I can always talk to them about anything.*

LMHM, age 10, Glasgow

When I grow up, I want to be a doctor like my mum.

Ilham, age 8, Glasgow

My home life is great...If I am having a hard time my mum and dad always help me.

Gerald, age 10, North Lanarkshire


My dad makes me happy.

anonymous, supported by Circle

My mum is my Rights Champion.

Member of the Scottish Youth Parliament (MSYP)


Parents and carers play a crucial role in helping children navigate difficult times, offering support and reassurance:

 *If I had a worry, I would talk to mummy.*

Boss Batman, age 7, North Lanarkshire


They help when you are sick – parent does.

anonymous, supported by Circle

 *My mum helps me with anxiety.*
anonymous, supported by Circle

Being able to talk to parents helps.
MSYP


Parents and carers are deeply missed when they are not there:

 *My daddy works away – I miss him.*
Sophie, age 3, Perth & Kinross



Artwork by Zola, age 13, Highlands

Children living across multiple households share the positives as well as challenges. Step-parents are often an additional source of support and reassurance:

 *I live in two homes. I live in one home with my little sisters, mummy and step mummy and one home is with my dog, daddy and second step mummy. I like having a garden, growing fruits and vegetables there. I get a lot of say in what happens at home, I like that. It's hard when my little sisters cry and when I get told off. I would like that to happen less. I would tell my mummy, step mummy, daddy, second step mummy or family friends if I was having a hard time.*

Rowpow, age 8, Midlothian

The two stories that follow highlight the special bond between babies and their caregivers. Each caregiver observed their baby's communication over the course of a day and helped narrate this from their baby's perspective:



Baby Nora's story, 11 months old, Edinburgh

I woke up early and I cried because my tummy was sore. Mummy lifted me into her bed, patted me on the back and started playing a little music to soothe me. I lay back down but my tummy started to hurt again, so I cried. Mummy rubbed my tummy and back. I let out a big fart and that made me feel a lot better so I lay back down onto mummy's pillow. I love mummy's pillow because she cuddles me in close and I love that.

When I woke up again, I rubbed my eyes and cried a little. Mummy asked if I wanted a cuddle so I flopped over her tummy and we had a cuddle. I really liked that, so I kissed mummy's tummy, and mummy gave me a kiss back, saying she loves my cuddles in the morning. I had a big smile on my face because I was happy.

Mummy offered me my water cup but I shook my head and let out a little noise to tell her I didn't want it. I reached out to get her water cup instead; I like drinking from an open cup. Mummy gave me a sip and I spilt a little down my chin. I rubbed it with the back of my hand. I like the wet feeling on my hands. I stood on the bed, and when it wobbled, Mummy held my hand as I laughed and bounced. She sang 'Hop Little Bunny,' then asked where Bunny Blossom was. I looked around and I lifted my hands up either side of my head to show mummy I didn't know. Mummy told me 'look behind you', and when I did, there was Bunny Blossom! I hugged Bunny tight and let out a happy squeal.

Mummy carried me into the bathroom and asked if I wanted to brush my teeth. I pointed to them to say yes. She picked me up, and I put my finger in the toothpaste tube as she tried to squeeze some out. I really like doing that. Mummy sang a song to keep me brushing. When I was done, I threw my toothbrush in the sink, but Mummy brushed my teeth a little more. I shook my head when I wanted her to stop.

Mummy carried me down the stairs, and I got excited looking at all the family pictures, pointing and asking, 'Who's that?' Mummy told me, and I laughed. She said it was time to change my nappy, but I ran away because I don't like it. Mummy chased me, saying, 'Get here!' and I giggled. She caught me and tickled my chin, which was funny. I moaned a little when she changed my nappy because I don't like lying down, so sometimes she changes it while I stand, which is much better.

Mummy asked if I wanted breakfast, and I put my hand in my mouth and shook my head to say yes. She asked what I wanted and pointed to different fruits, and I chose blueberries, blackberries, and raspberries but not strawberries. I also wanted Weetabix, so Mummy knew to get it quickly. She put me in my highchair and fed me some Weetabix and also put some in my bowl so I could feed myself, though it gets messy. I laughed when some Weetabix fell on my bib. Then it happened again! It was so funny. When I was done, I put my head to the side so mummy knew I was full. Mummy asked 'do you want more?' so I shook my head to say no and I pushed my bowl onto the floor. I said 'up, up, up' because I wanted out of my highchair. Mummy cleaned my hands and then she tried to wipe my face. I shook my head and moaned because I hate my face getting wiped. Mummy said 'all done' so I stopped.

Mummy asked if I wanted to listen to music, so I bent my knees to dance a little to say yes. She put on a song, but I don't want this one so I made a noise. Mummy skipped to the next song. It was 'The Wiggle Dance', which I love, so I danced by bending my knees and moving my hands. I told Mummy 'up' because I love dancing in her arms. She tried dancing with me on the floor, but I pushed against her and said 'up up', so Mummy lifted me. I love dancing with mummy. She's funny. I let out a happy squeal as we danced. We spun in circles, and I laughed and smiled a lot.

Baby Mimi's story, 21 months old, Edinburgh

I woke up this morning attached to mummy's breast, I was happy because yesterday she was not in when I woke up as she already left somewhere, I guess work but I am a bit confused because she often works from home so it confuses me a bit...

After I woke up, I immediately wanted to play but mummy was still in bed so I called her 'mummy mummy up up!'. We went downstairs, mummy was helping me on the stairs which is weird because I am sure I would manage by myself, but I let her hold my hand. Mum told me that we need to get my nappy changed but I wanted to say 'hi' to my toys and play. I allowed her to change my nappy while I was playing, but didn't want my PJs to be changed just yet so she went to the kitchen to prepare some coffee – it's only for mummy so she gives me a choice to drink water or oat milk. I like both but more often I want more breastmilk. Mummy offered me breakfast, but I was not hungry as breastmilk is enough for now, I also ate quite a lot during the night.

Mummy came with clothes and told me it's time to change as we need to go 'papa' to the nursery. I didn't like the shirt she picked up, so she brought another one and asked if I like it. It was my favourite one. I let her take off the PJs and put on all the clothes, I then told her that I need shoes and socks! She said that she needs to get ready too and invited me to the bathroom to wash my teeth. I hate doing it, it is difficult. Mummy is trying to help, she shows me how she is doing it, but I still don't get it, but she is patient and showing me every day... also she is trying to do it for me but I don't like it. I still don't get what she means and why it is important to do in the morning or afternoon.

Once we are done, Mummy is getting ready and putting her clothes on and use some weird things to put on her face. I watch her and like how she looks afterwards so I do my 'woow', she smiles and I can see she is happy. I love her.

For some children, talking about difficulties they face can be hard – even when they trust their parents and carers and know they will do their best to help:




I love my family and we talk about how we feel. Sometimes when I am stressed, I want to be on my own.

Charlie, age 5, Midlothian


I can talk to my family or teachers but I prefer not to.

Bud, age 12, North Lanarkshire

 *I trust my mum and dad and grandparents. Sometimes we find things difficult, but I know they are looking out for me.*

Toby, age 15

Others share that family separation can be particularly challenging and can affect the relationships they have with their parents. For some, courts order contact with a non-resident parent when children and young people have clearly stated they do not want to see them or are afraid of seeing them. When courts fail to take the time to listen to children's views or support them to understand a decision, it can leave them feeling let down by the system:

 *I wish I could live with both parents in a traditional family unit and my dad hadn't let me down. I am close to my mum and we talk when I'm having a hard time. Often, I feel really different from people around me. My mum includes me in all the decisions about my life. I get on well with the grown-ups in my life. Except my dad who I'd like to disconnect from but I can't even change my name without his permission...The courts saw my dad's rights as more important than mine. The individual adults in my life are great, the systems are rubbish.*

Chaz, age 15, Edinburgh

Children living with foster carers express deep love and affection for them, valuing the loving, stable environment they provide:



Lightning's story, age 7, East Ayrshire

I would like to talk about my life with my foster carer.

I love my foster carer. She does lots of fun stuff with us and takes us to lots of different places like park and bowling. Wherever she ever takes us is fun with us together. Children need love, and foster carers need to be very kind and welcoming. They need to know how to have fun.

My favourite thing about my foster carer is she is always kind. I love my foster home and have a lovely big garden.

I don't ever want to leave my foster carer.

I have drew a picture of me and my foster carer at the park.





Ada's story, age 5, East Ayrshire

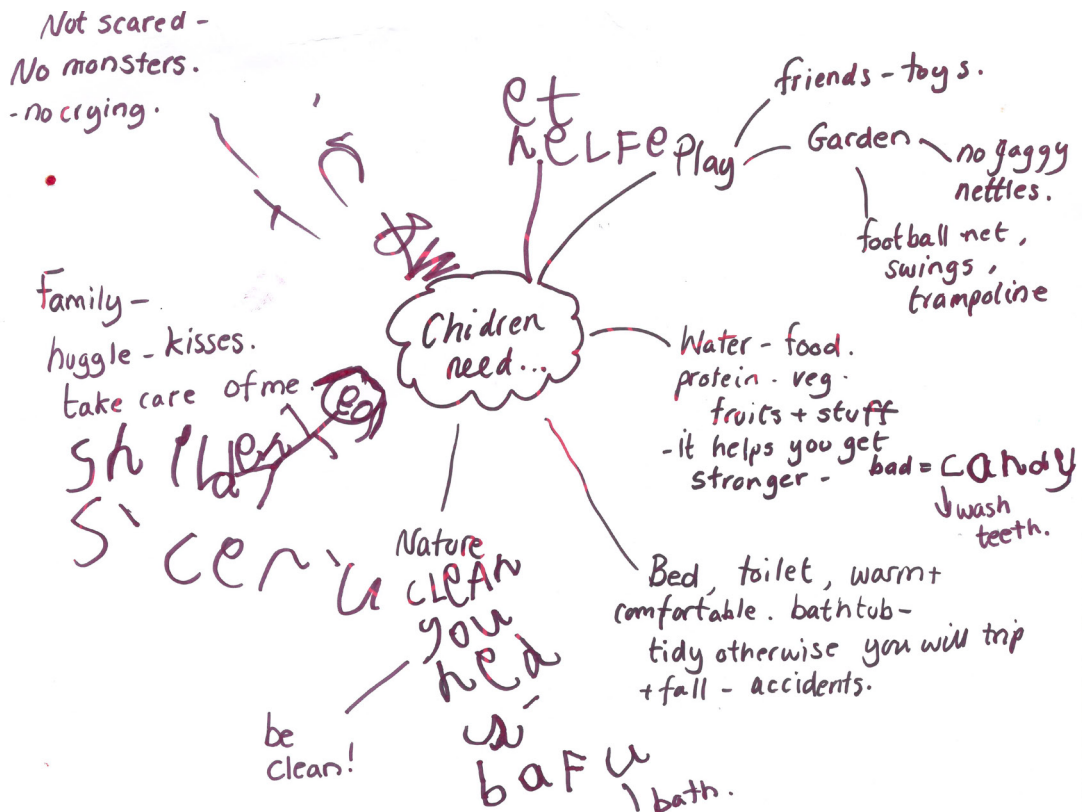
Ada lives with extended family in a kinship arrangement. She spoke about children who are adopted and all the things that they need. Ada said that one of the most important things children need is love and someone to talk to when they feel sad or worried.

She wanted to tell the story of a girl who gets adopted and how her new carers give her a happy life. Ada drew the story and shared it aloud:

"Once upon a time, there was a little girl called Chelsie. She was very sad cause no one wanted her. Then there was this woman called Chelseta and she said 'I will adopt you'. She took her to her nice, warm home. The woman has a spare bed for her and her room had butterflies on the wall and she had loads of toys. She gave her food, and she had a lovely warm bed. She had a lamp for her bedroom. The End".



Here are the things that Ada says children need to grow up happy, healthy and safe:





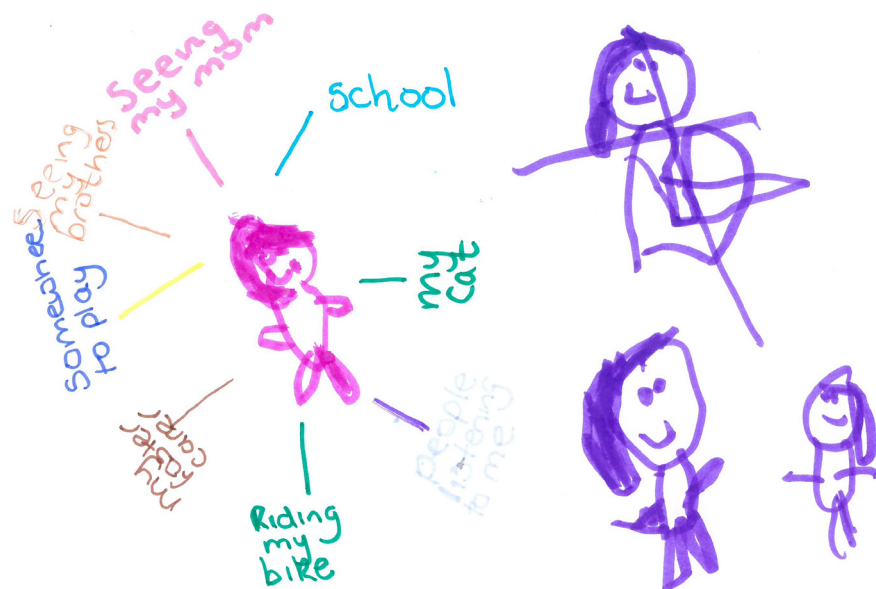
Anna's story, age 6, East Ayrshire

My family is really important. I love spending time with my mum and my brothers. I like telling them all about what I've been doing at my foster carer's house.


I really love animals. I live with my cat, and she makes me very happy. I really like playing outside too. One of my favourite things is riding my bike.

Every child needs someone to listen to them. I have lots of people who care about me. They listen to me, and that's really important.

I've been living with my foster carer for years. I'm really happy here. I feel safe and loved, and I love my foster carer very much. She is very important to me. We have a big garden at home, and I spend a lot of time playing in it. I think every child should have somewhere where they can run around and play.




Asylum-seeking young people speak about the important role that residential workers, independent guardians and social workers play in their lives. These figures are crucial sources of support, particularly for children and young people who are unaccompanied.


 *Those people are taking care of me when am sick. They take me to hospital, and they care about my education, also courage me to go with a good way.*

Tut

For children with additional support needs, home often becomes an important safe space compared to other environments, like school. Neurodivergent children share how they feel more understood at home:


 *I feel happy and safe at home. I like my home and my family love me. I want to be home schooled but my parents can't afford not to work.*

Me, age 11

 *My mum and dad look after me. I can find lots of things hard...I only had a few teachers I could talk to. My mum and dad help me and I talk to my big sister... My mum and dad know when something is wrong and they sort it.*


Bb16, age 16, Falkirk

For some neurodivergent young people, the strain of masking their true self lessens at home, but family members can still face difficulties in fully understanding their needs:

 *Home is a bit better, I mask slightly less. I have more of a routine. I have mixed feelings about people in my life. Some are better than others at being kind to me. My parents are really supportive and kind but do (understandably) make mistakes. I wish my family could be more understanding about autism and know how to cope better with meltdowns. I feel bad for my sister as she is only 11 but has to deal with a lot of family stress.*

Anna, age 15, Edinburgh


Others share that while their parents are caring and try their best, sometimes there is friction as children get older and seek greater independence:

 *My parents are ok. My mum always tries to help me achieve the things I want to do. My dad is funny and makes me laugh. I sometimes talk to my mum. She is always asking how I am. That's annoying. I'm nearly a teenager.*

Tiglo, age 11, Perth & Kinross



Some children and young people speak about difficulties at home, particularly when family circumstances are complex or strained:


 *My mum and I don't always get on. She has physical and mental health issues, and it is difficult. I struggle with my family relationships as I'm essentially a carer to my mum and brought up my younger siblings. My dad left when I was 11 and now he has a new family.*

Alice, age 17, South Lanarkshire

My parent treat me like am not a part of the family. They sometimes don't include you in their decisions.

anonymous, supported by Circle

Children say tension within the family can impact their sense of wellbeing. Friends are an important source of comfort but more support is needed:

 *Sometimes feeling family going against each other and arguing can impact on my day and choices.*

anonymous, supported by Circle

Being able to reach different support if things are difficult at home. Accessing friends for support helps me work through things.

anonymous, supported by Circle



Child contact centres and family mediation services are valuable for many families, enabling children to rebuild connections with parents in a safe and supportive environment. While these centres offer vital support, we heard that some children are missing out on contact due to financial pressures faced by their parents – such as the expense of travelling to the centre or taking time off work.




Ben's story, age 12, Aberdeenshire

Some weekends, I go to a Family Time Centre to see my dad. I have been going for two years. The staff there are very nice and prepared me as much as possible to go, but I still didn't feel prepared. But now, before going to the Family Time Centre, I feel excited because I don't see my dad much.


I have learnt a little bit about my rights in school, but I don't know much about them... I chose three rights that I felt were upheld during my sessions at the Family Time Centre. My Article 19 right to protection from violence, as I had a member of staff in the room with me while I spent time with my dad. My Article 9 right to keep families together, as staff were supportive of helping me build my relationship with my dad during sessions. And my Article 16 right of protection for privacy as the space we used felt very private and in a closed area.

Children and young people with health conditions share that the additional care they need can place a financial and emotional strain on their families. Their stories highlight the importance of greater support for the whole family:

 *My illness has made life at home difficult, because my illness has made me do things that can hurt myself and my family. My mum has had to give up work to look after me, which means we don't have as much money as we used to. My dad had to change his job and is now self-employed and is working lots of hours.*

Toby, age 15


Greater support is also needed for children experiencing bereavement, with one child sharing the profound impact of losing a parent and how this shaped his early years:

 *For one child, the death of a parent was a very prominent experience that he shared very early on in the session as this led to him moving house and was also when he was only six and would've just started primary school.*

Circle, East Lothian



Several children and young people wanted to speak about the impact of social work involvement in their families' lives. They feel that negative perceptions of social work can cause anxiety and fear within families, making them hesitate to speak up when they need help:


 *Stories that go around about social work makes my family scared and worried to speak up.*

anonymous, supported by Circle

Sometimes scared to speak up in case removed from home.

anonymous, supported by Circle

While social workers provide valuable support to families, children often feel confusion and worry about their involvement. This reveals a gap in understanding and trust between social work and families that must be addressed:


 *[There needs to be] more tolerance and understanding from social work.*

MSYP

I feel the police and social worker and my mum worry about me, but I always come home eventually so why worry about me.

Harry, age 14, Midlothian


To ease this anxiety, children and young people call for greater compassion, clearer communication, and more education on how social work operates. Knowing that they will be involved in decisions, that they won't be misunderstood or unfairly judged is key to feeling safe and supported in their homes.

 *Better education about the social work and how they help and work.*


anonymous, supported by Circle

Young carers

Children and young people who care for parents or other family members face unique challenges:

 *Home life growing up was different as I have always taken on a carer role for my ill parent.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

 *One of our story tellers talked about her hobby being caring for other people in her family but said this didn't stop her from doing other hobbies.*

Aberlour, Hearts & Minds, ages 5-11

Many young carers are not recognised as such, sometimes because they do not identify as a young carer. Often this means the support they need is never put in place.

Marie, who is both a young carer and in an armed forces family shared her story:



Marie's story

A lot of young carers in forces families don't even know that they are one and they don't have the support out there.

Since I was born, my dad has been in the Navy. Although I love what my dad does, this has had an effect on my caring roles and my family as a whole. Sometimes it is difficult as I don't have the support from my dad as he isn't able to be there physically to help my mum, brothers and me. If my mum is working or isn't feeling well it's on me to make dinner, look after my brothers and help my mum. I miss my dad and his job has made it hard to come to events or holidays and sometimes we don't even get to have any contact with him for a large amount of time.

It was hard when he was away and my mum was sick, especially around the time we moved. More on me looking after my younger brother – I'm a young carer. They tell Dad he can come home, then say he isn't allowed. We need a date and understanding of the date change.

Children in armed forces families

Children in armed forces families experience both pride and frustration about their parent's service. The nature of military life – frequent moves, long separations, and the unpredictability of deployments – pose significant challenges:


 *It's not like moving from one job to a new job. It's changing your lifestyle, friends, home, everything.*

Casm

Dad left last night and I don't know when he's back. Dad didn't tell me. I rather would have known for longer, so I had time to think about it.

Anne

Feelings of isolation and anxiety are common, as long deployments mean families are apart for special moments like birthdays and holidays. Deployment can be especially hard for very young children, as they may struggle to maintain their bond with their parent:

 *Deployment should not be over six months, especially if toddlers are being raised in the military. When my dad came back from deployment I couldn't remember him.*

Kai

The lack of communication and transparency around deployment also adds to the emotional strain. Many children and young people call for more information as well as shorter limits on deployment length.


 *Right to ask what is happening with parents. A lot don't know what's happening.*

Drew

I believe there could be a certain amount of months they can go for before they come back for a bit and go again, as parents being away...for long periods of time can affect their relationship.

Aaliyah

Communication with deployed parents is often limited and monitored. Messages are screened and sometimes redacted, making it hard for children to express their true feelings:


 *All I say is I love you, but I think it's quite invasive. You know that they have got to be read and you might not want others reading it.*

Louis

You can't say things that stop them doing work, they have to wait until they get home to find out even really exciting things. People on dad's boat had to come off to get good news.

Rene

Overall, children in armed forces families say they need more information, communication, stability and emotional support. While many accept that deployment is simply a part of military life, they call for more to be done to uphold their rights and ensure they are fully supported:⁹

 *Deployment can be a harsh process, but it is necessary. Our right should always be there and protected.*

Nick

If contact [with the serving parent] can't be improved, families need more support to deal with this.

Riley



Extract from composite story from Forces Children Scotland

My mum is in the Navy and works on the submarines. She has done this my whole life and it is all I know. I am so proud of her because you know she is making people's lives better.

No one understands what it feels like when your parent is deployed. Before she goes, you know she is about to be deployed but you don't know exactly when. You spend the whole time waiting and then when it happens, it happens so fast. You don't know how long she will be away and because she is on a submarine, once she is gone, I won't have any contact with her again until she is home. The longest she has been away was seven months and that time she missed my birthday and my school show. It feels like the Navy never thinks about how it might affect me and my younger brother and sister and, as a family, we don't get all the support we need. I get some support from school and because there are lots of navy children, they understand what I need. My friend who is the only forces child at her school doesn't get anything. A lot of the time, it feels like we are just expected to get on with it.

As a family, we can send mum a 120-word message each week. This message is read and sometimes has things taken out by the MOD. We must be careful not to say anything that will upset my mum or anything that is too happy that it might distract her from her work. If we do, it might not be passed on. We know that what we write will be read by other people, not just her, so we don't really say anything too personal.

When I was younger, I could never remember the things I really wanted to tell her by the time she came back and it felt like I didn't know her, and she didn't know me. We would all take a long time to adjust to her being back and it didn't feel like there was any help from anyone to do that.



Children with a parent in prison

Children and young people with a parent in prison face a unique set of emotional, social and financial challenges. For many, the sudden and prolonged absence of a parent creates a sense of loss, confusion and sadness. Their everyday lives are significantly impacted, from missing out on shared experiences to dealing with stigma and loss of income to support the family.



I am scared that people will find out about my dad. I am worried in case any more drama happens.

Ayla, age 13, Grampian

Children report feeling different from their peers, particularly when they see other children spending time with their parents:



Footyboi's story, age 8, Highlands

I feel different to other kids as my dad is in prison. It makes me sad and sometimes angry as I can't do stuff with him. I only get to see him two hours a month and even then, there are other people about.

The worst bit is when I see my friends with their dads, it makes me really sad. I miss having him to do things with like going to football or him coming to watch me when I play.


I wish I could spend longer at visits with him.

When my dad gets home, the first thing I want to do with him is go to a football match. I went with my friend to a match, but I really want to go with my dad.



Created by Zelda, age 16, South Lanarkshire

While visits to see parents offer a chance for connection, they are often infrequent and short. Visiting prisons can sometimes require long journeys which may not be feasible to do regularly. The cost of visiting can also limit how often families can go, with a knock-on impact for children's relationship with their imprisoned parent.

 *I see my mum once a week.*

Xavier, age 13, Grampian

Many children find comfort and support in other family members, particularly grandparents, who help to provide care and emotional security for children through difficult times:


 *My favourite place to visit is gran's.*

Xavier, age 13, Grampian

Children and families call for a range of improvements, including improved data collection so affected children can be identified and supported, accessible information, free transport passes for visits and improved financial support.¹⁰

Brothers and sisters

Sibling relationships play a central role in family dynamics for many children, offering fun, companionship and support, albeit with a little frustration at times!

 *Home is a happy place – my siblings and I get along with a few bumps like all do.*

Alfie, age 14, North Lanarkshire

I have a step-brother who stays with myself and dad.

Xavier, age 13, Grampian

Older siblings are viewed as key sources of support and protection, particularly in times of distress:

 *My older [sibling] helps me when I'm upset.*

anonymous, supported by Circle


In return, being an older sibling is often a source of pride – but comes with a sense of responsibility that can sometimes feel challenging:

 *I'm a big sister to a baby.*


Eyelee, age 6, Scottish Borders

Can be tough being the older sibling, more responsibility and pressure at times.

anonymous, supported by Circle

 *[what's important?] Being able to spend time with mum and brother and being a good big sister to him.*


anonymous, supported by Circle

 *One young person (girl, age 12) recalled colouring her younger sibling's baby box with her mum. She enjoyed this and mum loved the baby box.*

Circle, East Lothian




While children love their siblings, they can sometimes say and do things that are frustrating:

 *I have a sister, she's seven – no eight. My sister is really boring. I wish that she was older than me so she wouldn't be annoying.*


Lewis, age 10, Glasgow

Meanwhile, those who are an only child sometimes express a longing for siblings, saying it would be nice to have additional companionship:


 *It would maybe be nice to have a sibling.*

LMHM, age 10, Glasgow

Children and young people who live apart from their siblings, for example due to Care Experience or seeking asylum, describe the intense emotional difficulties of this. They often feel loss and longing:

 *The most difficult thing for me is living apart from my family and my younger siblings because I always lived with them before I came to Scotland.*

Tina, age 16, West Dunbartonshire


 *One of our storytellers explained that a sad bit of their story was that they didn't get to see their family as much as they wanted to and couldn't live with their sister.*

Aberlour, Hearts & Minds, ages 5-11

Overall, sibling relationships are described as key sources of joy, support and contributing significantly to children's emotional wellbeing.

Extended family

While parents and carers are often children's first 'go to' if they had a problem – many also value the support offered by extended family such as grandparents, aunts and uncles:

 *I know I can talk to my mum about anything. I also have great close bonds with my grandparents, siblings & uncle.*

Alfie, age 14, North Lanarkshire


I trust my mum and dad and grandparents. Sometimes we find things difficult, but I know they are looking out for me.

Toby, age 15

If I'm struggling, I can go to my parents, my mum, my dad, my granny, my sister.

Ruaridh, age 12, East Lothian


Extended family can be essential for stability and belonging, acting as sources of wisdom and comfort. Some young people with caring responsibilities for extended family say this can create emotional challenges:

 *I live with my mum and autistic sister. Our gran is 85 and has broken her hip, she needs to get help when she comes home so I will have to help her more and more as I'm not in school. I love my gran but it's too much for me to see my gran becoming weaker and weaker.*

Cerys, age 15, Greater Glasgow and Clyde


Pets

Pets also play a vital role in many children's lives. They are much loved members of the family who provide companionship and support:

 *I live with my mum, dad, and my pets Oreo, Biscuit and Onyx.*


Ayla, age 13, Grampian

For some children, pets provide unconditional acceptance, helping them navigate challenges they face in their daily lives. One child highlighted how much his dog helps him at home, concluding that every autistic child should be able to have a therapy dog at school:

 *I have a dog who is perfect. She is a black lab. She helps me when I feel angry or sad. I hug her when I feel sad. I wish my parents let her sleep in my bed. I walk my dog and do dog agility with her. I think autistic kids should have a therapy dog at school to help them like my dog helps me.*

Tiglo, age 11, Perth & Kinross

Pets also bring humour, doing unusual and unexpected things:

 *My auntie used to have a crazy dog and it eats pillows and stuff.*

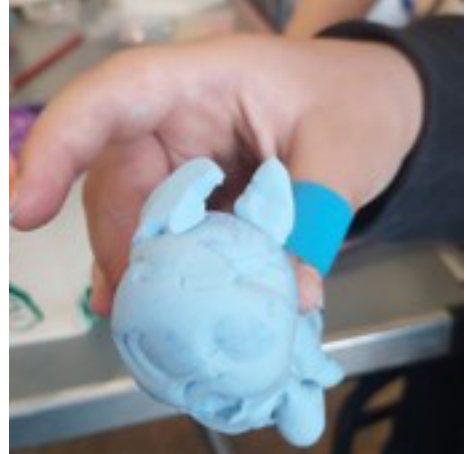
Lola, age 9, Glasgow



Taylor's time capsule, Renfrewshire

We made time capsules and imagined using them to tell people in the future about our lives. We put in things that are important to us.

I put in a model of my pets because it's important to care about things and they are family.



2.2 Where I live

Housing

Children's stories reveal a deep sense of attachment to their homes, often prioritising how these make them feel over how they look:


 *I love my home. It's not the biggest or the tidiest, but it feels safe and homely to me.*

William, age 10, Edinburgh

[Home is] a place to be myself.

anonymous, supported by Circle

Personal space is important, allowing children to decompress and have time to themselves:

 *Having my things that are important to me in my room so I can enjoy my personal space.*

anonymous, supported by Circle

[what's important?] Warm safe environment and personal space.

anonymous, supported by Circle

This desire for space is sometimes challenged by having to share a room with siblings or other family members:

 *I'd like my own room. I share with five people – my mum, dad, sisters.*

Ilham, age 8, Glasgow

Space is a particular issue for families with babies and young children. Finding enough room for prams, clothing, nappies and play equipment is challenging for those living in small flats, with knock on impacts for children's right to play and engage in all the activities of daily life:



Baby Ciara's story, Tayside

I live with my mum in our flat. My bed is beside hers so we don't have space to crawl in here, but I have my toys in a room where I can play on the floor and my mum can be on the sofa or making our food. We have bananas and toast for breakfast. I like to hold it myself in my hands. I don't like to get my face cleaned afterwards and I turn my face away.

This morning we are going out. I don't like putting on my outdoor suit and I scrunch my arms up so mum has to try and get my arms straight to go in the sleeves. I make some sounds to tell her I don't like this. She doesn't stop but when she's finished I get a cuddle so I feel OK again.

We have to keep the buggy at the bottom of all the stairs because our flat is at the top, so mum has to carry me all the way down the stairs to the buggy whenever we want to go out.

Some parents and carers face challenges in finding accommodation that best meets their babies' needs, particularly those living in local authority housing. For many they feel they cannot refuse what they are offered:



Robin hates the shower but Robin's mum's house only has a shower and no bath but she hadn't been able to say no when the council offered it as it met their other needs.

worker supporting family of one-year-old, Tayside

Despite these challenges, parents remain eager to create a safe and stimulating environment to help their babies learn and explore at home:



Angus likes the lights that switch on and off! He loves the lights! He loves all this [sensory] stuff – this is the plan for his bedroom.

parent of two-year-old, Tayside


In addition to space, accessibility is a significant issue for some families. Families with disabled children face prohibitive costs when looking to adapt their homes. As one child who uses a wheelchair shared:



I like my home but my mum and dad can't afford to make it fully accessible. They work so can't get it for free and can't afford to pay for it.

Dave, age 13, Edinburgh

Challenges posed by the cost-of-living crisis also resonate deeply, affecting children's access to basic essentials that they need for an adequate standard of living:

 So the cost of living crisis is affecting young people in Scotland dramatically and it's forcing people to make choices that no one should have to, whether it is that they can afford to buy food for the week or put their heating on.

Delilah, age 16, Glasgow)


Lower the prices of children items e.g. baby formula, clothes, toys.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

People should be paid more for the work they do to help with things like rent and food.

William, age 10, Edinburgh

Several highlight the high cost of housing and that this needs to change because it is unfair:

 Houses should be cheaper.

anonymous, supported by Circle

Broader housing conditions have a significant impact on children, with some reporting pests in the neighbourhood or buildings that are in poor condition:

 We used to have a lot of rats, but we don't have any now.

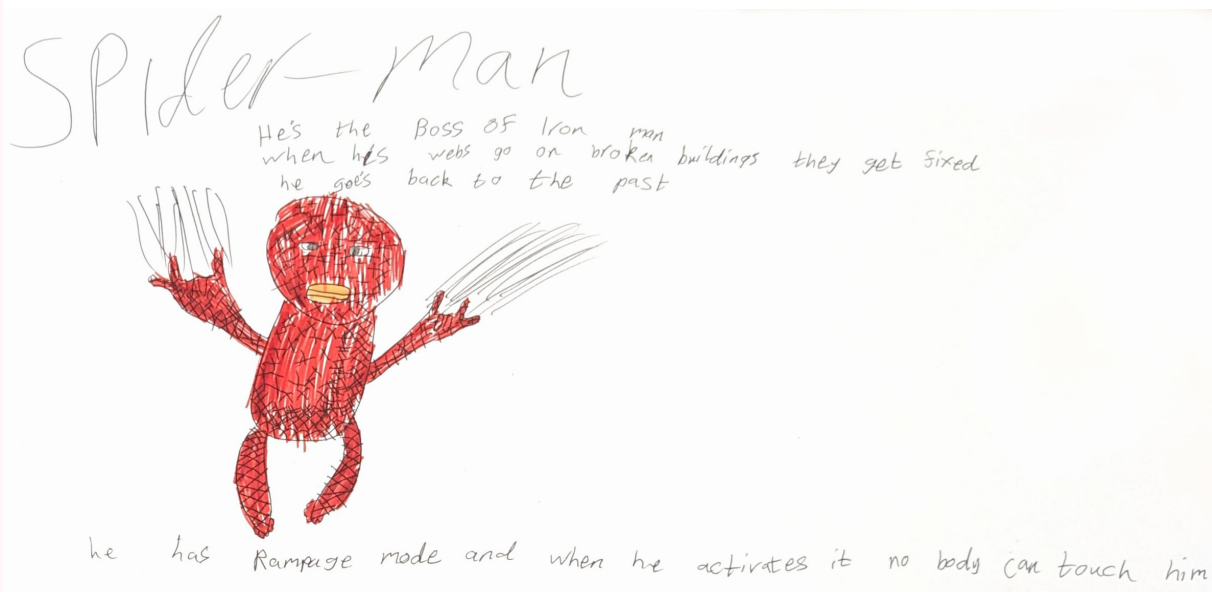
Lewis, age 10, Glasgow




My superhero, by anonymous, age 10, supported by Play Scotland

One child drew a superhero who would help make things better for children and young people:

"He could fix broken buildings – they are going to knock my building down. I feel okay about it – I want to move to a new house"




Neighbours' strict attitudes about tidiness are sometimes unhelpful, adding to feelings of shame and stigma where 'solutions' lie beyond the reach of families' finances:

 *We have bikes on display in the garden and people say "just build a hut to make it neater" but [we] don't have the money or health for my parents to do that.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Meanwhile, for other children, their frustrations about home lie in issues like poor digital connectivity – although they are grateful of community spaces where they can access this:

 *The Wi-Fi in my house is really glitchy, so I go to the library and use the computers there.*

Lewis, age 10, Glasgow



Art gallery: dream house drawings!

This art gallery explores the changes children would make to their current homes to turn them into their dream homes. The artworks and accompanying descriptions highlight the importance of play and quality family time, as well as personal space.

Kitty's house, age 10, East Ayrshire

I would like to live with my mum, dad and sister because my family is very special and makes me happy.

I want to live in a much bigger house with lots more space and room to play. My dream house would have a BIG garden for activities. I would grow lots of flowers and plants to make it look pretty. I would love to take care of them! There would also be a trampoline and swings so I could invite all my friends over to play. The front garden would have lots of grass to run around on.

The bricks on my house would be multi-coloured because I love the rainbow. Colourful things make me happy!



Everyone in my house would have their own bedrooms. My room would be a lot bigger than my room just now. It would have an art area, a storage area for all my art stuff, and a homework desk so I could get quiet time to focus. My room would be pink and black.

My dream home would need a BIG dining table so it could hold my entire family. My family is very important so I want them to be all together.

My dream home would also have a cat and a dog because I love animals!

It's important that my home is very close to school. I love school and want it to be easy to get to. I also want to be near my friend's houses and there would be a big swing park to play in. The park would be right next my house, and the slide would take me right into my house!

My dream house would have lots of windows so it could be bright and have lots of light. It would also need to be warm.

I love Pokémon, so there would be a big Pokémon statue beside my house too!

Lola's house, age 9, Glasgow

I live in my aunties house. My auntie likes to party every night. My auntie used to have a crazy dog and it eats pillows and stuff.

I have two sisters. They are little sisters (5 and 7), and they are very annoying.

My house is grey and white. I'd paint it blue. My neighbours are nice.

I hear ambulances outside.



Ilham's house, age 8, Glasgow

I'd put a swimming pool on the roof!

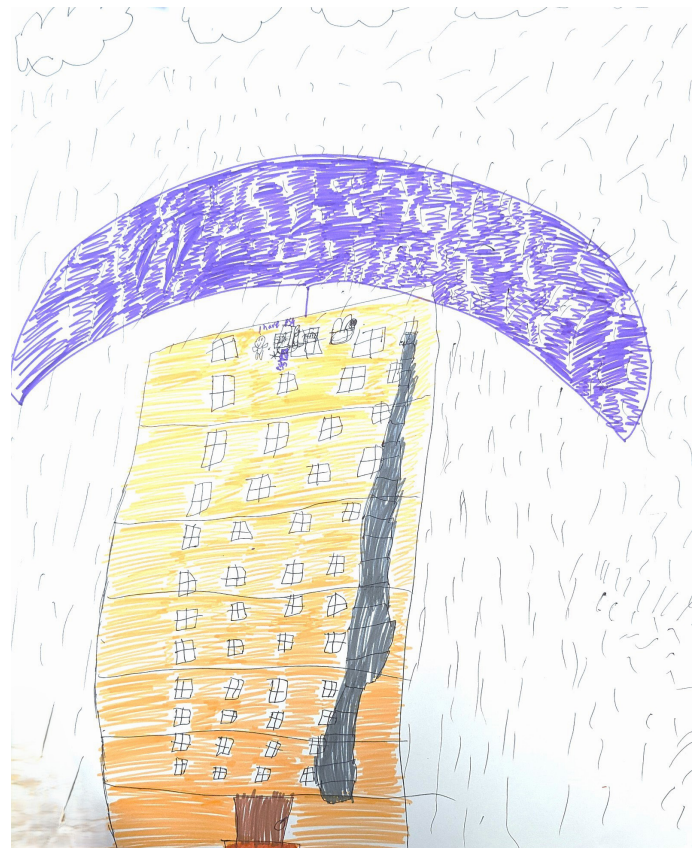


Anonymous, age 10, supported by Play Scotland

I live in a flat, on the top floor. The white colour on our flat is too boring. I've made it yellow in my dream home.

When I get home from school, mum is sleeping, dad is on the computer, and I'm on the PS4. I clean the house on a Saturday.

There's one other boy in my flats, but he's eight. I don't play with him.



Lewis, age 10, Glasgow

I would add a gaming room!



Olivia, age 10, Glasgow

I live in a flat, I'm at the top. It's three storeys. I can see lots of trees and roads from my flat. From my room, I can see the park.

There are no friends very near me. My friends live in [location]. For my dream home, I'd like a swimming pool...and also a hot tub.


I'd like a trampoline... I'm learning how to do a back flip.

I also added a charity to stop world hunger.




Children in armed forces families

Children living in Services Family Accommodation (SFA) share mixed experiences. For some, there is a sense of community and familiarity in its uniformity:

 *I like that the houses are the same as my friends. I've been in nine military houses but they were all similar, so feels like one house.*


Sophia

For many, however, the drawbacks often overshadow the positives:

 *It was not nice, there were a bunch of stains on the carpet and the bathroom door wouldn't lock. We couldn't even fit all four of us in the kitchen!*


Lilly

The inability to decorate or personalise SFA accommodation means it doesn't always feel like 'home':

 *Frustrating as you can't make it your own, can't decorate. It didn't feel like house of our own, it makes us upset.*

Marie

Concerns about the state of housing are common. This not only impacts on children and young people's health, but also their friendships, with some saying they don't want to invite friends over:


 *Our last house had black mould and a crack down it. It was only fixed after we moved out and it made the next people sick. The top floor caved in after we left...It hurts your pride to have a fault in the house, I wouldn't want friends over.*

Sophia

Most equipment in the house was breaking. The sink was replaced three times and the shower was breaking. Electricity kept going out. Mould throughout the house. Rooms smell rank.


Elizabeth

For families with disabled children, accessibility is a significant concern:

 *SFA housing is not accessible for disabilities. Our house was difficult to manoeuvre and Dad had to build decking to accommodate my sister's wheelchair as the MOD would take too long. It was a flat on the first floor and we had to carry my sister up and down the stairs. The MOD will try to accommodate but it's not good enough. My dad left the Army five years ago because the houses weren't suitable for my sister.*

Jaiden

While some children enjoy the community spirit of living on bases, they also express challenges around privacy:

 *On base, everyone knows everything, especially the wives. Friends saying stuff about others.*

Francis

Others report a lack of support when it comes to complaints:

 *Better to complain to welfare, but they don't take it seriously.*

Lucas

This composite story, based on experiences of multiple young people, highlights additional housing issues when parents become veterans and the difference that proper support can bring – in this example, support from the local young carers service:



Composite story from Forces Children Scotland

My mum served in the Royal Marines for 20 years. When I was 15, she hurt her knee while on a training exercise and could no longer serve. It felt like her leaving the Marines happened so fast. She might have got information about how to become a civilian, but I didn't. She told me later that because it happened so quickly, she didn't have the support she needed to make the transition. If she hadn't been hurt, she would have started the process a few years before she left.

I thought I knew everything about moving house and school and losing friends and connections because I had done it so many times before. This was different! I lost all of these things all over again but I also lost my connection to the forces community. I didn't know who I was anymore as so much of who I am was about being a forces child.

We moved off-base and back to be closer to my grandparents. We had to present as homeless to the local authority. It felt really embarrassing after all that we had sacrificed while my mum was serving. My mum and dad are really smart but initially they found it hard to manage their money, as so many things like rent and electricity had been included in my mum's job. Money was also tight because mum's injury meant that it was hard for her to get a new job on 'civvy street'. She also had difficulty understanding what benefits she could get and how they worked with the forces compensation she gets due to her injury. Everything just felt so hard and so different from the forces.

I didn't know anyone else in my new school whose parent was in the forces and no one in my new school understood what it meant to me that my mum had become a veteran.

This move was the hardest because I didn't have access to all the support I had while mum was serving and I didn't know where to go to ask for support. Because of mum's injury I had to do more to help her around the house and with my younger siblings. It was only after a couple of years that I recognised I was a young carer. Linking in with the local young carers service has been one of the best things for me. I finally got some support and the service took the time to understand what my life was like, not just as a young carer but also as the child of a veteran.

Residential settings

Children and young people share mixed experiences of living in residential settings and supported accommodation, including those seeking asylum:


 *The Children's Unit isn't bad, I don't mind it.*

Mohammed Ali, age 15, North Ayrshire

Good house and accommodation.


Mohammed

Some asylum-seeking young people highlight support they receive from social work, but call for improvements such as increased financial assistance so they can pursue their interests and feel more settled:

 *I have a social worker but they can't always help me with the things I need. When I lost my money and didn't have food they made me wait a long time for help and I want to join a gym but they won't help me get a gym membership. The money isn't enough for things that I need, like clothes and a gym membership.*

Tina, age 16, West Dunbartonshire

This issue is also recognised by their peers:

 *People who have immigrated, asylum-seekers, refugees, need more support with finance, housing and everything in general.*

MSYP

For some children in residential settings, regular visits home provide comfort and connection with their family. Robert, for example, looks forward to his family time every other weekend:



Robert's story, age 12

Robert is non-verbal and communicates through sounds and gestures. Robert took us on a video tour of his weekend. His support workers helped him to share his story:

Robert lives in a children's house at Aberlour with four of his friends.

His favourite thing is going back every other weekend to see his mum, sister, and gran. He loves his family time so much that he counts down how many sleeps are left until he gets to see them again.

Every night, Robert has phone calls with his mum and gran, which always make him feel happy. One of his favourite things is when his sister plays hide and seek over the phone, and he gets to imagine finding her.


Robert loves the comfort of his routines, and with the support from his family and the adults at the children's house, he's hoping to have sleepovers with his mum and sister soon. He dreams of those nights and can't wait to make them happen.

The adults at Aberlour know how much Robert loves stories, especially about his own day, so they record voice messages, narrating everything he gets up to. Robert loves to play these recordings back to his family and others, sharing the excitement with them.

The video Robert sent us showed him enjoying his birthday weekend. He celebrated with his mum and sister, visiting the safari park and going to the local gala day.

2.3 What I do at home

Children and young people's stories highlight their many hobbies and things they do to feel comfortable and happy. Spending time with family and friends, whether this is playing with toys, cooking together, watching TV or helping out in the garden, all add to a sense of emotional safety and contentment:

 *I like my toys and mum makes yummy tomato pasta.*

Sophie, age 3, Perth & Kinross

I love my PS5 and helping daddy in the garden. I like my life at home.

Boss Batman, age 7, North Lanarkshire

A day at home is chilling listening to audiobooks or watching TV.

Chaz, age 15, Edinburgh

Well...my mum and dad don't live together so at my mum's I have a Switch and on that I play Mario kart and Minecraft. At dad's I play FIFA with my friends. I used to play Fortnite but I'm bored of that now.


anonymous, age 12, East Lothian

I have a little sister who plays with Ilham she knows my whole family. I play with Ilham's sister.

Lola, age 9, Glasgow



The importance of choice and autonomy is a recurring theme. Children emphasise being free to be themselves and engage in the activities they enjoy:


 *Having options about what I can do at home and feel free to be myself.*

anonymous, supported by Circle

Options about what I can do and place to be myself.

anonymous, supported by Circle


Some children express frustration about having to share things with their parents and siblings. Learning to share can be hard:

 *My dad watches TV, and he always watches what he wants, my sister and me can't get to watch what we want... Me and my sister always have to share a TV, it's so annoying. Like, you watch one video, give her the remote and she watches one video after that...then it's my turn, stuff like that. I also have to share with my dad. My mum doesn't watch TV. My dad comes home from work and showers, everything like that. Then if we're still watching TV then, like after a couple of minutes, he says 'use your PS5', stuff like that and also my sister, she goes and uses her iPad. So yeah, so all of us have our own devices.*

Lewis, age 10, Glasgow




Sometimes adults don't always understand what children want – and this can also be frustrating:

 *My auntie wanted me to sit on the couch from the morning until the afternoon, but I couldn't do that.*

Lewis, age 10, Glasgow

Many children express a sense of duty to help out at home. This includes cleaning, caring for younger siblings and pets:


 *Chores, responsibility to keep clean the house ...take care of sibling...looking after pets.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and YMCA Paisley

I Hoover and wash the dishes.

Lewis, age 10, Glasgow

Children also share that it is important to be able to stay connected with friends whilst at home:

 *Feel the need to see friends every day and feel connected.*

anonymous, supported by Circle

Being able to access friends and support throughout the day, having my phone to connect with friends if not allowed out would help.

anonymous, supported by Circle

Stories from children and young people with additional support needs highlight their routines and preferences:



My mum and dad look after me. I can find lots of things hard. I like my routine and don't like anyone touching any of my stuff. I need help to organise myself and to know what I am doing. I sometimes won't go out as it's not always safe to walk about. I normally arrange to go to my friends or they come to me. I take my dogs a walk but with mum or dad. I like where we stay there are nice spaces to walk my dogs.

Bb16, age 16, Falkirk

In the following story, mum and dad help narrate how Jacob, who is autistic, navigates life at home:



Jacob's story, age 2, Tayside

In the morning I usually wake up in Mama and Dada's bed. Sometimes I get up right away and go downstairs, and sometimes I snuggle and play a bit with Mama before getting out of bed. Dada is usually getting ready to go to school and Mama and I eat food and watch TV. Some mornings I get to rough and tumble with Dada before he goes, and he has kisses and snuggles for me too. I don't like when Dada leaves for school, but I'm getting used to it. On other days, Dada stays at home and so we play together in the morning.

I like to play with my trains and with my play food and dolls. I feed the dolls each day. I like to test what my toys can do. I am testing what happens if they fall down the stairs and slide down the banister. I am learning how the world works. I like having programmes on the TV in the background, it can help me to feel more comfortable and means I can have a snuggle and eat or drink. I like to watch singing and dancing on the TV. I sing the songs in my head. I find it hard if there are big feelings in the song and so I might find somewhere to hide.

I have a pile of my books in my house and I can go and get them myself. If Dada is at home then I'll pick one and take it over to read it to him. If it's a book I know really well then I know what is on the pages. I turn the pages to show him and make the noises. I like to point to letters that I know, and I like when my Mama or Dada notice too.

On other days I fall asleep in the living room for my nap and when I wake up I go upstairs to find Mama. Sometimes she is also taking a nap, so I snuggle up with her and we nap together or we play until we choose to get out of bed. And sometimes she is sewing pretty designs with thread. I like to sit on her lap and watch what she is doing, and I like to play with the little containers she has when sewing. Sometimes I get to play fun learning games on a phone in the afternoon. I like the numbers and letters best. I like that I know how to do these myself. I can't always do what I want, like jump off the sofa, and I don't always understand why what I want to do isn't allowed.

If Dada has been away at work then I always get very excited hearing his keys in the door! I run up and tell him all about my day and what I am thinking about. I show him my baby dino and we roll puff balls down the stairs handrail! Sometimes I also help if my Mama or Dada are doing jobs in the house. I like to join in.

At the end of the day, Mama and Dada have dinner. I find it interesting what they eat, but I am not sure I want to try it. I only like the food that I like. I like peanut butter, cereal, rice, milk, bananas and grapes. When they're eating they usually watch boring shows with lots of talking, but I like the songs that come on at the start of them.

After a while Dada and I snuggle and watch stories. I like the one about a blue train racing a red car! I like to watch that one over and over. But we also watch pretty stories about gardens and zoos and they make me sleepy. When I fall asleep, Dada hugs me and brings me upstairs. Sometimes I pretend I'm still asleep because I like this part. He lays me down in my bed, but we all know I will join Mama and Dada in their bed soon, so I drift off for now...

Baby Annie's story, age 1, Edinburgh

Today when I woke up it was too early for me, so I was still very sleepy. I was rubbing my eyes and trying to burrow my head into mummy's chest. I didn't want to do anything but have cuddles so would cry and stretch my arms up if mummy put me down because that made me upset. After a lot of cuddles and breast milk I was calm enough to go back to sleep. I always sleep better in someone's arms because I don't move around as much and like to burrow into their chest.

I woke up in a much better mood so didn't mind everyone doing their own things while I played. I really enjoy climbing things that get whoever's looking after me to react because it's funny to see people rush over to pull me down. I always laugh at their faces. I also put some music on my special music player because I can do that myself rather than asking for help. Today I chose Encanto and bopped along to the songs. When I climbed onto the sofa, I could see the garden and so started pointing and making noises because I wanted to go outside.

As it was sunny I had to wear a hat outside. I don't like hats but if I take it off then mummy takes me straight inside and she's done it enough times that I know I need to keep it on. We all had lunch outside. I had a croissant, cheese and tomatoes. I then wanted some of mummy's yoghurt (only hers because it looked interesting) so I let her know by pointing and waving. When she fed me some, I was really happy so I clapped and smiled. I don't understand why you would sit at the table once you've finished eating so once I've had enough, I always stand up in my highchair. Someone always helps me down so I can go play. I wasn't that distracted that I didn't see them trying to have chocolate biscuits without me though, so I came back over to get mine before going to eat it sitting at the top of the slide.

I did a poo in my nappy which was great because it means that I can play in the garden without a nappy. I love wiggling my bare bottom and toes in the grass. I've recently worked out how to climb onto the trampoline by myself, so I now love doing that but only when someone is watching because it's still a bit scary and high right now.

2.4 What the adults have been saying..

The stories from babies, children and young people reflect many of the themes that are highlighted in the 2023 concluding observations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UN Committee).¹¹ This section highlights some of those recommendations – drawing from Together’s child friendly version¹² – as well as the child-friendly response from Scottish Government.¹³

What does the UN Committee say?



The UN Committee says that Scottish Government should make sure that all children have a safe, warm place to live. It says children and families should be able to live in their home for as long as they need without being forced to move.¹⁴

The UN Committee is worried that so many children in the UK are living in poverty. It says the UK and Scottish Government need to do more about ending child poverty. They should make sure that children have enough good, healthy food and make sure families have enough money to handle rising prices for the things that they need. The UN Committee says UK Government should get rid of rules that mean some families can’t get the benefits that they need.¹⁵

The UN Committee says governments should pay special attention to children whose rights might be at risk. This includes disabled children, young carers, children who can’t live with their families, and children who have a parent in prison.¹⁶

The UN Committee says governments should give help to parents and carers who need it. They should make sure that children are safe in their homes.¹⁷

For babies, the UN Committee says that governments should do more to promote breastfeeding, including supporting mothers and making sure people understand the importance of breastfeeding.¹⁸ The UN Committee also says that families should get help with childcare. This shouldn’t cost too much and should be free for families who can’t afford it.¹⁹

What has the Scottish Government said?



In its response to the UN Committee’s recommendations, Scottish Government said it knows that some families need extra help. It wants to focus on them to make sure they get what they need. Scottish Government said it was learning more about what makes it hard for these families so that it can support them. One of the things it said it was doing was giving extra money to some families through the Scottish Child Payment. Another thing it had done was a new rule to stop rents going up too much.^{20 21}

Scottish Government said it had made a plan – the National Carers Strategy – that explains what it is doing to make support better for young carers.^{22 23}

2.5 Ideas to help



Babies, children and young people across Scotland share powerful insights about their experiences of home life. Their stories highlight both positive aspects and areas where more work is needed to fully embed a children's human rights approach in their home environment. Based on what they tell us, here are key recommendations for furthering a children's human rights approach in the home:

Embedding children's rights:

- Ensure all children have access to safe, stable and adequate housing. As Dave, age 13, from Edinburgh said: "I like my home but my mum and dad can't afford to make it fully accessible".
- Prioritise children's right to family life by supporting parents and carers. Gerald, age 10, from North Lanarkshire shared: "My home life is great...If I am having a hard time my mum and dad always help me".
- Recognise and support different family structures, including foster families, kinship care, and families separated by military service or imprisonment. Lightning, age 7, from East Ayrshire said: "I love my foster carer. She does lots of fun stuff with us and takes us to lots of different places like the park and bowling".

Equality and non-discrimination:

- Address the disproportionate impact of poverty on children's home lives. One young person supported by the Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland called to "lower the prices of children items e.g. baby formula, clothes, toys".
- Ensure equal access to quality housing for all children, including disabled children, those in armed forces families, or seeking asylum. Sophia highlighted problems with Service Family Accommodation: "Our last house had black mould and a crack down it. It was only fixed after we moved out and it made the next people sick".
- Provide targeted support for young carers to ensure they can enjoy their rights at home. As one young person supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland said: "Home life growing up was different as I have always take on a carer role for my ill parent".

Empowering children:

- Give children more say in decisions affecting their home lives, particularly around housing moves or family separations. Rowpow, age 8, from Midlothian shared: "I get a lot of say in what happens at home, I like that".
- Provide accessible information to children about their rights related to home and family life, especially during times of change or difficulty.
- Support children to maintain connections with family members when separated, including those in prison or deployed with armed forces. Footyboi, age 8, from the Highlands said: "I feel different to other kids as my dad is in prison. It makes me sad and sometimes angry as I can't do stuff with him".

Participation:

- *Involve children in designing and improving housing and residential care settings. Many children share detailed visions of their “dream homes”, highlighting the importance of space for play and family time.*
- *Support parents and caregivers to meaningfully involve babies, children and young people in family decision-making.*
- *Ensure children’s views are heard and respected in decisions about contact arrangements or placements outside the family home. Chaz, age 15, from Edinburgh said: “The courts saw my dad’s rights as more important than mine. The individual adults in my life are great, the systems are rubbish”.*

Accountability:

- *Establish clear, child-friendly complaints procedures for children, including those children in foster care and residential care. One anonymous participant supported by Circle said: “Stories that go around about social work makes my family scared and worried to speak up”.*
- *Ensure transparency in decision-making processes affecting children’s home lives, particularly in social work interventions or armed forces deployments. Ash said: “I was left in the dark when my dad was under deployment. I was never told where he went, I was also left in the dark when he was medivaced back to the UK”.*
- *Regularly monitor and report on how children’s rights are being upheld in different home environments, including collecting disaggregated data on housing conditions.*

Overall, children and young people are calling for home environments that truly listen to them, respect their rights, and support them to reach their full potential. As Boss Batman, age 7, from North Lanarkshire simply put it: “I love my PS5 and helping daddy in the garden. I like my life at home”. Ensuring all children can feel this way about their home life should be the goal of a children’s human rights approach.





Chapter 3: Life at nursery, school and college

3.1 Nursery

Young children tell us that nursery is an exciting place. It is somewhere to explore, play, make new friends and express themselves:

 *I like nursery – I get to play with the dolls.*

Sophie, Age 3, Perth & Kinross


Caring relationships between children and nursery staff are crucial. The built environment is also important in how children feel. Some caregivers share that while environments for their babies are often very colourful and inviting, they feel that nursery settings for their older children are becoming bland, as if there is a policy of not having them too colourful. They feel this might reduce the stimulating atmosphere that their children enjoy.

Access to early learning and childcare settings is an issue for some families, particularly those in more rural areas, highlighting the importance of choice:

 *I wish there were different types to choose from.*

Ion, Age 4, Scottish Borders

At some nurseries, special “Stay and Play” days allow parents and carers to join the session. However, some caregivers say these can be difficult to attend if they also have a baby. The sessions are not suitable for babies, meaning they need to find additional childcare if they are to attend:

 *Because he’s a riot, he distracts from [sister] so they say [sister] doesn’t get a Stay and Play if he comes...so I didn’t get to go.*

parent, Tayside




Mimi’s story, 21 months old, Edinburgh

Once we are done in bathroom, mummy says it’s time to go and put my socks and nursery shoes on. I thought we will go by car but she puts me in the pram. It is fine, I can watch some cars on the way to the nursery.

On the way to the nursery, I saw a playground so I wanted to go there but mummy said no. I was a bit disappointed but she always takes me in the afternoon so it’s fine. I asked for some snacks and she gave me corn sticks which I loooove.

Once we arrived at the nursery I wanted to use a card to open the doors so I showed mummy to give me one and she did. But then when I saw the doors to my room and all the kids and aunties I didn’t want to go. I started crying because I prefer to be with mummy all day. She hugged me and explained she will be back in the afternoon and that she needs to work. I still want her to hold me but I know she has to go. She let me go to the room by myself which I prefer, rather than one of the carers coming to take me from her hands. Once I came to the room everybody was saying “hi Mimi!” I was very happy! My friends were already there and I turned to say bye to mummy and waved to her. She will be back soon and I will have fun today!

3.2 Getting to school

 *I really hate the weather in Scotland, it is always wet wet wet. I always get wet walking to school.*

Kitty-Bella, Age 7, comparing getting to school in Glasgow versus Ukraine

School buses

Catching the school bus is a positive experience for many children. It allows them to connect with their friends and establishes a routine that helps them feel ready for the day:

 *The bus is good because you meet your friends. It would be better if we could have a teacher onboard and tables and chairs ... I like drawing and I want to draw.*


Lola, Age 9, Glasgow

For some, particularly neurodivergent children, getting the bus can sometimes feel overwhelming:

 *I hate the school bus – it's too noisy and there is no adult.*

Tiglo, Age 11, Perth & Kinross

In North Lanarkshire, changes to school transport policies are causing anxiety and uncertainty for many pupils. The changes, which include the cancellation of some school buses, raise issues over personal safety, disruption to daily routines, and frustration that children's views are not being heard:

 *I am worried about going to school, they have cancelled my bus and I have to walk 2.99 miles each way along a dual carriage way. We do not have a car.*

Steps Girl, Age 12, North Lanarkshire


I am a 13-year-old girl and North Lanarkshire Council are cancelling my school bus which means I will have to walk for six miles every day along a dangerous busy road or a canal path.

Lulu, Age 13, North Lanarkshire

I worry not all kids will get to school safely.

Boss Batman, Age 7, North Lanarkshire

For children and young people who benefit from consistency, the cancellations feel particularly distressing:


 *School can be a struggle sometimes as I have autism so it's easier if I have a set routine in the mornings. I'm really worried about getting to and from school. I don't like to be out walking around by myself anywhere.*

Bud, Age 12, North Lanarkshire



Artwork by Member of Children's Parliament


They are also impacting children's ability to access after-school clubs and activities:

 *I would miss out on my football at night because I would be tired and have homework to complete and I do not want to be using public transport myself yet.*

Alfie, Age 14, North Lanarkshire



Some children raise concerns about the environmental impact:

 *My mum says I'm not old enough to get on public transport on my own so will likely drive me to school. There's 3000 kids impacted so that's lots of traffic that can't be good for the environment. I will also need to leave the house earlier so my mum can get to work on time.*

Boss Batman, Age 7, North Lanarkshire

A common theme throughout the stories is a sense of frustration and powerlessness that children's voices are being ignored by decision-makers:



Gerald's story, age 10, North Lanarkshire

I don't think adults listen to me enough. Where I live the people who make the decisions that affect my life don't try to speak to me. Where I live the council have removed the school bus. I don't understand why they think that's a good idea.

Now, lots of us have to walk or take public buses, which are so busy and not very safe. Someone even got hit by a car today, and everyone's really worried about it. The police and teachers are worried too, but the council doesn't seem to care.

They did this without speaking to me or my friends. I now need to walk for two hours each day to get to school along a busy main road. There are no traffic lights to cross the road. I am scared to do this walk. I don't think I can walk two hours a day every day either. I will be so tired and fed up. The council says my parents need to walk me to school and back now. I know they can't do this because they work and I am worried about it.

No one asked us what we thought. They don't care. They don't care because it doesn't affect them.

I tried to do something about it. I complained to the council myself, but the whole process was really hard. It didn't feel like it was made for us – it was complicated and unfriendly. Without my mum's help, I wouldn't have even known how to do it. The council didn't take me seriously, and nothing has changed.

I learned that children's rights are now part of the law in Scotland – so it's wrong that no one is listening to us. I think some adults think that they can tell children what to do because they are older. This isn't fair. My mum and dad always fight for my rights and what is best for me but a lot of the time adults don't listen to them either.



Note: in November 2024, North Lanarkshire Council announced it would reverse the proposed cuts in relation to primary school transport. The reversal does not apply to secondary school pupils, who will still see their eligibility for school transport restricted.²⁴

3.3 Classes


Learning about our rights

Children and young people report mixed experiences of learning about their rights. Some say their schools have active programmes, while others say there is little or no focus on children's rights:



I have learnt a little bit about my rights in school, but I don't know much about them.

Ben, age 12, Aberdeenshire

 We all agreed that we learned [about rights] at school, although wondered how children that didn't or couldn't go to school learned about their rights.

children supported by Aberlour, Hearts & Minds


My teachers didn't provide an education around rights.

Member of Scottish Youth Parliament (MSYP)

Rights Respecting Schools is a cool programme – educates and helps people learn about their rights.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project

Children are quick to point out that learning about their rights does not always mean they will be respected in practice or built into the culture of their school. Some point to issues at local authority level:

 People talk about children's rights, but it just feels like talking. I am in a Rights Respecting School and we learn a lot about our rights. I love learning about my rights but it's really hard when the adults in charge don't take us seriously. The council don't reply to letters and emails we send. They don't get involved in the things we ask them to. So it doesn't feel that children's rights are as important as adult rights because adults always do what they want to do and there is nothing children can do about it.

Gerald, age 10, North Lanarkshire




Artwork by Member of Children's Parliament

Some children feel that schools do uphold their rights:

 Rights: yes, my rights are heard.

Bartholemew, age 11, Dumfries and Galloway

However, others do not feel adequately supported in understanding or asserting their rights. They say that activities such as creating a Rights Charter can help but it is important that everyone follows this, including teachers.


 *It can be difficult to know how to voice any concerns as teachers weren't good at making positive change.*

MSYP

Teachers and school staff

Most children who shared stories about school life wanted to tell us about their teachers. This highlights just how important the pupil-teacher relationship is for ensuring children's rights are upheld and that they have a positive school experience. As the following stories show, the role of a teacher goes far beyond just 'delivering lessons' – it requires building meaningful connections and creating a positive classroom culture where every child feels understood, valued and their rights respected.

Teachers who are kind, supportive, who listen, and who take the time to get to know pupils play a key role in ensuring children feel happy, safe and included:

 *I really love my school and my teacher. I am sad that I won't have the same teacher for my next year at school. Why do you have to get a new teacher?*

Anna, age 8, Renfrewshire

My favourite teachers are so nice. They explain things.

anonymous, age 12, East Lothian

My teachers are really cool. They help me a lot and listen to me.

Dave, age 13, Edinburgh


My teacher isn't strict, and I like that. At the weekend, I go to Arab school. It's very strict and we don't have fun there, not like at normal school.

anonymous, age 10, supported by Play Scotland

[What does a Rights Champion look like?] All three of my drama teachers.


anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland

Teachers can be crucial allies and sources of comfort, particularly for children and young people who find school a complex or isolating experience:

 *I have just left school but when I was there it was difficult. I didn't have many friends and focused on my studies. My teachers were my friends sometimes. I would go to class and go home for lunch. I sometimes didn't come back because it was so isolating. I love most of my teachers, I have others who don't believe in me – but I have a few who have, and they made it worthwhile coming to school.*

Alice, age 17, South Lanarkshire

By contrast, children say that they do not like it when their teachers shout. It makes them feel scared, anxious and loses their trust:

 *I enjoy school it's fun. If I could change one thing it would be teachers not being able to shout.*

Boss Batman, age 7, North Lanarkshire

[What makes a good teacher?] Not shouty. My teacher at school is shouty but he/she is ok. They should be funny.

anonymous, age 11, East Lothian

Teachers have different approaches and personalities – some don't work for me, they're all different. Some teachers take the fun away from us.

anonymous, supported by Circle

Others say that while their teacher is strict, they don't always feel this is a bad thing:


 *My teacher is strict, and I don't like that...but sometimes I like that because the room is quieter.*

Olivia, age 9, Glasgow

My teacher is strict. If I ask her to do something, she'll do it. If you don't know how to do something, she'll tell you how to do it.

Ilham, age 8, Glasgow

Children and young people tell us that there are systemic issues in how teachers respond to challenging behaviour. Many are frustrated at teachers who punish the whole class for the actions of a single pupil, or who make exceptions for certain children. Such injustices often lead to resentment and disengagement, highlighting the need for more individualised approaches that seek to understand *why* a child has acted a particular way:

 *One thing I don't like is that when one child or a couple of children misbehave and the whole class is threatened with punishment. I don't think this is fair. It always makes me nervous that I will lose something fun like PE or play time.*

Gerald, age 10, North Lanarkshire

Teachers can be unfair. One person does something wrong and it changes it for everyone especially in high school.

anonymous, supported by Circle

I don't like teacher favouritism.

MSYP

Punishments are too severe sometimes by some teachers, leave us outside class for too long (20 minutes, get left behind), some kids sit on the floor as legs get sore.

anonymous, supported by Circle

Classroom rules also play a significant role in children’s experiences. Some children feel certain rules are unfair and detract from their dignity and comfort:

Only one person being allowed to visit the toilet at a time or not being allowed to go at all.

anonymous, supported by Aberlour

Toilets being locked and having to ask in front of everyone to go.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Not letting you wear leggings.

Brooke, age 12, Glasgow

Not being allowed to eat in class.

anonymous, supported by Aberlour



For a positive classroom culture, it is essential that teachers take time to engage with children and young people, valuing their input and creating an environment where everyone’s rights are respected. Again, children speak about the importance of teachers who truly care about their lives and who take the time to find out why something has happened before responding:

Being in trouble for being late without teachers trying to understand or care about why this might be.

Amy, age 17, Glasgow

I find school quite overwhelming. It takes me a long time to travel around the school and from class to class – I often get into trouble for being late.

Princess P, age 12, Edinburgh

I didn’t do something bad and then the teacher told me to go outside. I was in the calm corner, and I asked for help, and she told me to go away.

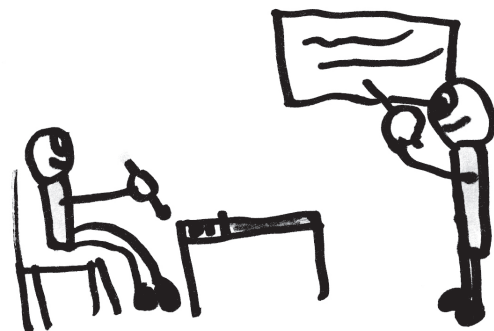
Lewis, age 10, Glasgow

[When asked what’s important] Teachers who genuinely try to make a bond with pupils.

anonymous, supported by Circle


Good teacher

helpful
good listener
good explaining
caring




Artwork by Member of Children’s Parliament

Teachers who listen are more likely to help children access and defend their rights. One girl talked of working through arguments with her guidance teacher who helped her to speak up to both her teachers and her classmates:

 *The guidance teacher is nice at school. He shows that he understands. He listens. We used to argue a lot and he just listened to me. He helped by speaking to others and helped me to speak to others.*

anonymous, age 14, East Lothian

In addition to becoming better listeners, other suggestions for improving teacher-child relationships include kindness training and teachers valuing effort rather than focusing on shortcomings:

 *[What could help?] a 'kindness course' as part of teacher qualification to understand how to make young people happy and things they can do to show kindness, rather than focus on just educating.*

anonymous, supported by Circle

Teachers [should] make a bigger effort to be constructive with feedback; one time I tried really hard with maths homework and thought I'd aced it, but she wrote 'must try harder' on it. I was really annoyed.

anonymous, supported by Circle


Don't be so harsh with us when struggling. Change how we are spoken to.

anonymous, supported by Circle

Find positives to motivate, rather than negatives as they can cause me to feel scared or uncomfortable.

anonymous, supported by Circle

Ultimately, pupils long for teachers who make learning enjoyable, fun and build a supportive classroom culture. The qualities they value in teachers often centre on kindness, consistency, understanding, and humour:

 *What makes a good teacher? Someone who helps you through hard times in your life.*

anonymous, supported by Circle


Supporting everyone to reach their full potential

Action on bullying and isolation

One of the primary concerns children raise is the prevalence of bullying and discrimination. They say more needs to be done to prevent bullying from happening in the first place, as well as more effective responses to incidents when these do happen.

 *School doesn't do anything to help with bullying. They hear us and see us but do nothing.*


anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

 *Due to my disabilities, other children choose not to play with me and it makes me sad.*
Me, age 11

I would change bullying in schools! I feel sad because I get left out....I feel lonely when my friends pick and choose me.


Ayla, age 13, Grampian

A related issue is loneliness and isolation.

 *School is torture. I have barely any friends. I spend break time alone, usually walking around the playground talking to my imaginary friend. I hate school.*


LMHM, age 10, Glasgow

This highlights the importance of teachers modelling rights-respecting behaviour, setting a tone of dignity in the classroom and playground. Children call for better training for teachers to recognise and handle bullying and discrimination effectively, emphasising the need for a classroom culture where children's rights are lived and breathed – not just words on a poster. Some highlighted that teachers sometimes contribute to discriminatory attitudes through their actions:

 *My headteacher made different rules for different religions about afterschool clubs and lunchtime clubs, I was discriminated against because she was prejudiced.*

MSYP


Children want more action to ensure schools are nurturing spaces that are safe for everyone. Members of Children's Parliament (MCPs) raised this as a priority issue at the 2024 Executive Takeover. They highlighted that bullying is a big reason for mental health issues and that Scottish Government needs to do more to prevent it from happening:²⁵

 *If you're being bullied, you might feel anxious and worried that people see you getting help.*

MCP

Their ideas included children's human rights approach training courses for adults, removing stigma around mental health, nurture spaces available in every school, and more play equipment inside and outside to support mental health and prevent bullying by keeping children busy and engaged.

Some children also speak about wanting help to build their confidence, as they feel this will help them to build friendships:

 *[what could help?] Learning how to stick up for myself and having confidence to make friends.*

anonymous, supported by Circle



Artwork by Ayla, age 13, Grampian



William's story, age 10, Edinburgh

I'm 10 and I am autistic. I don't feel safe at school and it's had a big impact on my attendance.

I've had experiences with bullying, and I feel like the adults didn't do enough to stop it. There have been times when I've felt really targeted – like when other kids would throw balls at me during PE or out in the playground. I always wished I could stay in the classroom during break and lunch, but the teachers would make me go out into the playground anyway.

I feel like I don't have real choices at school. Even if [teachers] give me two options, I feel pressured to pick a certain one. It makes me feel like the adults aren't really listening to me.

Inclusive education

One of the most common themes across children's stories is how schools have responded (or not) to their additional support needs. At the heart of these stories is the importance of embedding dignity in schools. This requires a steadfast commitment to children's rights, creating a culture of respect, inclusion and empowerment.

Some children report positive or mixed experiences:



I like school. I learn with my communication support worker who signs. I wish everyone knew BSL. I wish all my friends could learn BSL so we can chat more easily. I work hard [to communicate] but it makes me tired.

Charlie, age 5, Midlothian



I have one teacher who is very kind. He listens to me, but the other teachers don't hear what I need or care how they make me feel.

Cerys, age 15, Greater Glasgow and Clyde

Many children feel the traditional school environment is not designed with their needs in mind. Some feel misunderstood by their teachers, leading to feelings of guilt, shame and embarrassment when they struggle to conform to expectations. They say that teachers who take the time to understand their needs make a big difference:



Teachers make me feel bad for being naughty, but it's just my autism. I try hard but can't do the same as other boys and girls.

Me, age 11

I go to a mainstream school. I feel mostly supported by my class teacher. They've taken their time to get to know me and understand my needs. They notice when I'm starting to feel agitated and partner me up with my friends when I need it.

Robin, age 12, Edinburgh

I want to learn in a place that meets my needs, a space that is suitable that makes me feel safe so I can learn. I want to be taught by people who understand how autism and my other disability impacts me. I want to be included in school and society and not feel like I'm asking too much.

Cerys, age 15, Greater Glasgow and Clyde

Others highlight a postcode lottery in support, and the disparity between their learning needs and the rigid structure of the school day:



Different schools/universities have different support depending on what postcode, and I feel no support for dyslexia.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

I do get bored at school and about 30 minutes into a class, find I am not as focused. Each class is 55 minutes long and I think maybe shorter times would help. Also, I find that teachers talk lots instead of getting us to do things for our learning. I think interactive and engaging ways to learn would help.

Ben, age 12, Aberdeenshire

I think the school day is too long – it should be shorter. Maybe it could start later in the mornings. I think there's lots of repetition in certain subjects – and that we're not being taught new things.

Princess P, age 12, Edinburgh

I don't like school. It's really not made for people like me. I love learning but school just doesn't suit me. I think it should be much more flexible and they should be much more understanding of different additional needs.


Anna, age 15, Edinburgh

For some, it is the unstructured elements of the day that cause them anxiety:

 *I find break and lunch very hard as it is unstructured time with other young people.*

Anna, age 15, Edinburgh

Children and young people with sensory issues tell us that the classroom environment has a big impact on their learning experience. They report cramped spaces, uncomfortable uniforms and excessive noise. They want to be more involved in decisions about the school environment, as well as able to access adjustments to help them regulate and reach their full potential:

 *School is noisy and busy from 08:40 to 15:40. I have to fight my way around overcrowded corridors. I try to find quiet places to sit during breaks, but sometimes I get moved on by teachers. I love learning and have good relationships with my teachers. I love performing arts and take part in all the concerts and shows. I loved doing my Duke of Edinburgh this year. I struggle with the noise and other young people's loud and rule breaking behaviour. I would make the numbers of pupils at each school much smaller where teachers know you.*

Chaz, age 15, Edinburgh

I am autistic and I'm sensitive to noise. When the fire alarms go off at school it makes me feel angry. People in my class have sensory issues too – one of them listens to the same song every day on repeat. It really bothers me. The teachers said I should just use noise-cancelling headphones but I don't want to. I feel like they're trying to force me to wear them when that's not what I want.

William, age 10, Edinburgh

Students speak positively of teachers who allow adjustments to help them regulate. Small gestures like allowing students to have fidget toys or use noise-cancelling headphones make a big impact, enhancing children's feelings of comfort, security and fostering a culture of respect for their individual needs:

 *I had a good teacher who allowed me to 'fidget' and be free in the classroom.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and YMCA Paisley



Artwork by Zola, age 13, Highlands

By actively listening to children and addressing their concerns, teachers can start to build a classroom environment where every child and young person feels valued and heard. Embedding children's rights into classroom culture leads to a more positive and effective learning experience for children and young people, ultimately supporting everyone to reach their full potential.



Robin's story, age 12, Edinburgh

I feel mostly supported by my class teacher. They've taken their time to get to know me and understand my needs. They notice when I'm starting to feel agitated and partner me up with my friends when I need it.

Some of the support staff can be rude though. I know that if I ask some of them for a movement break they'll say 'no' even though it helps me learn. I know that if I ask some of them if I can go to the bathroom, they'll also say 'no'.

I know what I need to stay calm and help me learn. I wish all of the staff would understand that and listen to me. Some of them just make decisions for me – and that means I don't get what I need.

Robin chose to share more about his experiences through a two-part poem:

The dark side of ADHD (at school)

*School a place where all kids dread to go,
A place that makes you wear ties and bows, and uncomfortable irritating clothes,
A place worse than prison that crushes your hope,
And sadly that's really no joke.*

There's rules they enforce that make you have to hold in your pee that you really need to relieve,

*They make you sit and stand straight in a line even though it hurts your spine,
A place where you have to wait in pain in a room that feels as hot as Spain,
They squeeze your fun and silly imagination that they should embrace,
Until school feels the never-ending race.*

*They shout and bark until you feel like crying in the dark,
With little hope – they're like warlords of boring work,
Oh, they stand so stupidly tall, intimidating and embarrassing you (they all look like trolls)*

*Until it's the end of the pain, sadness and boredom,
And you're left with no experience/skills and you think to yourself of how it really kills that...*

*After all of that,
You're left in the world,
As blind as a bat.*

The bright side of ADHD (at school)

*On a bright sunny day where the sunshine is a glorious ray of happiness
And you don't feel annoyed about trotting to school on a still and restful morning
When the door opens up to a welcoming face,
And the morning's gone at such a fast pace.*

*I fortunately get to see [my sibling] and work with her,
And the proud sensation of finishing my maths and hearing I'm on the right path,
Because I just got chosen to race with a fast tracking pace for my school.
The teacher who saw my strengths and encouraged me to pursue athletics and sports.*

*Then finally to top my school day, a calming evening and a touch of little breeze,
A smell so good that's as sweet as ripe fruits and as fresh as the cold sea air.*

*Today I could bear.
Afternoon comes around along with the bell that tells me:
I can leave and enjoy this blissful day.*

Princess P's story, age 12, Edinburgh

I'm about to go into S2. I don't really enjoy school – the work, the classrooms and just the overall environment.

I find school quite overwhelming. It takes me a long time to travel around the school and from class to class. Sometimes I get into trouble for being late. Some of our classrooms are too small – they're overcrowded and too warm. The windows don't open in some of the rooms. In others, they do – but we're told we're not allowed to open them to get a bit of fresh air. We're also not allowed to drink during class even though it's really hot. It makes it harder for me to learn.

I struggle to sit still in class and think that we should be allowed to get up and move around more. Only pupils who have a diagnosed condition are allowed to get movement breaks – and only if it's in their learning plan.

I don't understand why my school insists that we have to wear formal uniforms. I think we should be allowed to wear whatever's comfortable – like shorts and t-shirt in the summer. I think my school is stricter with girls than boys when it comes to uniform. The boys are allowed to wear shorts, but we're not. I don't think that's fair.

Children and young people say that staff shortages have created barriers to their right to education. They emphasise the important role of classroom assistants and support workers:



My teachers say they listen but nothing changes because the school has no money for more helping grown-ups.

Tiglo, age 11, Perth & Kinross

 *Lack of support workers in school.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland



Dave's story, age 13, Edinburgh

I really like school. My teachers are awesome and I like my friends. I am just starting S2 but it took me nine months to be in school full time in S1 because the council wouldn't let me be safe because they wouldn't pay for a 1:1 for me to be in school full time. It made me really mad because it's not fair.

When I was at primary school I fell and broke my leg because there wasn't enough staff to help me and I was so scared but this wasn't enough to stop the council being mean to me. I feel like they don't like disabled children. We don't get to do the things that kids in special schools do because we are in an [Enhanced Support Base] but the school doesn't have enough money to support what we need in school and my teachers get really upset about that. I am used to it though and just happy I am allowed to be there now. I am worried because the council said they will stop [Enhanced Support Bases] and that makes me anxious.


I think I am a problem for the council, and education authority think I'm a problem though and don't like disabled children very much. They said that they would get it right for every child but that must only be for kids that weren't born with disabilities and that makes me sad.

I didn't like the special school I went to, I can't be in the mainstream part of the school but I still want to be part of my community and see people I know... Make more schools for children like me that are in between. Disabled kids aren't all the same, you can't just throw us in one kind of school and forget about us. This isn't the old times.



Diagnostic delays

Some pupils have support plans in place but say that not all teachers are aware of these. In such cases, their dignity is negatively impacted – but they often feel too afraid to speak up:


 *I cannot use the toilets at school. This causes me stomach issues but I'd rather be ill than use them. I have a care plan which means I have a pass to get out to use the toilet but not all teachers know me and I am afraid of being challenged. I would make more toilets which are lockable single units where I have privacy.*

Chaz, age 15, Edinburgh

Some teachers do not understand dyslexia or believe that I have it.

Princess P, age 12, Edinburgh

Others are unable to access such plans because they do not have a formal diagnosis. Many cite long delays and barriers in obtaining these – and frustration that schools do not just put support in place in the interim:

 *My brother has dyslexia and ADHD, and it took the school a while to notice and then meet with them.*

Lucas

Why not just put the support in that I needed at the time whilst waiting to diagnose me? Why did I have to wait all that time when they could have been helping me to learn?

Amy, age 17, Glasgow


I think teachers should be supported to help pupils with dyslexia as I didn't get diagnosed until end of 3rd year even although my mum and I said I had issues with learning.

Bb16, age 16, Falkirk

Pupils not officially diagnosed don't have access to resources.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and YMCA Paisley


Some children share that while formal plans are important, it is possible for teachers to put support in place without waiting for these – showing the importance of teachers who are tuned in to children's individual needs:

 *Some kids are allowed movement breaks if they have a diagnosed condition that the teacher knows about. But I do think that most of us have support in place to learn.*


Robin, age 12, Edinburgh

Mainstream and specialist provision

Several children and young people shared their experiences of mainstream and specialist provision. Some have experienced both, while others are hopeful of getting a place in their setting of choice. The stories show the importance of extra support for children and young people whatever the setting and at times of transition:


 *I started at a mainstream primary school but because of my early years neglect I could not manage it. I went into special school for the last four years and made good improvements. I felt safe. They thought I could maybe manage mainstream high school but I quickly found it to be too overwhelming and after two years finally got accepted into a special high school. I am still adjusting to it but find it very difficult because of my fight or flight and autism. I worry about leaving school with no qualifications and would like to have more opportunities in education to get into work experience or apprenticeships.*

Harry, age 14, Midlothian

 *I wish there were more special schools for children like me. I want to go to an Autism Unit when I go to secondary school but there aren't enough places. My parents will have to fight for a place for me and I'm worried I don't get one. I wouldn't cope in mainstream secondary. I take medicine because I am so anxious all the time.*


LMHM, age 10, Glasgow

One young person shared that she feels embarrassed getting extra support in front of her classmates and that this makes her want to be taught separately. Again, this highlights the importance of teachers building supportive classroom cultures where children feel comfortable getting the help they need:

 *I feel embarrassed when I have to ask the teachers for help in front of my classmates – and when the teacher then comes to help me. I think pupils who need extra support should be part of a different group or class – it would be less embarrassing.*

Princess P, age 12, Edinburgh

Another shares the importance of acknowledging each child as an individual, and making the right choice based on their specific needs:

 *Disabled kids aren't all the same, you can't just throw us in one kind of school and forget about us. This isn't the old times.*

Dave, age 13, Edinburgh



Artwork by Members of
Children's Parliament



Tiglo's story, age 11, Perth & Kinross

I do not like school. I don't like being indoors all day long. I don't like learning inside. I don't like how busy and noisy it is in the classroom and the corridor. I don't like games in PE. I don't like how they took our school dinner cook away. I don't like having lots of teachers. I don't like how they took all my stuff away because another boy needed it more than me. There's not enough adults to help children with autism like me. I hate the school bus – it's too noisy and there is no adult. I want to go to a school where everyone is autistic. I want to go to a school where learning is outside. I want to go to a school with individual PE like archery and horse riding.

I like writing but my teacher keeps saying I can't write about how I feel because it is upsetting for staff. It's not fair. I write about my feelings at home. If I do it at school, I get in trouble.

I don't feel like anyone listens to autistic kids like me. They keep trying to force us to go to school with normal kids. I don't want that.

Teachers pretend to listen to me, but nothing changes no matter what I say. My teachers say they listen, but nothing changes because the school has no money for more helping grown-ups...

Kids at school can be mean and I don't trust them.

I think there should be autistic schools in every part of the country. I think autistic kids should have a therapy dog to help them like my dog helps me. I think there should be no school uniform. I think school should be less days. I think children should learn outside every single afternoon they are at school.

Restraint and seclusion

Some participants told us about having been subject to restraint and seclusion at school. They say being restrained is a deeply traumatic experience. Here, one child, who did not want his location published shares his story:



Me's story, age 11

I am adopted and Care Experienced. I was abused as an infant. I have autism and learning disabilities. I also probably have FASD [fetal alcohol spectrum disorder] and loads of anxiety due to my past.

School is hard. I have been restrained and put in a cupboard, with soft play floors and padded walls and a few soft play bricks to calm down when I'm overwhelmed. I find it scary as I was abused as a child and also find it hard to communicate verbally due to my disabilities. I began being restrained and isolated when I was four years old.

I want to be home schooled, but my parents can't afford not to work. I feel happy and safe at home. I like my home and my family love me.

I don't have any say about school. My teachers don't always understand me... they make me feel bad for being naughty, but it's just my autism. I try hard but can't do the same as other boys and girls.

Restraint and isolation in safe rooms/padded cells in schools should be banned. It scares me so much.

These reflections emphasise that inclusive education requires schools and staff to be flexible, empathetic, and responsive to the diverse needs of pupils. Children and young people call for learning environments where they can feel safe, supported, and valued, with more personalised learning approaches and involvement in decision-making.

Children not at school

Several young people shared their experiences of missing extended periods of school due to health challenges. Their accounts highlight the complex difficulties faced by children and young people when the support they need is not readily available. Their stories illustrate the importance of ensuring that children who are unable to attend school are still supported to learn. This continuity helps to uphold their rights, ensure their wellbeing, sense of belonging and hopes for the future:



Toby's story, age 15

After covid, I started to have tics and personality change, and have a diagnosis of Long Covid (PANS).

I can't go to school because of my illness. It's been really difficult to get work from school that I can do, because my illness has changed the type of work I am able to cope with. Because I couldn't do the type of work school offered I have had no education for two and a half years. I've missed my Nat5s and worry about my future. My mum has been trying to get help from the school, but they wouldn't help until she kicked up a huge fuss – now I get one and a half hours a week in the local library, which is a start. I really want to get better, and go back to school because I am bored and lonely, but until then I would like more work to do, but its difficult to find the right thing – especially because I have been out of school for so long.

I don't trust the school because they refused to help me, even though I was ill.

Cerys's story, age 15, Greater Glasgow and Clyde

I am an autistic teenager, I have other health conditions that require more surgery. I have PTSD as a result of abuse when I was younger and I've been out of school for over a year. I have to pay for my own CBT therapy as not available via CAMHS and I've been refused a [Coordinated Support Plan] to access mainstream education, I have no friends and I'm desperate to learn.

I've not coped in school due to my disabilities and despite schools' efforts they made me ill, pressurising me to return to busy classes that I can't be in. It's too much to bear, so I've missed nearly two years of school and I'm desperate to learn. My request to repeat a year was declined and I don't have a guaranteed timetable in a place. I can learn with less noise and less unpredictable pupils. My peers have sat exams and I feel like my future is bleak. I'm trying to learn using apps at home. I want to be heard, school ignored my voice which is expressed with help from an advocate. I want to learn so I can get a

job, I'm disabled not stupid. I feel very lonely and sad most of the time and rejected by my school.

I don't feel safe in school either, I have some nice teachers, but I don't feel heard. What I asked for was refused and it's not fair, adults are supposed to do what's best for me. I don't misbehave, I don't shout or be rude yet I'm not to be taught. Adults pretend to be supportive but most often they don't understand my needs and don't really hear me.

I have one teacher who is very kind. My other teacher doesn't hear what I need or care how she makes me feel.

I want to learn in a place that meets my needs, a space that is suitable that makes me feel safe so I can learn, I want to be taught by people who understand how autism and my other disability impacts me. I want to be included in school and society and not feel like I'm asking too much to have a timetable that's not subject to change because people are ill or there's not enough trained staff. I want to be equally valued like my non-disabled peers, I want a future. I fear I won't achieve very much due to me not being regarded as important enough to teach.

Another young person told us that she had been excluded on a part-time timetable and that this later affected her subject choice. Her story highlights the importance of teachers valuing wider achievements – not just a narrow definition of academic success. It also shows the importance of teachers being trained to identify learning challenges early, and ensure support is put in place. Her story also calls for other changes to ensure each pupil has enough support – such as smaller class sizes, more classroom assistants, or both:



Bb16's story, age 16, Falkirk

I found school very hard. It was so busy and I struggled to manage every day. I had a few teachers who were nice to me and understood how hard it was but some didn't care and would pick on me. I had a few teachers who liked me and that showed and made it easier for me to learn.

School is so hard and if you're not clever or find it hard then you are limited in choices. I wasn't allowed to take subjects as I was told I was academically unachievable. I missed a lot of school as when I couldn't cope I was sent home or on a part day timetable.

There is no flexibility to be able to rests/downtime and sometimes noises/temperature in classrooms could be really difficult for me to manage. If I could change school I would make it that all students are treated as humans and not just about results. We were not even allowed to access school toilets because of vandals and this caused me a lot of stress.

At school we did not get a say in decisions. There was not many choices for me at school as I'm not clever...There's been a big focus on LGBTQ but not on making sure everyone at school is supported to do their best, not enough help or people who understand what I need to help me manage.


I think teachers should be supported to help pupils with dyslexia as I didn't get diagnosed until end of 3rd year, even although my mum and I said I had issues with learning. At high school I think we need more help (smaller classes) and teacher's assistants in each class to really help.

Having our school iPads was amazing I think these should be extended until you finish college or training as it's so good to have access. I think you should continue to be able to access these until we are working.

Young carers

Young carers shared their experiences of navigating the demands of school life while also managing significant roles at home. Their stories highlight the importance of schools identifying young carers and ensuring specific supports are in place so they can reach their full potential.

Young carers share experiences of isolation, bullying and what can happen if they don't get the support they need:


 *Due to not attending school as much you feel left out and do not have an understanding what is going on.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Bullied because you don't have the same life as others.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

They say that caring staff who take an interest in their wellbeing can make a huge difference:


 *My favourite teachers are so nice. They explain things, like the work. What helped in S1 is being helped to find my way around.*

anonymous, supported by Circle

Having nurturing staff has a positive effect on education.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland


Such teachers and staff can be a lifeline, providing understanding and guidance to help young carers thrive despite their challenges. But for many, there is still a significant gap in consistent support, leading to a strong need for more tailored resources, empathy, and recognition of the pressures they face. Sadly, when the support isn't there, the consequences can be severe. Young carers tell us about struggling with exams – and even being removed from college:

 *Missing a lot of school then expected to know it when coming to exams... Older you get, no support and have to leave the education system if not keeping up.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland


I got kicked out of college because my gran died. I told them, but they didn't listen.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

 *Not being able to select best subjects due to lower grades from missing school... No support in school for children who are not as bright as other kids; teachers have no time for kids.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Young carers told us about the particular challenges they faced during COVID-19 lockdowns. Many feel the impacts are still ongoing:

 *Didn't mind us missing school due to COVID but not understanding it due to the caring role... In COVID, the school just expected work done, no help or support. No help during COVID with access to work from teachers.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland


Development has been slowed due to COVID, and educational places are not recognising this.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

These young carers highlight how, as they grow older, they feel support often diminishes. They find themselves struggling to keep up with school and sometimes feel forced out of the education system as a result.


Schools and teachers should actively identify young carers and offer tailored support that acknowledges their unique responsibilities at home. This includes flexible deadlines, additional tutoring where needed, and emotional support from staff who understand their situation. Schools should also create an environment where young carers feel comfortable seeking help, providing them with practical resources and adjustments to ease their workload. By fostering a nurturing and empathetic culture, schools can ensure that young carers are not left behind but instead are given the opportunity to succeed alongside their peers.

Children in armed forces families


 *People easily make war jokes about when dad goes to deployment because they don't understand.*

Evelyn

Children and young people from armed forces families face unique challenges, often involving frequent relocations and long periods of parental absence. These young people are required to adapt quickly to new environments, new schools, and changing social circles. Children supported by Forces Children Scotland share some of their experiences:


 *My experience is that my dad was told what country he was going to and the city. You weren't exactly told the school you were going to, you just had to get on with it as a military child.*

Aaliyah

 *Only ever told where I'm moving, not anything else, so not knowing if the school is close or not without finding out myself, not knowing anything about the new area.*

Alicia

While these moves sometimes bring a sense of adventure, they also present difficulties, particularly in terms of educational continuity. Switching between school systems in different countries or regions can lead to gaps in learning. For some it means diagnostic delays that are a barrier to getting the support they need. These stories highlight the importance of teachers being able to identify children in forces families quickly and ensure the necessary support is put in place:

 *I missed two years of primary school due to moving back and forwards between the UK and Germany, also repeating topics between England and Scotland. I wasn't supported with hobbies and interests, so I was bored.*

Cadence

We move about a lot, we don't get the help we need. Sometimes you learn the same thing multiple times, and you miss other things. You are both smarter and dumber than your friends.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

I am really worried about starting high school because I have been waiting for an autism assessment for more than three years, but it never seems to get done because we keep moving. It feels like I go to the bottom of the waiting list each time we move... I really want to know which school I am going to, but I have not been able to enrol as we don't have an address yet.

Composite story, Forces Children Scotland



Extract from composite story from Forces Children Scotland

My dad is in the Army. I have moved nine times, mostly in the UK but once it was overseas. That was a great experience! There are times when I feel like all the moves have made me more confident and I could face anything but there are other times when it feels very stressful, and I wish we could just stop moving...

So far, I have been to six different schools in three different countries. Sometimes it has meant going up or down a school year. This seems to be based on my age rather than what I already do or do not know. I have done World War II three times but don't know anything about the Romans. I have a big hole in my maths knowledge, which has made it difficult to do the harder work now that I am older. No one sat with me at any of my new schools and took the time to find out where I needed help. I am now in my last few years of school, and it was important to me that I finished my schooling and sat my exams in one place. When my dad got posted to Cyprus last year we made the decision that I would stay here with my aunt while the rest of my family went away. Sometimes it is hard, but I am glad I got to stay here and finish my schooling.

Next year I am hoping to go to university up north. It's a good thing I am already used to being away from my family. I have been offered a place but I am still waiting to find out if I am eligible for funding because my dad signed up in Wales and I have moved around so much it is hard to show my connection to Scotland, despite living here for the last three years and finishing school here.

Children in forces families often experience difficulties that aren't just academic but also emotional and social. There is a strong call for more consistent support:

👤 *It would help if teachers understood more about someone in a forces family... Teachers don't understand what it is like when your parent is deployed or what moving between countries is like. They can't do what I need if they don't understand!*
anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

Supportive moments from schools make a significant difference:

👤 *Our teacher let the whole class go outside to watch my dad's boat leave. It helped a lot.*
Arnie

These voices highlight the importance of understanding the particular needs of children in military families – whether that's in the form of stable, individualised support in school, recognition of emotional needs, or simply creating spaces where children feel understood and heard.

What we learn about

Subjects and workload

Children and young people told us about their favourite subjects and the ones they don't enjoy as much. A common theme is that children enjoy lessons that are more creative, fun and get them moving. Lessons that are repetitive are viewed as boring and lead to disengagement:

👤 *I don't like maths at all because it's boring.*
anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

We learn the same things every Christmas and Easter – this isn't a good thing.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

The teacher has been teaching us about football and the Euros. The plan is we will have a real football match and real positions that people play for, a mini tournament. There's going to be two girls' teams and two boys' teams

Lewis, age 10, Glasgow



Artwork by young person supported by CYCJ

Many children express frustrations about the overall workload – particularly homework. They feel this can sometimes become overwhelming and detracts from hobbies, interests and responsibilities at home.

 **Lessen the workload.**

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

You already go to school and learn but my mum tells me to do homework, but I tell her that I've already done work at school!

Lewis, age 10, Glasgow

Getting homework when you don't have exams often feels unhelpful and takes away from hobbies and other interests.

MSYP

I wish I didn't have to do homework. I get six homework from Arabic school and one from English school.

anonymous, age 10, supported by Play Scotland

My mum and dad tell me I don't have to do homework so that I can have fun and time after school to relax and play. I am really happy about that.

Gerald, age 10, North Lanarkshire

Some children who have moved to Scotland from another country feel that Scottish schools give less homework. This was universally seen as a positive:


 **Scottish school is so much easier than Ukrainian school. You don't get as much homework.**

Misha, age 11, Glasgow

When I lived in Italy, they gave you lots of homework and my bag was full of books and we stayed at school until 5pm. I wouldn't want to do that in Scotland.

Lewis, age 10, Glasgow

Others speak about using AI to complete their homework – and worry about the long term impacts of this:

 **Use AI to do homework so we are going to get stupider.**


MSYP

AI is getting misused by pupils such as essays, need stricter rules.

MSYP

Young people at secondary level often told us about subject choice. Choosing subjects is a positive experience for many as it lets them focus on the subjects they enjoy. Meanwhile, other pupils say their choice has been limited due to a shortage of qualified teachers, particularly at Higher and

Advanced Higher level. Whilst some young people are able to access their chosen subjects by travelling to a neighbouring school, others miss out entirely:


 ***Part of it is that there aren't enough teachers to teach the course at certain levels.***
anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland

Education reform

Children and young people have lots of ideas about how Scotland's education system could be improved. Ideas include updating the curriculum, changing approaches to assessment, celebrating wider forms of achievement, creating new and better ways for children and young people to have a say in decisions, and reforming organisations like the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA).

 ***Need a new curriculum!***
anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

Children and young people want a curriculum that is engaging, meets their needs, celebrates wider forms of achievement and feels more relevant to their lives. There are calls for lessons around practical life skills:

 ***More classes that help with life skills like taking out loans, how to buy a house.***
anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

PSE needs to be updated! Taxes! Safety! Money! Borrowing! Saving and budgeting skills need to be learned before leaving school.


MSYP


No classes to help you to go into jobs that you want to do when you're older such as grow one of our characters beauty skills.

Bob, age 14, Glasgow

Many children and young people feel that important topics like Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood (RSHP) education, artificial intelligence (AI), and climate change must be added or improved in the school curriculum.

They emphasise the importance of RSHP education, calling it essential for their health and well-being. They believe understanding the reproductive system should be a fundamental part of the curriculum to empower young people to make informed decisions about their bodies:

 ***The right to sex ed and period education is really limited – this lack of education is a problem.***
anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project


 *Having the right to learn about your own reproductive system in class, such as PSHE, is essential.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project

The right to sex ed and period education links to Article 24.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project

On AI, children express concerns about inclusivity and safety. They want AI systems to accommodate diverse learning needs while supporting, but not replacing, teachers. They call for AI education to be integrated into the curriculum to prepare them for the future:

 *AI should support, not replace, teachers. Teachers understand children's feelings and children think this is really important.*

MCP


AI might not understand neurodivergent children and how they learn in different ways. Decision-makers must take this into account when deciding what AI systems can be used in schools.

MCP

AI will be in all our lives, so we need to know what it means and how it works before we grow up.

MCP, age 9, Shetland²⁶

On climate change and sustainability, children and young people call for more comprehensive and action-oriented learning. They highlight the need for positive examples and greater involvement in climate initiatives to inspire meaningful action:

 *When are schools going to teach more young people about the importance of looking after our planet?*

Willow, age 17, Glasgow

My friends and I asked for more recycling bins at school, but nothing happened. They keep telling us to pick up litter, but how are we supposed to do that when they don't even give us enough bins?

Gerald, age 10, North Lanarkshire

My school teaches about climate change and sustainability, but some of us learn more than others, when every person should be learning a lot about it.


MCP, age 11, Perth & Kinross²⁷

More broadly, young people feel that the rigidity of the education system can fail to accommodate different types of learners:

 *It should be about what I need, not about following the rules.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

Many young people feel that the SQA system unfairly measures success based on a rigid standard. They feel that exams create a pressure to memorise and reproduce large amounts of information. They call for an updated system that supports young people to properly understand information and how to apply it.

 *SQA is outdated.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project

We need to change the education/qualification system. SQA isn't the way to test kids – you can't be expected to learn a whole syllabus.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project

We need a better and more motivating culture to do well.

MSYP


We don't have an education system; we have a selection system....The current Scottish education system elevates those that are classically academic, and as a result, disabled people are 'sifted out' or left behind.

Rowan, age 17, North Lanarkshire



Artwork by young person supported by CYCJ


Beyond the specific issue of exams, funding cuts are another significant concern. Young people are worried that these cuts could reduce accessibility and quality of teaching in state schools:

 *There are cuts being made to education, which in my personal opinion is even more important than the youth services funding cuts because our education is free. If cuts are being made and staffing is being dropped, fewer people will be able to access this free education. More people will be pushed towards private education, which simply wouldn't be feasible for some families and children*

Delilah, age 16, Glasgow


This fear speaks to the underlying worry that reduced investment in education will deepen inequalities, making it even harder for children and young people whose rights are at risk to thrive.

Another key area that children and young people highlight as needing reform is their involvement in decision-making. Children and young people feel that their opinions are often dismissed by teachers and education authorities. Where they are asked for their views, children and young people feel this is often a box-ticking exercise rather than a genuine effort to involve them in the decision being made:

 *Heard for the sake of it being a requirement to consult rather than with young people in mind.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland

Some feel that schools do not respect their evolving capacities. They call for schools to recognise and support their development in an age and stage appropriate way. This would help to foster a culture of mutual respect and trust:

 *Most teachers don't recognise I am getting older and should have more responsibilities. They still treat me as a child, but not in a good way.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

Overall, the stories capture a widespread feeling that education should be about fostering curiosity and supporting every child and young person to reach their full potential – regardless of background or characteristics. Children and young people want a system that is tailored to individual needs, rather than expecting everyone to fit into a ‘one-size-fits-all’ model. Instead of expecting children and young people to adapt to the system, they felt the system should be built around the rights and needs of the pupils it seeks to serve.



Rowan's story, age 17, North Lanarkshire

I feel like we don't have an education system; we have a selection system. The way I see it, the current Scottish education system is set up to elevate those who are classically academic, and everyone else is just supposed to strive towards that same standard. Because of how things are, I think disabled people are often just sifted out or left behind.

To me, it feels like the education system is designed to reduce non-conformity by wearing people down. From my own experience, disabled people are expected to mask their differences and difficulties, and that usually leads to burnout. It seems like we're always expected to change to fit in, rather than society making space for all kinds of diversity.

I feel like these big systems are built on old-fashioned principles. School still seems stuck in a Victorian way of thinking, where the goal was to train children to be obedient factory workers. I feel like questioning the status quo is discouraged or even punished. I've been told more than once by adults that 'this is just the way it has always been'.

Accessing the right support has been a constant struggle for me. Things like getting extra time in exams, having readers or scribes, or getting adapted materials have all been way harder to get than they should be. It's always an individual fight, and the bureaucracy involved is so unnecessary that it must make a lot of people just want to give up. I've definitely seen the value in having advocacy support to help me through it.


When it comes to getting into higher education in Scotland, I know that you need several Highers to even get into university. It feels like success is measured by these metrics alone, and if you don't manage to get those qualifications, the blame falls on you. People say it's because you didn't try hard enough, or that you were procrastinating. From what I've seen, those who can succeed seem to do so with little effort.

I really don't think much of the current exam system. It just feels like information is memorised then quickly forgotten by most kids. There are also these so-called 'prestigious' schools that exist to train young people to become politicians or other powerful roles. Meanwhile, it feels like disabled young people are pushed to the bottom of the social ladder before we even get the chance to leave school—especially if we've struggled to attend mainstream education.

3.4 Taking breaks and having fun


Breaktime

In addition to calling for lessons that are fun and engaging, children and young people also emphasise the importance of breaktime and lunchtime. Opportunities to relax, play and unwind throughout the school day help them to build friendships and feel more able to learn in their next lessons.

 *Some of the girls were practising cheerleading and the boys stole the jackets. The girls chased them, and they really punch you!*

Lewis, age 10, Glasgow

For some, restrictions on the duration of breaks or availability of equipment dampens their excitement:

 *Lunch is too short.*

MSYP

 You can't play basketball at play time, but you can play at lunch.

Lewis, age 10, Glasgow

This morning, we had to go inside because it was raining – wet playtimes are boring.

Olivia, age 9, Glasgow

We have new playground stuff, but no one is allowed to go on it yet because they need to check that it's safe, but it's been since last year that we aren't allowed to go on it!

Lewis, age 10, Glasgow

No one plays on it. They made it last year, but no one has come to check it yet.

Lola, age 9, Glasgow

I don't like the playground, it's boring. They don't let us play with the loose parts all of the time, you come out with your class to play with them

Olivia, age 9, Glasgow




Artwork by young person supported by CYCJ

Older pupils enjoy that they are trusted to leave the school grounds at lunchtime:

 [Like that] you could go out with friends at lunch time.

Brooke, age 12, Glasgow

Meanwhile some children with additional support needs appreciate teachers giving them quiet time after breaks:

 *My class are allowed to have quiet time immediately after breaks to help us to calm down so we're ready to get back to work.*

Robin, age 12, Edinburgh

For some children, their enjoyment of breaktime and lunchtime is hampered by school buildings and playgrounds that are too small or otherwise lacking in some way. Here, Gerald shares his story:



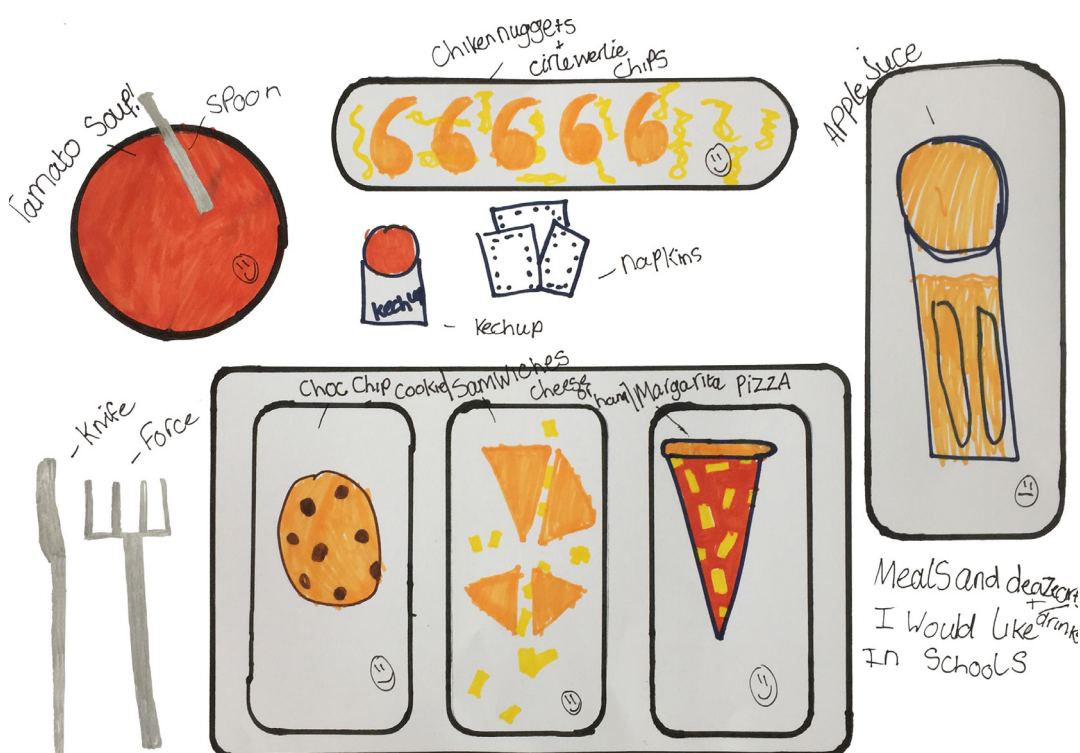
Gerald's story, age 10, North Lanarkshire

I enjoy school life. My school day is sitting down and learning and playing with my friends at break time. I like my teachers.

In my school if you ask to go to the toilet they always make you wait. I don't understand this. Nowhere else in my life do I need to wait. The teachers say I must go to the toilet at break but I need to eat and play and sometimes I don't need the toilet then. I would like to go to the toilet when I need.

My school is also not big enough for all the children. Our dining room and playground is too small. At lunch time there is a rota for children to go into the dining room. This means one year group is always last and that means they are hungry. I hate being last but it needs to rotate so that different groups are last. We told the teachers we don't like being hungry but nothing has changed.

I don't think the education managers care. They never speak to us and even though my mum had complained about it for five years they don't do anything. It doesn't affect them so I don't think they care. The head teacher also says 'no more people going to the toilet' if a lot of people are going at the same time.



Artwork by Member of Children's Parliament

Trips and activities

Children and young people appreciate opportunities to break away from the standard routine and do something different, like going on trips, playing board games, or participating in clubs and outdoor activities.



I enjoy fun activities e.g. playing Monopoly for a double period.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

I like when we get to go on trips.

Olivia, age 9, Glasgow

Every time in school we used to have this dance competition, and I always win.

Lola, age 9, Glasgow

We had nine weeks of swimming lessons. We go on a Friday just after lunch and stay until home time.

Olivia, age 9, Glasgow

There is also a desire for greater access to extracurricular activities that can enrich their learning experience and add variety to their school day.



Access to extracurriculars- widely positive but it's a lot of effort to find out about them, school doesn't promote them, you have to find out about them yourself.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project

Clubs and extra curriculum activities.

MSYP


These insights illustrate the diverse needs and desires of children and young people for an education that is both engaging and supportive, encouraging not only academic growth but also practical skills, social and emotional development.



3.5 Support with transitions

Another key theme from children and young people's stories is the importance of extra support at points of transition. Key moments include moving from primary to secondary school, and from school into work or further education.

For many Primary 7s, the prospect of moving into secondary school brings with it a mixture of excitement and nervousness. Whilst there are new classes to look forward to, there are also fears – such as there might be more fights. Initiatives such as tours and buddy systems ease the transition for many:

 *Primary school is okay, I don't really like it a lot, but I am really excited to start high school – I visited the high school and I liked the art class. I am looking forward to learning new languages at school, I already know some Spanish so maybe I can learn more.*

Mila, age 11

I am going to high school, I am excited about going but a little bit[struggled to find the correct word in English but then agreed it was 'nervous']. I have visited the school with my classmates which is helpful – it is really big.

Misha, age 11, Glasgow

What helped in S1 is being helped to find my way around.

anonymous, age 12, East Lothian



Artwork by Elysia, age 12, Aberdeen



A walking tour of our community

A group of children and young people supported by Aberlour told the story of life in their community through a walking tour:


We shared our stories by taking the adults for a walk around the area that we live in. We took pictures of the places, people and things that are important to us...

We walked past the primary school that lots of us attended. We told lots of stories about our experience of school. A few of us loved school because we enjoyed spending time with our friends and had favourite teachers that made us feel special.

Most of us are just about to start the part of our story when we move up to high school, or have just finished our first year. We shared that this felt hard, because there were lots of fights in the secondary school which made us feel unsafe.



For children with additional support needs, there are calls for extra support at points of transition:

 Decisions are made and processes are in place without really understanding the long term impacts on children...I got no high school preparation. I'm in S4 now and still not settled at high school.

Chaz, age 15, Edinburgh



Lilly's story, age 15, East Ayrshire

I'm going into S4 after summer. I'm not feeling too good about it. I feel anxiety in school and I don't feel like the staff support me enough.

I really struggled with school last year because the classes were too long and overwhelming. I don't have enough time to myself.


Social work got involved because I wasn't going to school but they don't help me.

In going in to S4 after summer
I'm not feeling too good about it
I feel anxiety in school
and I don't feel like the
staff support me enough
I really struggled with
school last year because
the classes were too long
and overwhelming
I don't have enough time
to myself
Social work got involved
because I didn't go to school
but they don't help me

There are also calls for more support in navigating the transitions between different levels of education:


 Support with jumps between National 5 – Higher – Advanced Higher.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

 *How to independently study and write uni-style essays! We go to uni unprepared and with a limited skill set. This needs to change.*


MSYP

Many young people express a desire to experience what further education is like before making the leap to apply. Such experiences help them to feel better prepared:

 *I would like for there to be more opportunities to experience university education before applying.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland

Children and young people who feel well supported are more likely to speak positively about their next steps upon leaving school:

 *At school, I feel listened to and if there are any problems, I go see my guidance teacher. On a couple of occasions, I have approached my guidance teacher to help resolve any issues. I am not sure what I want to do next in life, but I do feel supported by school in deciding the next steps. I wanted to join the police because I enjoy watching crime series, but I am currently unsure.*


Ben, age 12, Aberdeenshire

These stories underscore the need for schools to provide robust support for children and young people in the lead up to and after key changes. By prioritising open communication, regular check-ins, skill-building and responding to children's expressed needs, schools can empower students to navigate their journeys more successfully. As these stories illustrate, when children and young people feel listened to and supported, they are more likely to embrace next steps with optimism and enthusiasm. Investing in support for transitions not only helps individual pupils, but also helps foster a positive school culture that recognises and values the diverse needs of all learners.


3.6 Going to college or university

College and university experiences significantly shape young people's futures, providing opportunities for personal growth, academic exploration, and social engagement.

Many young people feel that access to free further education is a significant advantage of living in Scotland. They feel that this helps to overcome financial barriers that might otherwise deter people from pursuing college or university. Some welcome initiatives aimed at widening access:


 *Free education is something I think is really important. I'm just now in my last year of high school, so I'm having to start to think of uni applications, and the fact that I know I can go to uni and not have to pay anything for my tuition is incredible and again it takes away so many different barriers and makes so many more people able to pursue further education in Scotland.*

Delilah, age 16, Glasgow


 *Widening access helped me get into university despite not having a full education.*
Cadence, reflecting on time missed at school as a result of being in an armed forces family



Some young people identify disparities in financial support for students:

 *Getting paid to go, although the unhappy part to this story was that people got paid different amounts which didn't feel fair.*
Amy, age 17, Glasgow


Many young people are excited to go to college and university as it allows them to study subjects that truly interest them and which were not available at school:

 *My favourite thing that I want to go in to is childcare. I'm at school now and I will be going to college.*
anonymous, age 14, East Lothian

Choosing what subjects you wanted to study from a more diverse range of options.
anonymous, supported by Aberlour



For young refugees, access to college plays a key role in helping young people feel settled in Scotland:

 *I only go to college on Tuesday/Thursday. It's good.*
Mohammed

College is good.
Tina, age 16, Glasgow

Young people appreciate the freedom that college provides, with many relishing the opportunity to express themselves through their choice of clothing and subjects.


 *Freedom to express yourself by wearing whatever you want.*

Bob, age 15, Glasgow

I feel like I had responsibilities – treated like an adult.


anonymous, supported by Aberlour

For young people already at university, there are calls for additional support during the initial settling-in period to help new students adjust:

 *University is a great social experience, but it took a lot of settling in to begin with as it was a big jump from high school, so more support would have been great during these initial stages.*


anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland

Accessibility is a further priority. One neurodiverse young person spoke fondly of the support received from their adviser, highlighting again the importance of supportive relationships and tailored approaches in ensuring young people's rights are upheld:

 *Having ADHD whilst at uni is difficult. However, my adviser is always championing for me, especially in situations I do not feel comfy doing so myself, so I have access to the same support to provide me an equal opportunity to do well!*


anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland

Another also spoke to greater support available at college compared to school:

 *So many more support systems [at college] for people with poor mental health or special needs.*

Amy, age 17, Glasgow

The collective experiences of young people in college and university once again illustrate the importance of tailored support, equitable access, supportive relationships amongst peers and staff, and opportunities for self-expression, all of which contribute to young people being able to reach their full potential.

 *[Who is a Rights Champion?] Some professors at universities – they might have knowledge of rights and how to uphold them.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project

3.7 What the adults have been saying..

The stories from babies, children and young people reflect many of the themes that are highlighted in the 2023 concluding observations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UN Committee).²⁸ This section highlights some of those recommendations – drawing from Together’s child friendly version²⁹ – as well as the child-friendly response from Scottish Government.³⁰

What does the UN Committee say?



The UN Committee says children’s rights should be at the heart of everything nurseries and schools do so that everyone feels safe and respected no matter who they are or what their background is.^{31 32} Children should never be treated unfairly, by adults or other children, and schools should support children and staff to learn about children’s rights.

The UN Committee says Scottish Government should do more to make sure that all children have the same opportunities to learn and thrive.³³ This includes making things better for children living in poverty, disabled children, young carers, and refugees.

The UN Committee also says that children should be able to learn in a creative, playful and fun environment.³⁴ They shouldn’t be pressured by lots of tests and exams.³⁵

Young children should all have access to early childhood education, including those living in poverty, in rural areas and disabled children.

What has the Scottish Government said?



In its response to the UN Committee’s recommendations, Scottish Government said it wants to make sure schools are fun, safe and fair for everyone.³⁶ It wants to make sure everyone knows about children’s rights and has given money for UNICEF’s Rights Respecting Schools Award. Scottish Government said it will keep working on this – especially for children whose rights are most at risk.³⁷

Scottish Government said it had created a guide for adults on how to stop bullying.³⁸ It is going to update this so that schools are kinder and more inclusive. Scottish Government also said it wants to update what’s taught in schools so that it includes more stories from different cultures and backgrounds.

Scottish Government said it wants to help young people’s mental health by having counsellors in every secondary school.³⁹

3.8 Ideas to help



Babies, children and young people have shared powerful insights about their experiences in nurseries, schools, and colleges. Their stories highlight both the progress made and the work still needed to fully embed a children's human rights approach across all educational settings. Based on what they tell us, here are key messages for furthering a children's human rights approach in nurseries, schools, and colleges:

Embedding children's rights:

- Ensure children's rights are at the heart of all policies, practices and curricula in nurseries, schools, and colleges. As Cerys, age 15, said: "I want to learn in a place that meets my needs, a space that is suitable that makes me feel safe so I can learn".
- Train all staff in nurseries, schools, and colleges on children's rights and how to embed them in their work.
- Make rights visible and accessible throughout all educational settings. As one group of children noted: "We all agreed that we learned [about rights] at school, although wondered how children that didn't or couldn't go to school learned about their rights".

Equality and non-discrimination:

- Address bullying and discrimination proactively across all educational settings. As one child shared: "School doesn't do anything to help with bullying. They hear us and see us but do nothing".
- Ensure equal access to opportunities and support in nurseries, schools, and colleges. As Ion, age 4, from the Scottish Borders stated: "I wish there were different types to choose from".
- Create inclusive environments that celebrate diversity. As one child said: "Due to my disabilities, other children choose not to play with me and it makes me sad".

Empowering children:

- Provide age-appropriate information about rights across all educational stages.
- Support children and young people to develop self-advocacy skills. As one young person supported by Aberlour said: "Why not just put the support in that I needed at the time whilst waiting to diagnose me?"
- Create opportunities for meaningful choices about learning, from nursery through to college. As Anna, age 15, from Edinburgh stated: "I think it should be much more flexible and they should be much more understanding of different additional needs".

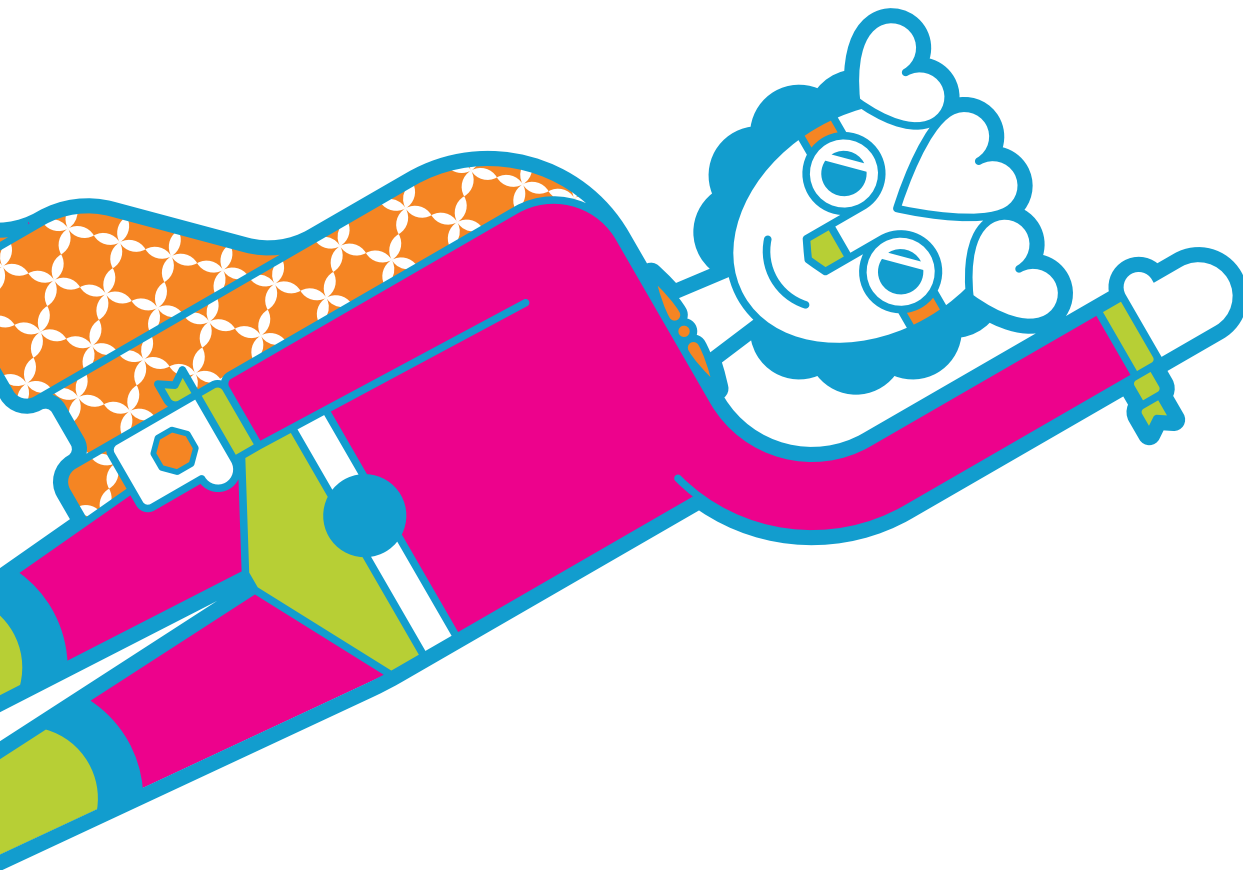
Participation:

- Involve children and young people in decision-making at all levels and across all educational settings. As one young person said: "Most teachers don't recognise I am getting older and should have more responsibilities. They still treat me as a child, but not in a good way".
- Ensure inclusive participation, especially for those with additional support needs, from nursery onwards.
- Provide meaningful feedback when views are sought. As Gerald, age 10, from North Lanarkshire said: "No one asked us what we thought. They don't care. They don't care because it doesn't affect them".

Accountability:

- Establish clear, age-appropriate complaints procedures across all educational settings. As Gerald, age 10, from North Lanarkshire shared: “I tried to do something about it. I complained to the council myself, but the whole process was really hard. It didn’t feel like it was made for us – it was complicated and unfriendly”.
- Ensure transparency in decision-making processes affecting children and young people at nursery, school, and college.
- Regularly monitor and report on how children’s rights are upheld across all educational settings. As Gerald, age 10, from North Lanarkshire said: “I learned that children’s rights are now part of the law in Scotland – so it’s wrong that no one is listening to us”.

Overall, children and young people are calling for nurseries, schools, and colleges that truly listen to them, respect their rights, and support them to reach their full potential.






Chapter 4: **Life in the local community**

Artwork by young people supported by CYCJ

4.1 The local neighbourhood

Children and young people's stories paint a picture of life across Scotland's cities, towns and rural communities. Each location comes with its own opportunities and challenges, but there are also themes that are common across them all: meeting with friends, access to nature and green space, involvement in decision-making, and adults' attitudes towards young people.

 *My area is in the centre of [Edinburgh]. There's loads to do which is great but it's really busy and I find the roads a bit scary.*

Chaz, age 15, Edinburgh

I live in a small town – everyone knows everyone.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project

Built environment

Public spaces and town centres play a central role in children and young people's lives. They are hubs for socialising, shopping and getting involved in community activities. Many of those living in towns and cities enjoy the proximity of entertainment like shops, restaurants and cinemas:

 *There's a chicken restaurant that I go to with my friends.*

Lewis, age 10, Glasgow

Many shops around...good access to amenities.


anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and YMCA Paisley

I like living where I live, I feel safe mostly and I have friends in my area.

Anna, age 15, Edinburgh




Discount schemes, like the Young Scot Card, help make these options more affordable for children and young people, in turn supporting their right to meet and spend time with friends:

 *It [Young Scot discounts] encourages teenagers and young people to go out such as like into town or getting a meal or going to the shops. And encourages them to be more social. And again it lowers the barriers between people from like lower off backgrounds because it means that they are more able to afford things when they go out with their friends.*

Delilah, age 16, Glasgow

When meeting up in town, many young people were conscious of negative attitudes and assumptions from adults. Many express frustration that they are unfairly judged due to their age, and labelled as troublemakers:

 *Police getting called because of our age so can't even go on walks with friends to clear our heads.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland


Young people not being allowed in some public spaces because of reputation of vandalism.

Member of Scottish Youth Parliament (MSYP)

Young people not allowed in shops or public spaces because of reputation.

MSYP

Even young children are conscious of adults' attitudes while playing in their communities:

 *I hit her [neighbour] window with the ball and then you're all running away. The police didn't actually come. The neighbour was angry. My auntie said 'they're just kids, they're just playing'.*

Lewis, age 10, Glasgow

Children and young people want to be treated fairly, without negative assumptions based on their age. They call for more understanding from adults in their communities.

While many children and young people feel safe where they live, this is not a universal experience. Safety concerns limit the enjoyment of public spaces, particularly for girls and young women:


 *In Glasgow, being able to access public spaces as young women, lack of lighting doesn't feel safe.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project


Safety in public spaces is an issue across Scotland particularly in cities. I live in a small town everyone knows everyone, but big cities have so many different people- this needs resolving.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project

Some girls and young women say they avoid public spaces altogether, instead preferring to socialise in their homes:


 *I sometimes won't go out as it's not always safe to walk about. I normally arrange to go to my friends or they come to me.*

Bb16, age 16, Falkirk

 *Not being comfortable going out at night due to fear of safety.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Group

Younger children also share concerns about safety, particularly in areas where alcohol and drug use are visible. For some, this means they no longer want to spend time in their local area. Their experiences highlight the need for greater investment in support services which in turn will allow children to reclaim their ability to explore and play outdoors:

 *There's a lot of drunk people where I live, it can be scary. There were girls and drunk people, and they were smoking and ringing every doorbell. It's annoying. I sometimes feel scared as I'm scared that one time, they will have a bottle and try to smash it on the window.*

Lewis, age 10, Glasgow

There are some people using alcohol and drugs nearby. I think these people should be put in prison if they hurt others – or sent to rehab if they were just doing some drugs.

William, age 10, Edinburgh

It's not safe for me to go out alone in my area.

LMHM, age 10, Glasgow


Minimum unit priced doesn't do much but strong restriction should be placed on alcohol

MSYP




Artwork by Members of Children's Parliament

Sometimes younger children share that they are afraid of groups of teenagers or older children:


 *Sometimes it's not safe in town. There are some sketchy people. [Who are they?] Teenagers.*
anonymous, supported by Circle

Young refugees and asylum-seekers also shared experiences of harassment by other young people:


 *In general, my area is ok but there are some troublemakers...some young people used to harass us and we had to contact the police. There was scaffolding on our building and children would climb the scaffolding and come to our windows in the night.*
Messi, age 17, North Ayrshire



Meanwhile, many children and young people criticise the absence of indoor spaces that are free for them to access. They say this pushes them to meet outside due to a lack of other options:

 *Have free places for teenagers. People think teenagers are all bad. Have a bad name. They have nowhere to go.*
anonymous, supported by Circle

More generally, young people share that lack of opportunities in their communities can lead to negative outcomes such as antisocial behaviour, highlighting the need for greater support and investment:

 *Growing up just outside a major city, it has always been surrounded by antisocial behaviour and high crime rates with very little community programs or initiatives.*
anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland

Growing up in areas where there is antisocial behaviour is difficult to break the barriers to get out of.
anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland

Lack of opportunities for young people.
MSYP



Super Bears Inc.

Some young people designed their own ‘Super Bears’ – a team of superheroes to support children and young people in their communities. Several designs call for action on littering, vape use and anti-social behaviour.

Name: The Visual Master

*Designed by: Zoe, age 15,
North Lanarkshire*

The Visual Master was named after his key power: lie detector goggles. He can see if young people are lying to him about vaping or drinking in order to keep them safe. Once he spots a lie, he is there to give support to figure out why they’ve lied – without judgement – and help them get past their struggle.

He can fly – allowing him to patrol the community to oversee and protect young people and stop them from making bad decisions. He has a bubbly, upbeat and welcoming energy so that young people feel that they can trust him and feel comfortable talking to him.

People would feel intimidated by The Visual Master’s presence upon first impression of seeing him because of his lie detecting abilities. They would then feel safe because he talks to them with a calm energy to tell them it’s okay that they have made that mistake (e.g drinking or drug use etc.) but he will encourage and support them to not do it again.



Name: The Trouble Tamer*

*Designed by: Catriona, age 16,
South Lanarkshire*

The Trouble Tamer exists to catch all of the people who think they want to be Trouble Makers and discourages them from this. Some words to describe Trouble Makers: crazy, gang violence, scary.

The Trouble Tamer's powers include metal detector hands to catch and confiscate all weapons and vapes. He then upcycles them into something more positive like steel bins to encourage people to litter less. Metal bins are also harder to steal or set on fire which would deter more Trouble Makers from doing this.




The Trouble Tamer is sneaky, kidnapping Trouble Makers to reshape them and then puts them back into the community as a more positive member. His effects are long lasting and once someone has been 'treated' by him, they will not revert to their old ways and they will even then become an ally to the bear and stand up against other Trouble Makers.

The Trouble Tamer would make people feel scared then safe. The fear would deter people from becoming Trouble Makers. 'Non-Trouble Makers' would feel good about the Trouble Tamer operating as they would not need to fear Trouble Makers anymore.

Young people would then feel safer as Trouble Makers are often involved in gang violence and the Trouble Tamer would be fighting this and restoring young people's rights. This is important because once Trouble Makers fall into a gang it is very hard to get out and the Trouble Tamer will be a support in freeing them and getting them out of this.

**Note: In adapting this story, we've made slight adjustments to the young person's original words, specifically choosing "Trouble-Maker" and "Trouble-Tamer" to avoid language that could unintentionally cause offence. These terms were chosen by us, with the aim of staying true to the spirit of the story while ensuring it can be shared widely and respectfully.*

Beyond safety, many children are concerned by the general upkeep of town and city centres. Litter, run-down buildings and general untidiness can make these environments less appealing:

 *There is too much rubbish in Scotland.*

Anna, age 8, Renfrewshire

The councils should empty the bins because there could be rats...The council should fix damages to property.

Trevor, age 13, Edinburgh

Make my community not look rubbish. Edinburgh is dirty looking and embarrassing.

Dave, age 13, Edinburgh



Many young people highlight the role of the cost-of-living crisis in contributing to poor maintenance, calling for increased investment in their communities. Several children and young people mentioned feeling discriminated against because they are from areas of socio-economic deprivation:

 *Being discriminated against for what area you come from.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland


It's a busy diverse community but also a deprived area. There are lots of fruit shops and charity shops.

LMHM, age 10, Glasgow

Glasgow is not the best when it comes to areas of poverty.


Delilah, age 16, Glasgow

Children are also concerned about advertising in public spaces, particularly for vapes and alcohol. Members of Children's Parliament (MCPs) highlighted vaping as one of their priority issues at the 2024 Executive Takeover.⁴⁰ They called on Scottish Government to implement a range of measures, including: a ban on sales near schools and parks, restrictions on visibility in shops, stronger ID checks, dull packaging with health warnings, and greater awareness of the effects of vaping. MCPs as young as eight were able to name vape flavours but could not explain the effects, with some even thinking that vaping was a healthy choice.

 *Packaging on cigarettes is better, they write on it that it can hurt you, but with vaping, they make it look better, so kids want to buy it.*

MCP⁴¹

Despite these challenges, town centres and public spaces remain important for fostering social connections and community engagement. For many, it is the community spirit that is key to their sense of belonging:

 *Our area of [town] can be a little boring – there’s not much to do but the Safety Zone (community group) try their best. The community is unrivalled and safe. Everyone knows each other. You can’t make the two min walk to the shop with my mum without stopping to say hello to neighbours who are also friends and family.*

Alfie, age 14, North Lanarkshire

The Pennypit is a community that helps to fund the rugby.

Oliver, age 12, East Lothian



Overall, children and young people’s stories highlight the importance of public spaces, while also calling for action to ensure they feel safe, welcomed, and understood.

Parks, nature and greenspace


Access to safe and engaging outdoor spaces is a recurring theme among children and young people wherever they live. Many express a deep enjoyment and sense of calm in natural spaces, appreciating the freedom to explore, play and connect with the environment:

 *I like beaches and throwing stones in the water and having picnics.*

Sophie, age 3, Perth & Kinross



For those living in more rural areas, nature is a central part of their lives:

 *I like where I live in the countryside. It’s quiet and peaceful. I like the nature all around where I live. I care about the environment.*

Tiglo, age 11, Perth & Kinross

Lots of nature and space. I play with my sisters...Go out and play in nature.

Ion, age 4, Scottish Borders



Garfield's story, age 12, East Ayrshire

I live in [village] with my sister and foster carers. I wake up and go see my sister and after I go get breakfast. Then I go out to play with friends for most of the day. I only come back for dinner and lunch.

I love being outdoors - that is who I am. I go out in all weathers. I don't care if I am cold, wet or too warm - I love going out.

When I go back in, I go for a nice warm shower. Then I turn on the TV and fall asleep.

I think it's important for children to live close to their friends and get to be out in nature.

I live in
with my Sister
and foster
Care's.

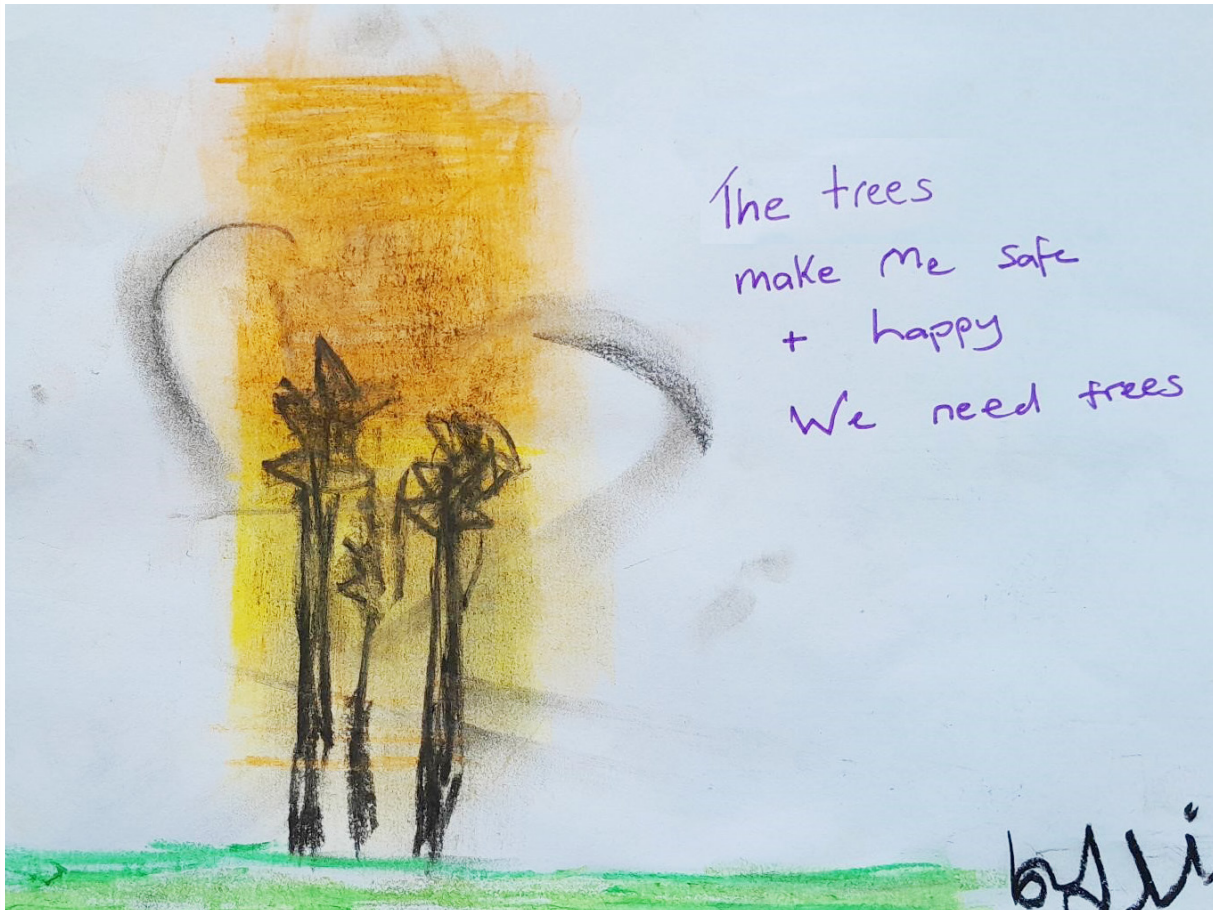
.The day in a life of me.
I wake up and go see my
Sister. And after I go
get breakfast. Then I
go out to play with friends
for most of the day. I
only come back for dinner
and lunch. I love being out
doors that is who I am.
I go out in all weathers.
I don't care if I am cold
or wet, too warm I love
going out. When I come
back in I go for a nice
warm Shower. Then I
turn on the tv and fall a
Sleep.




Zola's story, age 13, Highlands

Zola chose to create some artwork to share her thoughts on the environment around her. She says the green border around the image indicates things she views positively. Zola is neurodivergent and spoke about the importance of having time in nature for her wellbeing. She felt that children should have more time outdoors with trees.

'Scotland has nature. I love nature. Nature is calm'.



For those living in towns and cities, access to green spaces encourages physical activity and offers a space to spend time with friends, family and pets:

 *I take my dogs a walk but with mum or dad. I like where we stay. There are nice spaces to walk my dogs.*

Bb16, age 16, Falkirk


There are nice walks around my home.

Me, age 11

Children share that parks are valuable spaces for having fun, seeing friends and playing sports:

 *I love the swing park near my home, it's fun.*

Boss Batman, age 7, North Lanarkshire

 *I have two parks near me. At the park I once saw Lola, I saw her sisters and her dad.*

Olivia, age 9, Glasgow


There's a park next to the houses. It has a pitch at it.

Lewis, age 10, Glasgow

Football at park, football at school, tig, football with Oliver.


anonymous, supported by Circle


Parks are entertaining for babies too, even if they are not quite able to use the equipment yet. As their caregivers told us:

 *She likes the park. She looks for the trees, and when you let her out the pram she's straight up looking in the sky. We go to [park] because there is a zip line for the older ones and then she's just there looking at the trees so there's something for everybody.*


parent of one-year-old, Tayside

However, challenges remain. Some children and families are unable to access parks and greenspace, or find that local provision is otherwise inadequate:

 *Q: Is there anything you'd change about your local area if you had a magic wand?*

 *A: I would have more parks, cos (points at all parks on maps) there are just these ones...I'd keep Country Park.*

anonymous, supported by Circle

 *There's nowhere nice near us and I don't have a car.*

parent of two-year-old, Tayside




Others call for more access to outdoor centres, giving children and young people greater access to nature beyond the boundaries of towns and cities:

 *Limited access to high-quality equipment/ facilities for young people (outdoor centres!!!!!!!)*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland

Children also frequently point to issues like safety, dog mess, broken glass, other litter and poor maintenance, which can make parks and green spaces less inviting. They feel more can be done to address this and ensure parks remain clean and welcoming spaces:

 **I think there needs to be a litter police department in Scotland with cameras and big fines.**

Tiglo, age 11, Perth & Kinross

In some cases, the use of alcohol, drugs and antisocial behaviour can discourage children from using their local park as it does not feel safe. Children with additional support needs and neurodiversity were particularly worried by safety in their local parks:

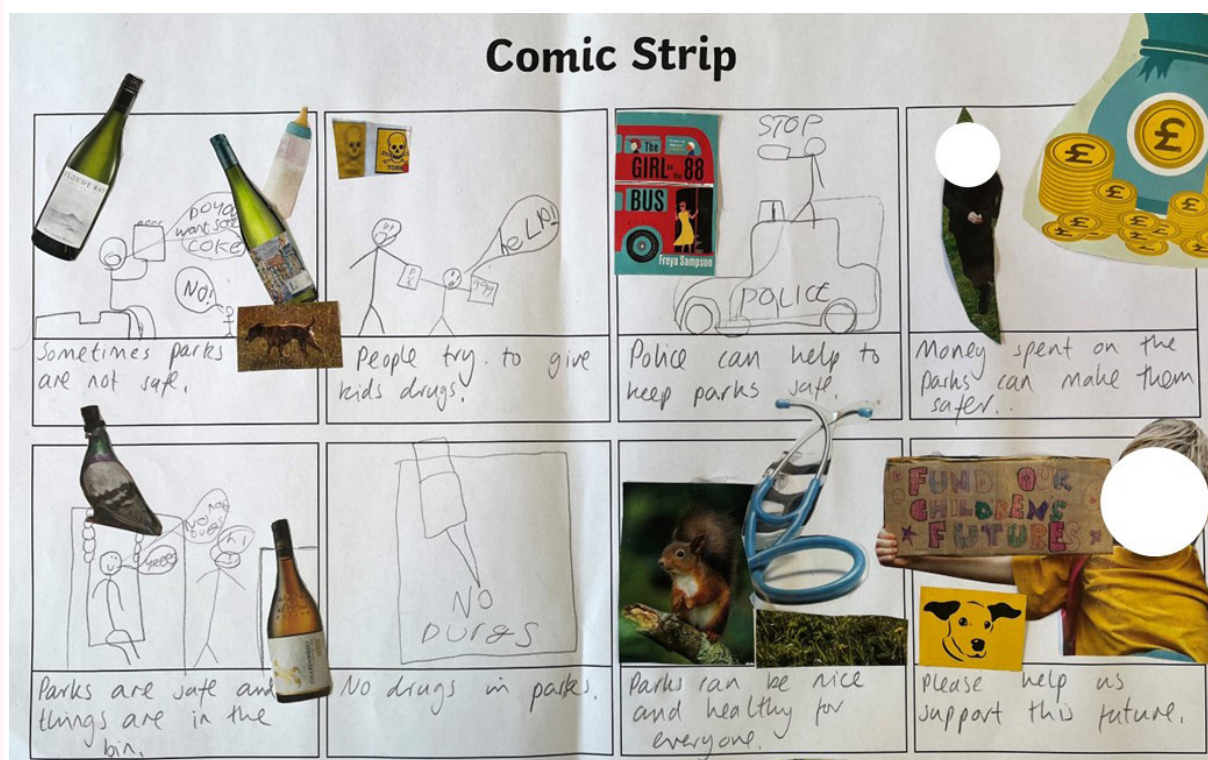


Trevor and Saint Herrington's stories, age 13, Edinburgh

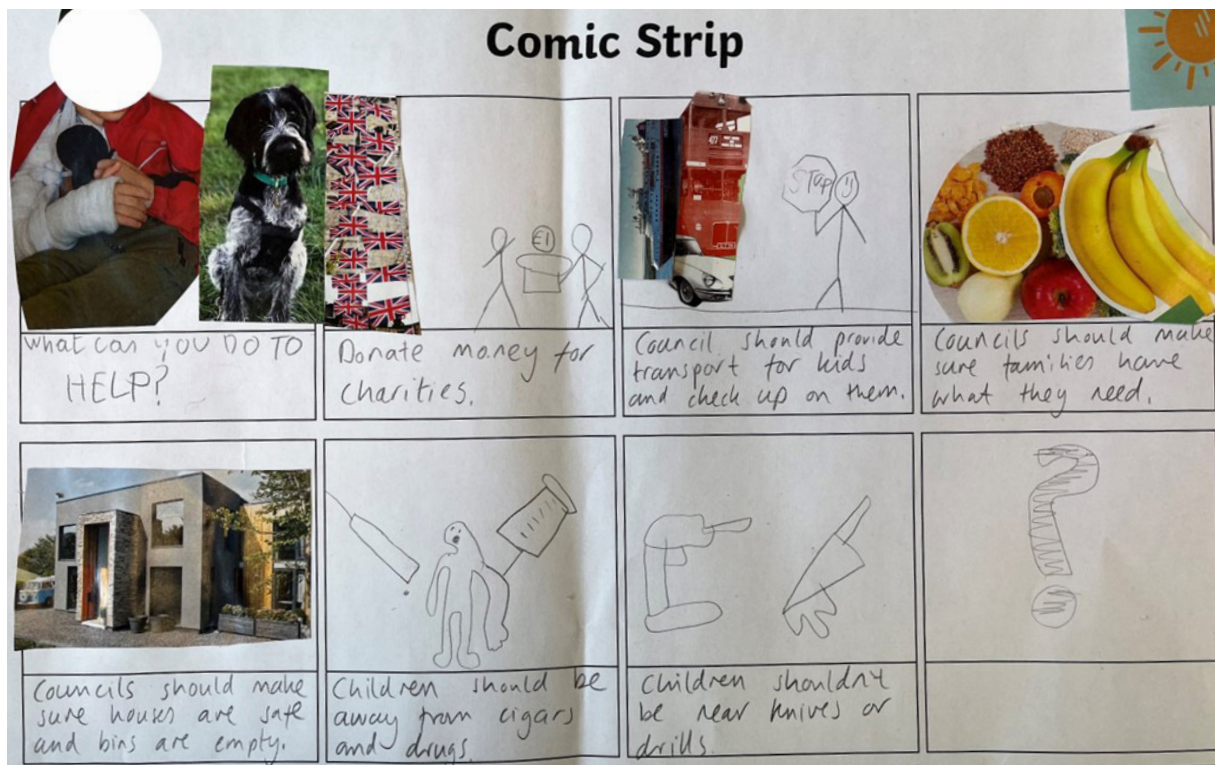
Trevor and Saint Herrington are both 13. They are neurodivergent and go to the same specialist school. They wanted to share their views about parks by making some comic strips and spoke about their creations:

We decided we wanted to create a park. The park has petrified children and drugs around. Our message for the government is that drugs should not be allowed.

Trevor: *There are lots of people taking drugs near where I live. I wanted to include a picture of someone taking cocaine because I feel like it shows why the park isn't safe. When I go to the park, I'm worried as I never know if there is glass. There is lots of rubbish in the area – a child could go into [the bins] and get something bad. The councils should empty the bins because there could be rats. I think the council should also make sure that families have everything they need, including transport to places, and they should fix damages to property. I hope this happens. In the last box of my comic, I've put 'please help us to support this future'.*



Saint Herrington: I wanted to have a picture of someone calling for help – parks are not safe. I think the police should have more security dogs to stop people with drugs. There’s lots of rubbish too – the council aren’t collecting the bins just now.



Several stories highlight how parents’ and carers’ fears about safety can also play a role in children’s enjoyment of outdoor spaces:

[Q. Why don't you go to the park?] They [parents] say it's cold and that they're busy. I'm scared to go to the park in case the police come and ask me where my parents are and take me away, well that's what my mum thinks. I don't think that, but my mum is scared that it will happen.

Lewis, age 10, Glasgow



There is also notable frustration about the lack of provision for different age groups and for disabled children. For older children and teenagers, parks are often perceived as child-focused which can leave them feeling excluded if no equivalent provision is made for them:

When they build resources but only suited to an age range – baby focus such as free spaces like parks only being for babies.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland



A walking tour of our community

A group of children and young people (age 12-18) supported by Aberlour told the story of life in their community through a walking tour. Here they tell us about the local parks:

We shared our stories by taking the adults for a walk around the area that we live in. We took pictures of the places, people and things that are important to us.

We headed to our local park and saw where some of our friends lived on the way.

We agreed that there were lots of good spaces to play where we live, but that sometimes the “young team” stopped this from happening.

We all took time to look at the Communication Board in the park. Some of our story tellers shared their story of being neurodivergent. One of our characters said that it took a long time to find out that she is autistic, but that she’s glad that she did because she can get extra help at school.



4.2 Getting out and about

Active travel

Active travel, such as walking, cycling and wheeling, is highly valued by children and young people. It offers not only a means of getting around but also an opportunity to stay physically active and help the environment:




I want to ride my bike everywhere instead of having to go in the car.

Ion, age 4, Scottish Borders

My bike and scooter are both broken. It would make my life in the community better if they were fixed!

anonymous, age 9, East Lothian

Children and young people appreciate when designated footpaths and cycle lanes are installed. Some mention using these with their families, who help to keep them safe:

 *I enjoy cycling. There are good tracks around where I live. There are cycle lanes as well as more challenging trails at the local nature reserve. I can mostly avoid areas with lots of traffic. The adults with me can help keep me safe. My family are regularly active and they encourage me to spend time outside and to take part in things that are happening locally.*

Robin, age 12, Edinburgh

However, many highlight that not enough is being done to put cycle lanes in place. While they would like to cycle more, they call for greater investment to address safety concerns.


 *Cycling too dangerous making more people to drive.*

MSYP

Safety came “by” CCTV and lighting.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and YMCA Paisley

Safety concerns also prevent children and young people from wanting to walk. Again, this is particularly the case for girls and young women, who feel that more could be done to increase safety, such as improved street lighting:

 *I work part time at the local pub as a waitress. I don't like walking around my community. I feel unsafe when street lights aren't on. There are many people who have addiction issues or are on something. I don't feel safe as a 17-year-old girl walking the streets.*

Alice, age 17, South Lanarkshire

Younger children also have safety concerns, often preferring to walk with a parent or carer:

 *I don't like to be out walking around by myself anywhere.*

Bud, age 12, North Lanarkshire

For disabled children and young people, accessibility is a significant barrier to active travel. Uneven pavements and poorly maintained streets can make moving through their local area a challenge, with some experiencing incidents that make them feel unsafe:



Dave's story, age 13, Edinburgh

The area I live in is ok. I can't wheel about my streets because the pavement is full of holes and weeds and loads of dog poo. I don't like getting dog poo on my wheels because it goes on my hands when I push my chair.

When I go on the walk-way I am scared because one time a cyclist was going so fast he knocked me out my chair and just cycled away fast. Another cyclist shouted at me for wheeling in the path and swore bad words to me. It gives me a fright and makes me not feel safe.

It's pretty boring around here and Edinburgh is not wheelchair friendly. I had to try my school uniform on in the street because the shop did not have a ramp but my mum said all shops should have one but a lot don't. It makes me nervous to go out because I know my mum will have to argue with people and we can't go in a lot of places. It's not fair.


Rowan's story, age 17, North Lanarkshire

I've noticed that a lot of our public spaces and buildings seem to be built mainly with able-bodied, neurotypical people in mind. Since I started using a cane, I've really started to see just how many issues there are with access in different environments. It's not just about ramps or lifts, it's about all the small details that add up.

I can't help but think that a lot of these problems could be easily fixed, but I also feel like there's a real resistance to making those changes. Because of that, it often feels like disabled people just aren't welcome in these spaces – they weren't designed for us.

It seems like able-bodied people don't even notice these issues until they need accommodations themselves. Like, one day they might need a ramp or a lift when they get older and their mobility decreases, but until that happens, it's not something they think about. And honestly, with an ageing population, these access issues are just going to become even more important. But instead of being proactive, it feels like we're stuck waiting for the need to become so obvious it can't be ignored.

In addition to physical barriers, children and young people describe how stigma and negative attitudes towards disability and neurodiversity can make them feel less confident in going out:

 *I find going out really difficult, but when I am able I like going for walks in the countryside. I really struggle to be around people my own age. I have heard some of them talking about me when I have seen them in the street – it wasn't nice.*

Toby, age 15

These stories highlight the need for greater attention to the needs of disabled and neurodiverse children when decisions are taken about the built environment and streetscape design.


Public transport

In addition to active transport, children and young people emphasise the importance of reliable and accessible public transport. They say this helps them pursue their hobbies and interests, and do things with friends and family:

 *I like visiting the airport. I think it's well connected by the tram.*

Joe, age 12, Edinburgh

Free bus travel is widely viewed as positive, as it promotes independence, enables access to amenities and allows children and young people to spend time with friends in other areas. It also provides an option for children who do not feel safe walking, cycling or wheeling in areas with lots of traffic:

 *I have a bus card. It's so easy as we can go on the bus anytime and it doesn't cost anything.*

Lewis, age 10, Glasgow


It's a belter!

Princess P, age 12, Edinburgh

I'm going to see 'Inside Out 2' with my friends. I get to the cinema by bus ... last time it was like 30 minutes but if you go to city centre it's like 20 or 15 minutes. I have a bus card so it's free...My friends live in [location], if I want to visit them, I walk but it's far and sometimes I get the bus.


Olivia, age 9, Glasgow

The free bus pass also plays an important role in supporting children and young people from low-income backgrounds to access activities, educational opportunities and maintain friendships that might otherwise have been difficult due to the expense of travel:

 *[Free bus travel] is really important because it lets young people have more freedom because they're able to travel distances. And it also removes barriers from people who are less well-off money-wise as they would be able to travel to places they wouldn't have previously. And also it helps young people meet up with other young people as you may have friends like in different parts of Scotland and you could all meet up for free, which I think is really great.*

Delilah, age 16, Glasgow

For babies and toddlers, public transport can sometimes be an exciting adventure – but at other times it can feel too restrictive and noisy:

 *Hannah doesn't like the bus, because she just wants out of the buggy, she wants to be moving.*

parent of one-year-old, Tayside



Jacob's story, age 2, Tayside

Jacob is autistic and has his own ways of communicating. He loves getting out and about, especially if that means getting the bus! Dad helps to narrate his story:

I really want to spend time outside. Sometimes I can't go out when I want to but today Dada is home and we can go out. I have cards that show me what we are going to do. A card for putting on clothes, for going on the bus and for where we'll go next.

Sometimes we go to the shop to get a banana or grapes and me and Dada walk there. I know the route that we take to get there. Sometimes we go to the library.

Today we go to the [children's centre] which is my absolute favourite place. I like the space and I like the toys there, and I get to choose what we play. I don't usually like to put my coat and shoes on but it's OK to go to [children's centre].

We get there on the bus. I also really like the bus so it's very exciting. Sometimes I get upset if a bus comes and we don't get on it. Dada shows me a map on his phone where we can watch the right number of bus and see when it is coming to us. That makes me less sad if we don't get the first bus because I see where mine is. On the bus we can look out the window. When we need to leave [children's centre] my Dada lets me go on his shoulders. We get the bus home. My home is a nice place to come back to.

While free bus passes are much celebrated, many children and young people express frustration with limited timetables and unreliability. This makes it difficult to access activities or arrive on time:

 *Difficult to travel out my hometown due to rubbish buses.*

MSYP


Lack of public transport to orchestra on school nights, no communal bus etc.

MSYP

The unreliability of public transport is something I would change. It makes a lot of people late so much for stuff. I remember standing at the bus stop and I've been late for school many times because buses just haven't showed up when they're supposed to.

Willow, age 17, Glasgow

This is particularly challenging for children and young people in rural areas where the lack – or infrequency – of public transport creates barriers to socialising and accessing amenities. For example, children and young people in Shetland told us that they could catch a bus to their youth club in Lerwick in the afternoon, but that it wasn't possible to get a bus home until the next day. Children and young people from other rural areas and small towns share their experiences:

 *I wish we had a bus I could go on to the library and pool so my parents didn't have to drive me....I wish people in the countryside got a bus like people in the town do.*

Tiglo, age 11, Perth & Kinross


Living in rural constituency can have various challenges – connectivity, facilities, poor transport links etc.

MSYP

More buses to the town I live in and more regularly. Buses to and from the town I live in is every two hours and it is two that arrive within five minutes of each other.


anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Many children and young people are conscious of the additional transport barriers that their peers in remote and rural areas face in terms of their ability to participate in national decision-making. They feel opportunities are often concentrated in the central belt:


 *Just living in Glasgow gives us such a huge advantage because getting to Edinburgh to go to the Parliament is so easy, you just hop on the train. If I lived in Shetland, that would be multiple hours, possibly days' worth of travelling and it just wouldn't be feasible for most people.*

Delilah, age 16, Glasgow


Some young people – particularly girls and young women express concerns over safety while using public transport. They call for better lighting and visibility at stops:

 *There was an unsafe bus stop by the train station, and it just disappeared.*
anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Group

Others point out that some night buses are not covered by their bus pass. They feel that every night service should be included so that girls and young women never have to walk due to being unable to afford the bus:

 *As soon as the night buses start in Edinburgh you have to pay £3. That's when you need it most, because it's so unsafe.*
anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Group

Some children and young people are calling for an expansion of free travel passes to cover other forms of transport – such as trains. They say buses are not always suitable for all children and young people, nor do they cover all necessary routes:


 *I think that the Young Scot card, one thing that's been really difficult for a lot of people is that it's not the free train travel as well as the free bus travel because a lot of my friends they get trains to school and it's costing them so much every single day.*

Willow, age 17, Glasgow

Should be free transport for trains as I am scared of the bus, but we get free bus transfer.


anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

Other children called for increased investment and expansion in public transport more generally due to environmental concerns:

 *I think we need more buses and trains. There used to be a station near me. The government should bring back the old stations.*


Tiglo, age 11, Perth & Kinross

Again, children and young people are conscious of adults' perceptions of them when using public transport. Many say these perceptions are unfair – judging all young people on the basis of their age rather than their actions. Some are worried by calls from some adults to remove the free bus pass scheme, pointing out that buses are sometimes the only free, indoor spaces that children and young people have available – particularly in winter. Some children feel worried that their parents might decide to take their bus pass away.

 *Lack of free space...Not any spaces we feel safe.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

At the same time, some children and young people feel more should be done to address antisocial and bullying behaviour on public transport by people of all ages:

 *Live close by to public transport links (both trains and buses) however, anxiety prevents me from often using these due to the type of behaviour that is often happening...*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland

On my birthday, I think Celtic won and people were throwing a whole party on the bus! There's no rules on the bus.

Lewis, age 10, Glasgow



One autistic child shared a particularly distressing incident. He also called for the free bus pass to have an option that limits travel to a certain area so that he did not go too far from home:



Harry's story, age 14, Midlothian

I can't stay in my local area because I have been threatened by a kid in the area. His friend and him spotted me in town and beat me up. I ran onto the bus but they got on and continued to hit me. No-one helped. When I got off the bus a stranger helped to chase the boys away and the guy took me to A&E. I have lots of friends which I travel every day to see but because I often don't come home at night, often staying out for a couple of nights at a time, I am not allowed to have the free bus pass because I would use it to travel all over Scotland.


If there could be a free bus pass that limits travel [to a certain] area that would be better to keep me safe. I feel the adults in Scotland should know how to keep me safe – why should I have to tell them how to do it?

Overall, children and young people say reliable public transport is essential for their mobility, independence and staying in touch with friends. While the free bus pass scheme is widely celebrated, they call for action to address challenges of patchy provision, unreliable services, safety concerns and negative attitudes to ensure fair and equal access for all.

4.3 Things to do

Children and young people's stories highlight a clear divide between those living in the cities, and those living in smaller towns and rural areas when it comes to feeling satisfied with how much there is to do.

Children living in cities talk about having lots of options:

 *There are lots of places I like to visit nearby – like the zoo, the shopping centre and the science museum.*

William, age 10, Edinburgh

Whereas those living in smaller towns, villages and more rural areas face challenges:

 *There's not loads to do in the place where I live.*

Ion, age 4, Scottish Borders

Life is boring where I live, there is nothing to do for 20 mins away on a train!

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

My town is kind of boring. It's very boring. There's nothing to do. Only my house, school and Lidl, there isn't much to do. I go out with my friends, a lot! I sometimes go to the next town, to the High Street or I like going into Edinburgh.

anonymous, supported by Circle

More things in rural areas, lack of access to a lot of things.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Access to public services

Children and young people highlight the importance of having access to public services such as libraries, swimming pools and community sports centres. These play a crucial role in their education, health and social lives.


Libraries are seen as valuable spaces for learning and connecting with others. For some children, they provide access to books and reliable internet that they may not have at home:

 *I live beside the [area] library... The Wi-Fi in my house is really glitchy, so I go to the library and use the computers there.*

Lewis, age 10, Glasgow

I'm a huge book worm so I think...it would go without saying that I think reading is really important for everybody. But having free public libraries is incredibly important for young people as, even young people, children and adults, because it encourages people to keep reading and also allows people to further their education for free and have access to all of the...like hundreds of thousands of books constantly.

Delilah, age 16, Glasgow

 *I like to do lots of reading and writing and like to go to the library. I write mostly stories, but a mixture of everything really.*


anonymous, age 13, supported by Circle

Some libraries offer clubs and activities where children enjoy learning new skills:

 *We have a really good library near us... I did a great coding club there.*

Tiglo, age 11, Perth & Kinross

Access to community sports centres is another recurring theme. Children frequently express how much they enjoy being active, both indoors and out:


 *I like the library and the school MUGA.*

Charlie, age 5, Midlothian

I go to the gym with my mum. It also feels good to be active outside.


anonymous, supported by Circle

At the same time, many children and young people feel frustrated at the lack of local options. Some have to travel far to find suitable facilities or simply feel that there isn't much available near them:

 *I love football. I enjoy playing at the pitches at [High School in nearby town]. My friends and I often are dropped off and picked up by our parents – I wish there was more places for football in my local area.*

Alfie, age 14, North Lanarkshire

Many children mention the poor condition or closure of local swimming pools, limiting their opportunities for leisure, exercise and to learn a lifesaving skill:


 *The local pool is shut, it's been shut for about a year. I used to love that and go a lot. I'm not so into sports.*

anonymous, supported by Circle

Swimming pools are really gross and need to be made better.


MSYP

One young carer said they had a free pass for the pool, but hadn't been able to use it because it was shut:

 *I am a young carer. I get a free pass; I can get into the gym and swim. I want to go swimming, but the swimming pool has been shut for nearly a year.*

anonymous, supported by Circle


For disabled children and those with sensory issues, accessibility of swimming pools and sports centres is a particular concern:

 *I want to learn to swim but there are no teachers who use BSL.*

Charlie, age 5, Midlothian


I used to go swimming at the local pool with my family and I loved it because it was warm but the council stopped it to get more money off someone else paying for it. My mum and other mums said they would pay but the council said no. It makes me sad because it was a safe space for me to have fun. Other pools are too cold and hurt my body.

Dave, age 13, Edinburgh

 *Angus doesn't like the astroturf...yeah because it's scratchy. And he's sensitive to sound.*


parent of one-year-old, Tayside

For other children, the main barrier is that classes are oversubscribed due to low provision:

 *I live right next to the swimming pool; I don't have far to walk. I always ask for swimming lessons but it's always full. I've only gone to the free play.*

Lewis, age 10, Glasgow

Cost remains a key barrier to accessing public services more generally. While libraries remain free, many activities come with a price that can be prohibitive:

 *We have an ok pool. I wish the pool was free like the library is... The grown-ups in charge just think about money not what is best for me... I think Scotland should make kids activities free.*

Tiglo, age 11, Perth & Kinross

Overall, children's stories reveal the everyday impacts of cuts to public services. Many children and young people are calling for greater investment and access – be it libraries, swimming pools or community sports centres. They emphasise the need to make these spaces more affordable, accessible and available to all:

 *A better library, sports would be nice.*

Ion, age 4, Scottish Borders

I'd like to do more sports. I would like to do a K-Pop dance class. I would go into Edinburgh to do this if there was one on.

anonymous, supported by Circle



We should have more free clubs that children can attend.

Misha, age 11, Glasgow

Better sport services.

MSYP

Spaces for babies

Parents and carers emphasise the importance of having accessible spaces within their communities where they are able to bring their babies to play, explore and socialise. Baby-friendly shops, cafes and other amenities all make a difference – as do tailored offers such as baby and toddler groups, and soft play centres. Together, these options are vital for ensuring caregivers have opportunities for social connection, feel supported, as well as supporting their babies' early development through new environments, learning and interaction with others.

Children's centres, baby and toddler groups are a favourite among young children and their parents, offering opportunities for structured and free play and learning. However, not all babies are as interested in the toys as their parents might expect! As one mother reflects:



Robin there are all these toys here and you're like 'here's ma toe! Don't want to explore all these toys'.

parent of nine-month-old, Tayside



Baby Ciara's story, Tayside

I wake up with mum lifting me out the buggy and it's a bright space and quite noisy. I am not sure where we are and I cry.


We go to a room with other babies. I have been here before and it feels familiar. I get to play with some blocks and coloured balls. I can hear my mum talking above me. I am interested in the other babies and try to move towards them but I am going back even when I try to push forward. Mum picks me up and takes me to a mat where she sits me in front of her. A lady gives me paper with colours on it. I lean forward to touch the colours and they move. They feel cold and wet. I use both my arms to move them back and forward and mix them together. I look at my fingers which are different now, and try touching my hands together. I open and close my hand to see what happens. I put my fingers in my mouth to taste but mum says no and takes the fingers out. I put them back in, but she moves my arm away. I am going to put them back in, but she lays me down on my tummy on more colours. I move these about and it's interesting to watch them. I like this feeling and I kick my legs. It is hard to hold up my head and I drop it down onto the colours. Mum lifts me up and wipes my face which I don't like. I am getting uncomfy and let mum know by squirming and trying to turn.

My mum takes my clothes off and puts me into warm water. I wave my arms and the splash is interesting. I don't like having the cloth on my face, but I like seeing water pour out of a toy. I splash and some water gets on my face, so I make a sound. I like feeling my mum smooth her hands over my arms and legs and back with soap. Mum lifts me into a towel. I like lying in the towel but I don't like getting my nappy on or

my clothes. I hear another baby is crying and I might cry too. Mum sings a song that I recognise so I look at her while she is singing.

We sit on a sofa beside another baby and I hear my mum talking. I am looking at the other baby and try to reach out to touch their face, but mum moves my hand away. I am interested in their eyes and want to feel them. I make a loud noise to tell them I can't reach but nothing happens. I am feeling hungry so I start turning my head to get to the milk and making sounds. My mum sees this, and she turns me so I am in her arm and lifts up her t-shirt so I can drink. I drink fast to start with and then more slowly. I am starting to get tired, and close my eyes while I am drinking.

Many parents and carers feel there is a shrinking space for babies in their communities. For many, cost is an issue. For example, while babies enjoy soft play and the opportunity to interact with other babies, many parents mention the cost of this (and other indoor activities) prevents them from attending regularly. All parents and carers engaged by Art at the Start called for more options and places to take their babies:

 *I wish there were more places to take them. There's nowhere nice inside.*

parent of one-year-old, Tayside

Something not costly as well.


parent of two-year-old, Tayside

This, coupled with the expense of childcare means parents and carers take their babies along to activities for their older children:

 *I take her everywhere with the older two, football, kickboxing, dancing.*

parent of nine-month-old, Tayside

Parents and carers feel there are also other ways in which existing spaces can be more baby-friendly. A key issue is recognition of babies' different needs and to make things more inclusive. For example, one mum suggested that community spaces could be more baby-friendly by offering ear defenders:


 *I know it's the parent's job to bring stuff if they need it but it would be good if that could be shared, because you're always going to forget something.*

parent, Tayside

Youthwork, clubs and activities

Children and young people share that youth clubs and activities are essential, offering a space to relax, unwind, socialise, learn new skills and, for some, to escape the stresses of home life. Many feel youth clubs help foster their sense of identity, community and belonging, while at the same time offering a safe place for children and young people to gather in their communities.

For many, youth clubs and activities are ways to pursue interests like art, music and drama:

 *I go to the Haven at the Community Centre. It's a place you can go to do activities like crafts and hanging out. I used to go every Wednesday, but I've not been for a wee while. I would like to go to a Youth Club or do something like that after school.*

anonymous, supported by Circle


I used to go to the drama group at the Hub with another person. I would like to go back.

anonymous, supported by Circle

I am in Girlguiding and I act in shows. I play guitar and I'm in a few bands. It's hard to get everyone together to practice because we are all so busy.

Chaz, age 15, Edinburgh

Youth clubs and activities are also important places to learn new skills – often ones that are not taught at school:

 *Scouting has provided me with skills for life that have helped guide me on a much better path for life such as graduating high school, being accepted into university.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland


CLIMBING! I love climbing, I go to climbing lessons every Saturday and go climbing three or four times a week in a different place....It's so fun to go climbing and my other hobbies. It feels a sense of achievement after I've done a really hard climb.

Rowpow, age 8, Midlothian

I go to Scouts. It is all outside all year. I really like it. We get to learn knife skills and cooking and camping. I love going to Scout ScotJam. School should be like Scouts. Scouts is my biggest hobby. My mum keeps telling me I can't earn all the Scouts badges because there are too many but I think I can...When it was lockdown I earned every single Beaver Scout badge. The Scout leaders are funny....Boys at Scouts are disgusting.

Tiglo, age 11, Perth & Kinross

Youthwork plays a particularly significant role for children and young people whose rights are most at risk. For example, neurodivergent and disabled children shared that youth clubs help them feel empowered, safe and accepted:

 *Barnardo's helps me a lot. I go to a holiday hub and they are the best people and make lots of fun with me. I also go to a club at Capability Scotland and they are really important because they help me have fun and meet friends and make me feel special.*

Dave, age 13, Edinburgh

I go to lots of clubs. It is important because I have friends at my ASN clubs. I love football and I play in two ASN clubs every week. I go to multi-sports clubs too. I like my clubs because people talk to me there and are friendly.


LMHM, age 10, Glasgow

For young asylum-seekers and refugees, clubs offer a vital community:

 *Boxing, gym and football are good.*

Messi, age 17, and Mohammed Ali, age 15, North Ayrshire

For young carers, targeted youth clubs and support groups offer connection with others who share similar life experiences. These groups offer crucial emotional support and respite from their responsibilities at home:

 *Young carers groups treat us as humans and young people unlike the rest of society.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Feel valued in groups with young carers and good to know others experience similar.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

A group where you feel normal that's why funding is so important for young carers.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Feeling someone is there for your highs and lows and understands your position in the caring role.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Good to have groups of friends with the same life as you and having same in common can bring an understanding and don't feel alone. Nice to get a break from life with residential and breaks.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Rights champions in my life is Carers Trust Scotland and PKAVS.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

You want them to be local enough for access, especially with caring responsibilities.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland



Artwork by young person supported by CYCJ

Youthwork offers vital support to children and young people facing a variety of challenges in their daily lives:



Paige's story, age 14, Glasgow

I'm here [at Youth Club] because I keep getting into trouble where I stay. It is not one bit easy to be 14. Because of school, getting into trouble, fighting, drinking AND fighting, and it affects your mental health and all that. I think they drink because their mental health is poor, or we smoke weed, just anything to help cope.

It's so hard when money is tight, you can't DO anything. It stops you from actually being able to do nice things. Like go out with your friends, maybe to a carnival or something fun. But we've got no money for fun because fun is expensive. There's no money at home, so we fight.

I got the train down to the beach with some of my pals once, we had a speaker and were drinking. I just wanted to get into the sea for a swim, but no one wanted to come in with me. I lost my pals and ended up having to go back to the station on my own. But it was good just to get away for a day.

If I had a magic wand and could do anything, I'd wake up rich. I'd spend it on cars, makeup, clothes, shoes, going out to eat, having proper fun.




A video tour of our youth club!

Children and young people supported by Barnardo's Scotland took us on a video tour of their Wednesday youth club. The group had just received news that the club was closing down and wanted to share all the wonderful things that made youth club great and that they would miss.



Youth workers themselves are seen as critical to creating the supportive space and atmosphere that children and young people enjoy. Some young people say they feel more connected to their youth workers than to their teachers, and the relationships they form are key to their sense of safety, belonging and help build their confidence:

 *They do a mental health club. Lots of activities like colouring in and uno. The adults there are nice.*

anonymous, supported by Circle


Super cool, awesome person who comes to see me and is super cool and awesome, nurture advocacy within schools/Barnardo's lady.

Bartholemew, age 11, Dumfries & Galloway

Better relationships with youth workers than teachers.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and YMCA Paisley

Youthwork also plays an important role in empowering children and young people's participation in decision-making and campaigning for change on the issues that affect them:

 *Feeling like you're making an impact and are part of a group is a good feeling.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Youth workers help children meet their rights.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project



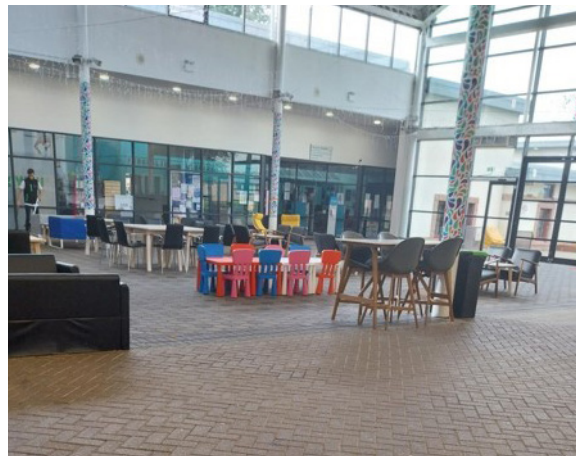
A walking tour of our community

A group of children and young people (age 12-18) supported by Aberlour told the story of life in their community through a walking tour:

We shared our stories by taking the adults for a walk around the area that we live in. We took pictures of the places, people and things that are important to us...

This is Rodger. He helps to run the youth club and is an important person to us as he is funny, keeps us safe and does games with us. We also love Jo, Lorna and Michelle! They are all very important characters in our stories!

This is the community centre. It's important to us because it's where the youth club and the library is. You can speak to adults who help your parents with money, and there is free food and sometimes clothes here. It is our centre and we agreed it's a really important place. We also go to clubs here.



Some children and young people face barriers in accessing youthwork and activities. Children and young people in rural areas, in armed forces families, neurodivergent children and disabled children all shared challenges they faced.

For children and young people in rural areas, the issue was a lack of provision and transport:



Geographic disparities in availability of youth programs.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland

Meanwhile, children in armed forces families face difficulties in getting to clubs due to deployment or disruption to membership due to constant moves:



When my dad is away it is hard to get to my clubs, especially when mum is working.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

Moving country, you're not able to join clubs or you join them then have to leave. Sometimes there is nothing when you move, like dancing.

Morgan

There are calls from neurodivergent and disabled children for more accessible and inclusive clubs and activities. Dave, Harry and Me, who are all autistic, shared their thoughts. Dave is also a wheelchair user:



There isn't a lot of choice for kids like me.

Dave, age 13, Edinburgh

I would like to go to a sports club but no one local can support me there due to autism and the owners of the clubs say I can't go.

Me, age 11

I have not joined any clubs because covid stopped all that and because of my additional needs I don't want to give groups a chance. I prefer one-to-one activities.

Harry, age 14, Midlothian

Unfortunately, funding cuts are leading to the closure of many youth clubs and activities. Children and young people express sadness, frustration and a deep sense of loss at the closure of clubs that have provided essential support, connection and opportunities to influence change:




I am going to miss everyone.

anonymous, supported by Barnardo's Scotland

Confused because honestly, you don't know what is going to happen in the future.

anonymous, supported by Barnardo's Scotland

 Youth clubs being shut down and no funding changed my life and made me more isolated.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Youth work cuts detract from abilities to have voices heard/rights empowered.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland



Willow's story, age 17, Glasgow

I would say there should be more funding for like youth charities and groups. [...] I think that it would provide a lot more opportunities for young people and it should be prioritised over ideas such as like national service, which I think is kinda an adult version of what they think is good for young people and like more money could be put towards funding these groups instead of a scheme like that.

The Youth Action Group was made purely just to involve young people and the work of [anti-bullying charity], we created so many resources that are used all over Scotland now. But now I believe the group can't run anymore due to funding. It's not got enough funding and it was a group that was really important to [us].

I also used to go to a youth group for young people experiencing abuse. It supported me in so many different ways after I'd left my own abusive home. But it also had to get shut down because there was a lack of funding and it meant that so many people missed out on these opportunities to get the help.


Delilah's story, age 16, Glasgow

There are cuts in funding. [Youth volunteering group] is not the only organisation that I've been part of that has experienced funding cuts which meant cuts to staffing or to opportunities because of the lack of funding and I think it's incredibly sad because it's slowly cutting off all the opportunities for young people to be supported while we're trying to make change.

Social services for young people have been cut all over Scotland, such as youth clubs or youth support services and it is being... they're removing a very important and very needed safe space for young people, especially in Glasgow where there's a high level of violence. There are lots of links between the cutting of these youth services and the increase in violence, which is not great and also it presents a very negative view of young people even though it's not our fault that the government is cutting funding to these very important spaces.

Places of worship

For some young people, places of worship offer an important sense of community. Children and young people highlight these as places where they build friendships and take part in youth groups.

 *I go to church all day Sunday, main service then afterwards Sunday school and to the youth group after that (5:30-9:00pm). I go home in between these. I get a lift from home to coastal town with someone from my church. I am friends with everyone in the church.*

anonymous, supported by Circle

[Q. Who would go in your Circle of Trust?] friends from church.


anonymous, supported by Circle

Some young people emphasised their right to freedom of religion and called for more to be done to ensure this was respected within communities.

 *More religious places...Right to practice own religion.*

MSYP

4.4 Getting help when I need it

 *My support worker is my rights champion – only person I can talk to and listens to me.*
anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Children and young people rely on a range of adults in their communities to provide support and help uphold their rights. While parents, carers, social workers, teachers and youth workers are central figures – as explored throughout this report – this section focuses on the vital role of independent advocates, healthcare professionals, independent guardians and recovery workers to help children and young people navigate the challenging times in their lives. As the stories show, while access to such support is vital, experiences are mixed, with some children and young people unable to access support when they need it most.

Independent guardians

Asylum-seeking children and young people speak about the crucial support provided by Guardianship Scotland. All unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, victims of trafficking and children at risk of trafficking who arrive in Scotland are entitled by law to an independent guardian. The service is delivered by Aberlour Children's Charity and Scottish Refugee Council.

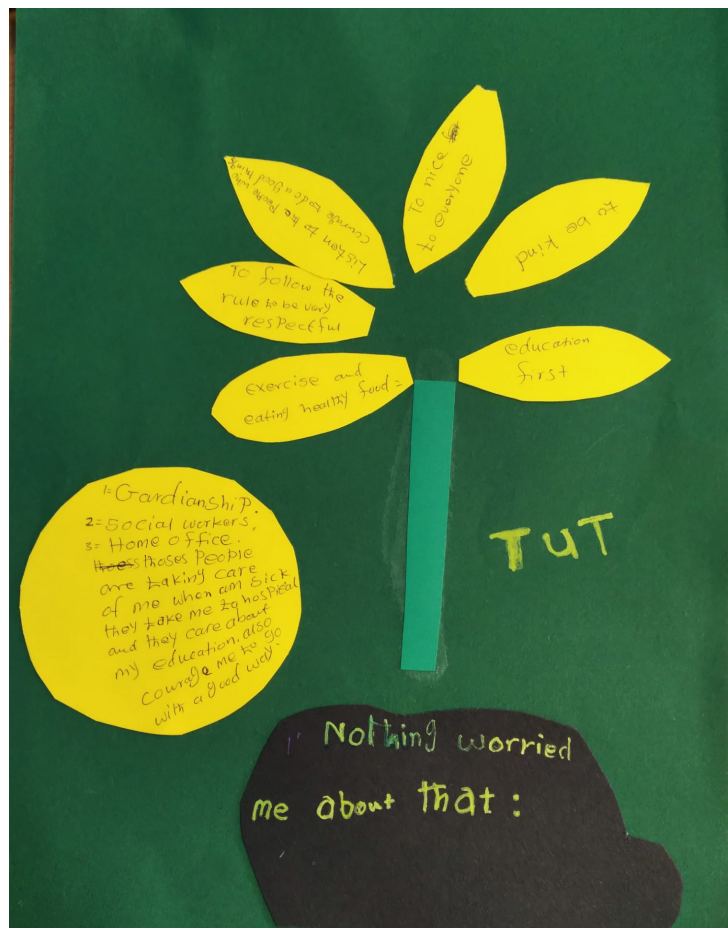
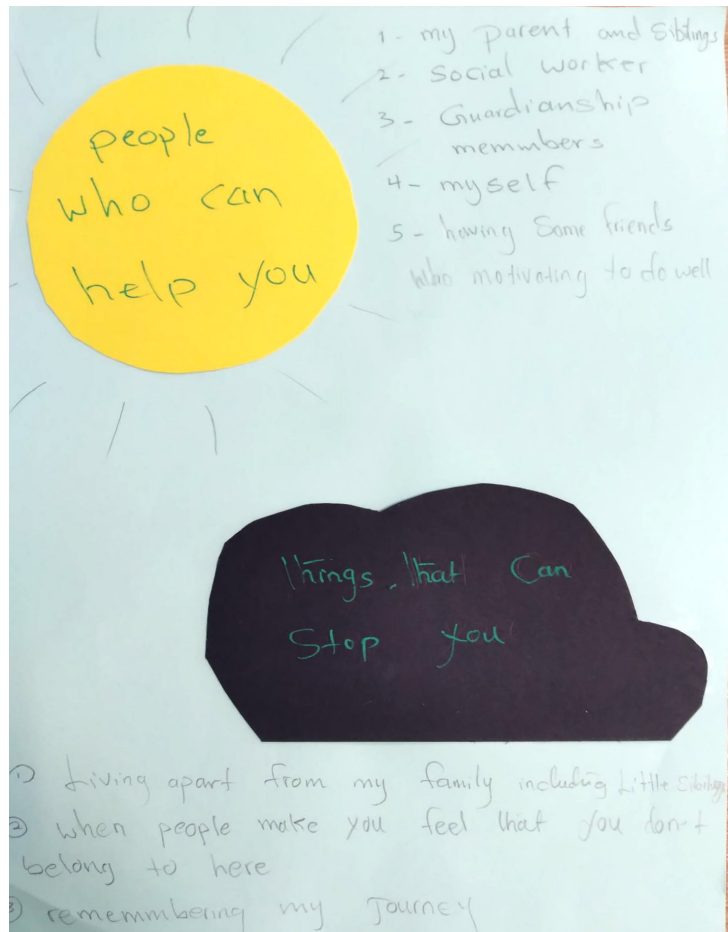
Young people share that their guardians are key 'Rights Champions', helping them to settle into a new life in Scotland. They support them to cope with being apart from their families in a new country, to learn about their rights, find suitable lawyers and navigate complex processes around trafficking, asylum, welfare, criminal justice and age assessment.

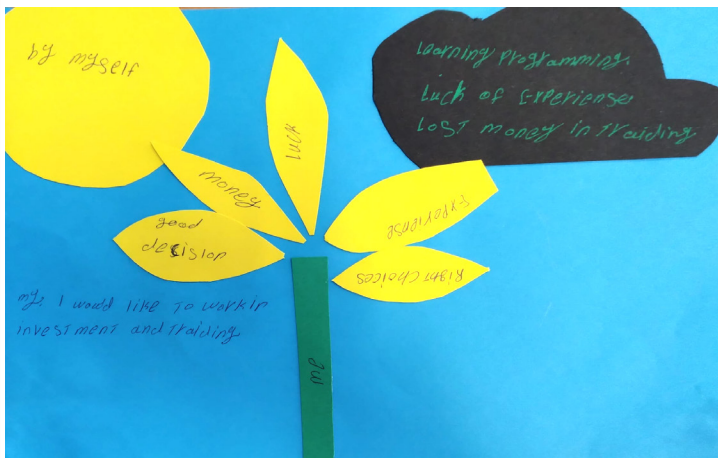
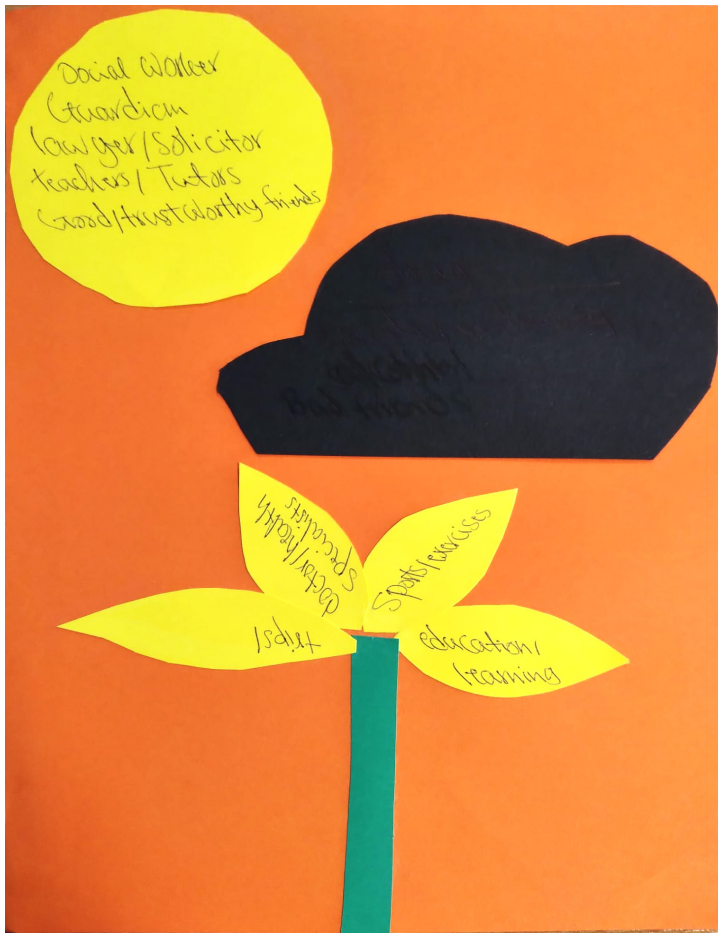


Art gallery: sunflowers

Asylum-seeking young people created sunflower collages to represent the things they need to grow up happy, healthy and safe (indicated on the petals); the people who help make sure that they have these things (the sun); and the barriers that can get in the way (the clouds).

Their creations emphasise the central role that Guardians play in their lives, acting as crucial sources of support.






By contrast, one young person decided to leave their sun blank, saying he did not need anyone to support him. Another wrote 'by myself', suggesting a sense of isolation in a new country, but also highlighting his determination to navigate challenges independently.

Independent advocates


Independent advocacy workers are another vital source of support for children and young people, particularly those who find it difficult to express their views in meetings or situations where there is an imbalance of power. Independent advocates stand alongside and speak up for the views of children and young people. They are independent in that they are not connected to any service provider and are not influenced by the views of others.

 **Q. What does a Rights Champion look like?**

 **A. My advocate**

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland

One young person who had experienced multiple traumas, including sexual assault and mental health crises, shared how her independent advocate had helped her to express herself:

 *I have an advocate who's very kind and helps me express my views, I get nervous in meetings and find them really hard. This helps me to express what I really think, though it doesn't always get heard even when it's the advocate talking for me.*

Cerys, age 15, Greater Glasgow and Clyde



Super Bears Inc.

Some young people designed their own 'Super Bears' – a team of superheroes to support children and young people in their communities. Some designs focus on the importance of children and young people having someone supportive to talk to if something is bothering them.

Name: Zandra-Adiva

Designed by: Zelda, age 16, South Lanarkshire

Zandra means 'helper' and Adiva means 'kind & gentle'. I picked this name because of the meanings as they relate to their powers.

Zandra-Adiva's powers include super hearing for all young people who aren't heard. Zandra-Adiva can hear them suffering and appears to assist them.

The appearance of the bear is rainbow because the colours represent all the different emotions that a young person would feel, to let them know that it's okay to feel different ways. Some people feel it is not okay to feel 'negative emotions' e.g. anger/sadness but Zandra-Adiva encourages and reminds them that it is okay.

Zandra-Adiva has some ribbons. The green ribbons on their wrist represent that she/he is always open for a hug as the colour green is the colour of 'hug me'. Both of these foot ribbons represent freedom which so many young people don't have. The blue ankle ribbon represents calmness, peace and love, whereas the yellow ribbon represents fun and creativity.

My bear would make young people feel more confident to realise they have their own rights and that there is always someone there for you. Also that it is important to speak to someone when you are struggling or when you are feeling down.



Name: Amarie

Designed by: Vanessa, age 17, South Lanarkshire

Amarie is a powerful name for a powerful, influential superhero.

Amarie's powers include the Power of Authenticity – helping young people to be who they truly are. Pushing through fears and judgement of how other people view them. Helping young people to focus on what is true to them and how to express it.

The Power of articulation to help young people to express how they think and feel.




Her bright colours represents the ‘inner child’ of young people and helps young people to feel happiness which encourages vulnerability.

The heart on her head represents wholeness, joy open-mindedness and acceptance for all – no matter their race, gender, sexuality etc.

Amarie would help young people to feel like they are not alone. Authenticity and vulnerability are the biggest things that young people struggle with; and she would act as a role model demonstrating how to be her most authentic self which would have a domino effect on other young people and allow them to follow suit.

Healthcare professionals

Children and young people’s stories highlight the important role played by doctors, nurses, dentists, mental health professionals and hospital staff. Staff who are kind and caring make a big difference:

 *My doctor is kind and always lets my mum come to my appointments with me.*

Bb16, age 16, Falkirk

I love my CAMHS worker and I go to her if I am having trouble.


Anna, age 15, Edinburgh

Many children and young people celebrate that healthcare is free in Scotland – with some expressing gratitude to adults for securing this:

 *Adults try to make things free (chemists).*

anonymous, supported by Circle

Others, like Alice and Delilah, celebrate that the NHS is free, but note that accessing timely healthcare is not always straightforward:

 *I’m grateful for free prescriptions and stuff but I was on a waiting list for my neurologist for over three years before I could get seen. I suffer from migraines and feel Scotland’s migraine care is not good.*

Alice, age 17, South Lanarkshire

In her story, Delilah also highlights how turning 16 meant she could manage her own healthcare decisions without her parent needing to be involved, an important step towards independence:



Delilah’s story, age 16, Glasgow

I have multiple highly complex rare diseases but I don’t have to worry about trying to be able to fund treatments for myself or my family doesn’t have to worry about that because we get everything for free.

But also, specifically I wanted this to signify that once you turn 16 in Scotland, you can transition to adult services and also you no longer need to tell your parents about what's going on, what appointments you're going to. And doctors they don't... if you get a letter from the hospital it doesn't go to your parents, it goes to the young person which means that the young people don't need to rely on their parents and they're classed as a completely separate adult which I think is really important especially if they have really complex relationships with their parents or if they have parents who work and they manage their own healthcare. It's completely up to them what they do and don't access.

But not only are young people struggling to access care for their mental health but they're struggling to access care for their physical health. As someone who has been on her fair share of waiting lists through the NHS, I know that the NHS is extremely important and it is also extremely over-worked and therefore all people, whether they're young people, children or adults, aren't receiving the care that they need even if it's an emergency or care for long-term conditions.

Some children and young people with rare conditions find it difficult to get treatment in Scotland. Delays in diagnosis and treatment have implications for both physical and mental health. Some young people also share experiences of being patronised by medical staff and struggling to feel heard which has resulted in a lack of trust:



Toby's story, age 15

My illness is quite rare, and there are no NHS diagnosis or treatment guidelines for it, but it is recognised by the WHO. We have had to travel to doctors in London for diagnosis and treatment, despite my mum asking NHS doctors at home if it could be investigated.

It has been very difficult to get professionals to listen to me or my parents and understand my illness. I feel really patronised, and it's like they are talking to a 4-year-old – or a dog!!

My mum has had medical professionals suggest that she hides medicine in my food, or lock me in my bedroom. I have been told that I have to 'just stop' being ill.

Luckily my parents understand me and my rights, and they protect me. I don't trust most doctors – because they don't listen and have experimented on me with medicine that made me feel sick.

An issue of concern to many children and young people is the crisis in mental health care. Children and young people are facing significant challenges in accessing support from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), with high thresholds and long waiting lists creating barriers for many.



I think it's really important to think about the current mental health crisis with young people. I have anxiety, depression and anorexia and I know I'm not alone. I love my CAMHS worker, and I go to her if I am having trouble...but there is nowhere near enough support for people struggling with their mental health.

Alice, age 17, South Lanarkshire

 Mental health should be a priority e.g. CAMHS.

MSYP

struggling in school

Public Places are terrifying

ANXIETY

in young people

WEIGHT on my chest

no one understands
the fear that runs
thru my body going
to school

Artwork by young person supported by Circle

uncomfortable

Long waiting lists are a common source of anxiety and frustration:

 When is the Scottish Government going to look at the shocking mental health wait lists?

Willow, age 17, Glasgow


I have been helped by CAMHS with my medicines, but it took a long time to get help. If they had been quicker, it would have been better for me. The CAMHS lady helps me with my tablets. They helped a lot but took a long time for mum asking for help.

Bb16, age 16, Falkirk

For children in armed forces families, this issue is compounded by regular moves meaning they have to rejoin the waiting list in their new location. For some this means they choose to remain registered in their prior location and travel long distances for appointments.


 Appointments with a GP or dentist are hard to get.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

 *Moving around disrupted being on waitlists, so chose to stay registered in England to get treatment even though living in Scotland.*

Emily

Some children and young people are able to turn to private healthcare to get timely support, but recognise that not everyone has this option:


 *I go to a private therapist who is great. She really helps me to get through all my struggles.*

Toby, age 15

NHS waiting lists are long and people are having to go private, but some can't afford it. People are pushed to paying for private.


Lena

For young carers, the struggle is often even more acute, as their caring responsibilities can take a significant impact on their mental health, particularly when they do not receive the support they need at school. They call for more support and preventative action:

 *[Need for] more support for the protection of youth mental health.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

While the NHS is using artificial intelligence (AI) to help reduce some waiting lists,⁴² MCPs have been exploring potential impacts of wider AI use in healthcare.⁴³ They saw some benefits in terms of access:

 *AI lets more people get healthcare. Not every country gets free healthcare so AI could make it easier.*

MCP, Stirling

However, they identified potential challenges around trust, accuracy and privacy:

 *Doctors are trusted but AI systems can't reassure you.*

MCP, Stirling

AI doesn't get everything right – you need a human.

MCP, Stirling

What if AI diagnoses you wrong?

MCP, Stirling

If there's a new illness, AI might not know it.

MCP, Stirling

 Sometimes you don't want people to know what's wrong with you.

MCP, Stirling



Bairns' Hoose

Bairns' Hoose is Scotland's approach to the Icelandic 'Barnahus' which means 'children's house'. It offers a holistic, child-centred support to those who have been victims or witnesses of abuse, and to children under the age of criminal responsibility whose behaviour has caused harm.

Children and young people who are helping to shape the Bairns' Hoose and young people supported by the Bairns' Hoose children and family recovery support team have highlighted their experiences through song, poetry and in letters to key adults around them.



A letter to my recovery worker⁴⁴

In this powerful letter, the Changemakers (Changemakers | Children First) – eight girls under the age of 16 who have been victims and witnesses of crime – explain how important their relationship with their Children First recovery worker is.

To My Recovery Worker,

We need your support from the moment we have told someone what has happened. We need it before we go to be interviewed by the police and social work and before everything becomes out of our hands.

All we want is to be supported by a worker who we know has our best interests at heart because it does not always feel everyone else does. We know that you hear our voice. You are honest with us, and we know what we tell you is private.

You have been there for us on our bad days, our good days, or the days we're just getting through. You see us for who we are and meet us wherever we are. I never feel like I need to impress you or put on a front. There's no pressure and I just feel comfortable with you.

I know you want to help my whole family; I am happy when I see you supporting the people I love. I know you want to help keep us together when things are tearing us apart. You show us you are real people; we make each other laugh and you feel like my best pal. Some days all I can manage is a McDonalds in my jammies and you make that OK. Other days you're with me for my most difficult moments.

If I didn't have you there would be no one. I would be alone. I worry about other people who have experienced what I have but don't have you because then who is there? You have helped me process so much and I don't know how I would have done it without you.

At the end of the day with you I don't need to be happy or sad, I can just be me.
From The Changemakers



Sophie's song

One young person, supported by the Children First Bairns Hoose children and family recovery support team, wanted to share her experience of the justice system, to inform change and bring awareness of her experience. She wanted to put her views into a song, but she wanted someone else to take her core feelings, turn them into lyrics and sing the song.

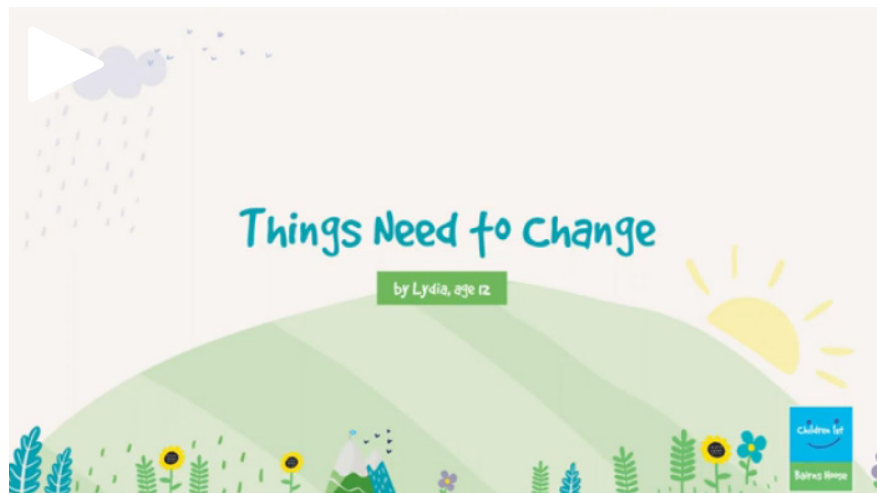
The young person identified the core themes of her story, which were feeling strong, brave, wanting people to listen to her, and wanting to be in a place that was safe and warm and felt like home.



Lydia's poem

Children First has been working alongside another young person who wanted to raise awareness of her experiences of the justice process. She identified which parts of her story she wanted to share to illustrate the importance of change for children and young people.


She has written a poem to share her experience of the Joint Investigative Interview process and awaiting court. Lydia's poem has been shared with police officers, social workers, and court officials, to highlight the struggles and challenges that she faced at this time to inform and influence important change.



Police

Children and young people from a range of backgrounds wanted to tell us about the police.


For many children and young people, the police are key adults who play a role in upholding their rights and supporting them. In the stories already highlighted in this chapter, we see children and young people looking to the police to help them feel safe in their communities – such as responding to harassment faced by young asylum-seekers and taking action on drugs. We also see children looking to the police to help protect the environment:

 *I think there needs to be a litter police department in Scotland with cameras and big fines.*

Tiglo, age 11, Perth & Kinross



However, the stories also show more nuanced views, with some children and young people frustrated at the police being called when they are simply out spending time with friends, and some children (or parents) thinking the police might come if they do something ‘wrong’ or are out alone:

 *Police getting called because of our age so can't even go walks with friends to clear our heads.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland


I'm scared to go to the park in case the police come and ask me where my parents are and take me away, well that's what my mum thinks. I don't think that, but my mum is scared that it will happen.

Lewis, age 10, Glasgow

I hit her [neighbour's] window with the ball and then you're all running away. The police didn't actually come.

Lewis, age 10, Glasgow

For others, the police had been part of a holistic approach to supporting them when the young person had done something worrying, ultimately helping to reach a positive outcome:

 *When I couldn't cope I hurt myself bad and took stuff. I could not tell as my papa died and I didn't want to. I now have a few friends I talk to...I spoke to the school, police and my head of house when something bad happened to me and they listened and mum got me help. I feel good now. I don't like talking about feelings.*

Bb16, age 16, Falkirk



A walking tour of our community

A group of children and young people (age 12-18) supported by Aberlour Children's Charity told the story of life in their community through a walking tour. Here they tell us about their local police station:

We shared our stories by taking the adults for a walk around the area that we live in. We took pictures of the places, people and things that are important to us.

We realised that we all had a part of our story which was about people fighting in our local community. Some of us felt excited when this happened, some of us felt sad, some were worried and a few people felt angry.

We talked about our right to be safe and how we kept safe when these things happen. We shared that we often went to play inside or tell an adult.

Across the road from our youth club is the police station. None of us have ever been in the police station because there is no way of getting in – there's no front door!

We agreed that it would be good to know the police who are meant to help to keep us safe. The adults who run the youth club also hadn't been able to get in to meet them!



4.5 What the adults have been saying...

The stories from babies, children and young people reflect many of the themes that are highlighted in the 2023 concluding observations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UN Committee).⁴⁵ This section highlights some of those recommendations – drawing from Together’s child friendly version⁴⁶ – as well as the child-friendly response from Scottish Government.⁴⁷

What does the UN Committee say?



Governments should make a plan to make sure that all children have the right to play, no matter who they are or where they live.⁴⁸ Governments should talk to children when making decisions about play spaces and their communities.⁴⁹

Children have the right to be a part of any group that they feel passionate about. Governments should support children who are standing up to adults (including the government) and make sure they feel safe when doing so. This includes children who are climate activists.

The UN Committee says governments should stop letting people use ‘mosquito devices’. These are machines that make a high-pitched noise that only children can hear. They are sometimes put on buildings so that children and young people won’t gather there.⁵⁰

The UN Committee also says that governments should make sure all children have access to the internet. Not every child has their own phone or computer, so they should be able to get online in other ways – for example at the library.⁵¹

Governments should also make sure that all children can go to good doctors and hospitals to get the care that they need. Children should have a say in decisions about their healthcare. Governments should always think about what children need when making decisions about healthcare, especially those who have a harder time getting healthcare such as transgender children, disabled children, children who have moved from another country, or children whose families don’t have much money.⁵²

The UN Committee is worried that lots of children are waiting a very long time to get help with their mental health. Governments should do something about this right away. They should make sure that there is support for all children, including young children. They should also make sure children can get treatment and support close to home and in their communities. Children should be able to say what they think about their care and governments should spend more money on supporting good mental health to stop issues getting worse or happening in the first place.⁵³

The UN Committee says children who have been hurt or treated badly should get the help they need to recover. This help should be given in a caring way and in a way that protects their rights.⁵⁴

What has the Scottish Government said?



In its response to the UN Committee’s recommendations, Scottish Government said it wants Scotland to be a cleaner, healthier and happier place for everyone.⁵⁵

It said that children and young people have the right to gather safely and express their views. Children and young people also have the right to protest about things they care about. Scottish Government said it wants people to be safe, so supports Police Scotland to make sure everyone can protest safely. It also says it will work with Police Scotland to help make sure that children and young people can meet in groups safely.⁵⁶

Scottish Government said that mental health is very important. Everyone should be able to get help when and where it's needed. It said it is giving money to local authorities to help pay for community mental health services. Scottish Government also said it is giving money to the NHS to improve the mental health services that are already in place. This includes support for neurodivergent children and young people.⁵⁷

Scottish Government said it wants all children who have been hurt or treated badly to have the help and support they need in a way that makes them feel safe.⁵⁸

4.6 Ideas to help



Babies, children and young people across Scotland have shared powerful insights about their experiences of life in their local communities. Their stories highlight both positive aspects and areas where more work is needed to fully embed a children's human rights approach. Based on their voices, here are key recommendations for furthering a children's human rights approach in Scotland's communities:

Embedding children's rights:

- Ensure children's rights are at the heart of all local community planning and decision-making. As Chaz, age 15, from Edinburgh said: "My area is in the centre of [Edinburgh]. There's loads to do which is great but it's really busy and I find the roads a bit scary".
- Incorporate children's rights into the design and maintenance of public spaces. Many children highlight issues with litter and poor upkeep. As Dave, age 13, from Edinburgh shared: "Make my community not look rubbish. Edinburgh is dirty looking and embarrassing".
- Ensure all community services and facilities are developed with children's rights in mind. As Tiglo, age 11, from Perth & Kinross said: "We have an ok pool. I wish the pool was free like the library is... The grown-ups in charge just think about money not what is best for me".

Equality and non-discrimination:

- Address the disproportionate impact of poverty on children's access to community facilities and activities. One participant supported by the Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland noted: "Being discriminated against for what area you come from".
- Ensure equal access to safe, welcoming public spaces for all children, including girls and young women, disabled children, and those from minority ethnic backgrounds. As one participant supported by the Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project said: "In Glasgow, being able to access public spaces as young women, lack of lighting doesn't feel safe".

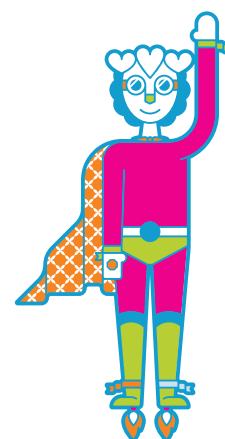
- Provide targeted support to ensure refugee and asylum-seeking children can fully participate in community life. As Messi, age 17, from North Ayrshire shared: “In general, my area is ok but there are some troublemakers...some young people used to harass us and we had to contact the police”.

Empowering children:

- Give children more say in decisions affecting their local communities, particularly around the design of public spaces and provision of services. As Ion, age 4, from Scottish Borders said: “I want to ride my bike everywhere instead of having to go in the car”.
- Provide accessible information to children about their rights related to community participation and local decision-making.
- Support children to maintain connections with their communities, particularly when facing challenges. As Garfield, age 12, from East Ayrshire shared: “I love being outdoors – that is who I am. I go out in all weathers. I don’t care if I am cold, wet or too warm – I love going out”.

Participation:

- Involve children in designing and improving public spaces, transport systems, and community facilities. Many children share detailed ideas about how to improve their local areas.
- Create mechanisms for children to meaningfully participate in local authority decision-making. As one participant supported by the Scottish Youth Parliament said: “Youth work cuts detract from abilities to have voices heard/ rights empowered”.
- Ensure children’s views are heard and respected in decisions about community safety and policing. Many children share concerns about feeling unsafe or unfairly targeted in public spaces.



Accountability:

- Establish clear, child-friendly complaints procedures for local services and facilities. Many children feel unheard when raising concerns about their communities.
- Ensure transparency in local authority decision-making processes affecting children’s lives in the community. As Willow, age 17, from Glasgow said: “There are cuts in funding. [Youth volunteering group] is not the only organisation that I’ve been part of that has experienced funding cuts which meant cuts to staffing or to opportunities because of the lack of funding”.
- Regularly monitor and report on how children’s rights are being upheld in different community settings, including collecting disaggregated data on access to services and facilities.

Overall, children and young people are calling for communities that truly listen to them, respect their rights, and support them to reach their full potential. As Alfie, age 14, from North Lanarkshire shared: “Our area of [town] can be a little boring – there’s not much to do but the Safety Zone (community group) try their best. The community is unrivalled and safe. Everyone knows each other. You can’t make the two min walk to the shop with my mum without stopping to say hello to neighbours who are also friends and family”. Ensuring all children can feel this sense of belonging and safety in their communities should be the goal of a children’s human rights approach.



Chapter 5: **Life online**

Artwork by young people supported by CYCJ

5.1 Screentime

For many children and young people, being online is part of their daily lives, providing opportunities to connect with others, learn new things and relax. However, managing screentime can be a challenge and it sometimes feels difficult to strike a healthy balance.

While time spent online varies, some report spending upwards of six or seven hours a day, especially when combining social media, streaming and gaming. From the stories we received, there seems to be a pattern with time spent online generally increasing with age:

 *I spend at least two to four hours a day. Not as much as I think!*

Member of Scottish Youth Parliament (MSYP)

I love being online although I know I can find it hard to stop and not be obsessed with stuff.

Bb16, age 16, Falkirk

I spend about three hours a day on my phone. I know this is really bad and I want to lower it but don't know how.

Anna, age 15, Edinburgh

11+ hours a day.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

I spend roughly six hours a day online.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

I spend about four hours a day online. Less if I am doing something. More if I'm chilling.

Chaz, age 15, Edinburgh

I don't really go online much. I only play Minecraft and stuff and use it in school.


Dave, age 13, Edinburgh

For those with additional support needs, being online can provide a source of comfort and stability:

 *I like being online. It helps me regulate. I spend probably three hours online every day.*

LMHM, age 10, Glasgow

Despite these benefits, excessive screentime can have negative consequences. There is recognition that too much time online can start to impact other areas of their lives:

 *Screen time could affect education.*

MSYP

Meanwhile others describe online content as:


 *Purposely addictive...it takes away from everyday life.*

MSYP

Brain rot – bad.

MSYP

For many children and young people, adults play an important role in helping them to develop better habits and encourage balance. Open conversations around screentime can help young people better manage their time online. Some children and young people appreciate when parents and carers work with them to set reasonable limits:

 *I really enjoy going on YouTube but my parents are not happy about how much time I spend on it. I have an hour on it on weekdays and 90 minutes at the weekends.*

anonymous, supported by Barnardo's Scotland

I don't spend a lot of time online. I am allowed my iPad on a Wednesday after school and at the weekend.

Gerald, age 10, North Lanarkshire


Fixed time limits would be good so you can't be online all of the time.

Bb16, age 16, Falkirk

By setting limits together, young people can feel supported and more in control of their own habits. These stories highlight the importance of parents and carers setting boundaries with children in a collaborative way, having conversations about why such limits are important, supporting young people to reflect on their digital habits, and encouraging a healthy balance with activities that offer a break from screens – such as outdoor time, hobbies and face-to-face interactions.

Digital barriers

While too much screentime is a concern for some, others face barriers to getting online at all. Limited access to devices, lack of data or unreliable Wi-Fi are all reported as making it difficult for some children and young people to fully engage in the digital world:

 *Disparities in deprived areas access to online spaces and devices (especially seen during covid).*


anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland

I'd make my computer better, faster so I could play games better...it can be slow.

anonymous, age 12, East Lothian




These digital barriers can also affect their education, with some young people feeling left behind:

 *Didn't grow up within a technology savvy house and it definitely held me back in higher education as I lacked basic computer skills that are really important for life in general.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland

On the other hand, some young people spoke positively about devices they had received through school.

 *Having our school iPad was amazing. I think these should be extended until you finish college or training as it's so good to have access. Continue to be able to access until we are working.*

Bb16, age 16, Falkirk

Although for others these were not reliable:

 *My school has laptops and iPads, but they are rubbish. They never work properly.*

Tiglo, age 11, Perth & Kinross

These stories highlight the importance of maintaining and expanding programmes around digital access and literacy, ensuring that children and young people from all backgrounds have the technology and skills to help them succeed.

5.2 Keeping in touch

For many young people, being online is vital for staying connected with others, whether this is through social media or messaging apps. For children and young people who are facing challenges or feeling isolated, these platforms can offer a sense of connection and support. One girl who was waiting for an autism diagnosis shared how it helped her:

 *I like being online as I am generally quite isolated and it helps me feel less alone.*

Anna, age 15, Edinburgh

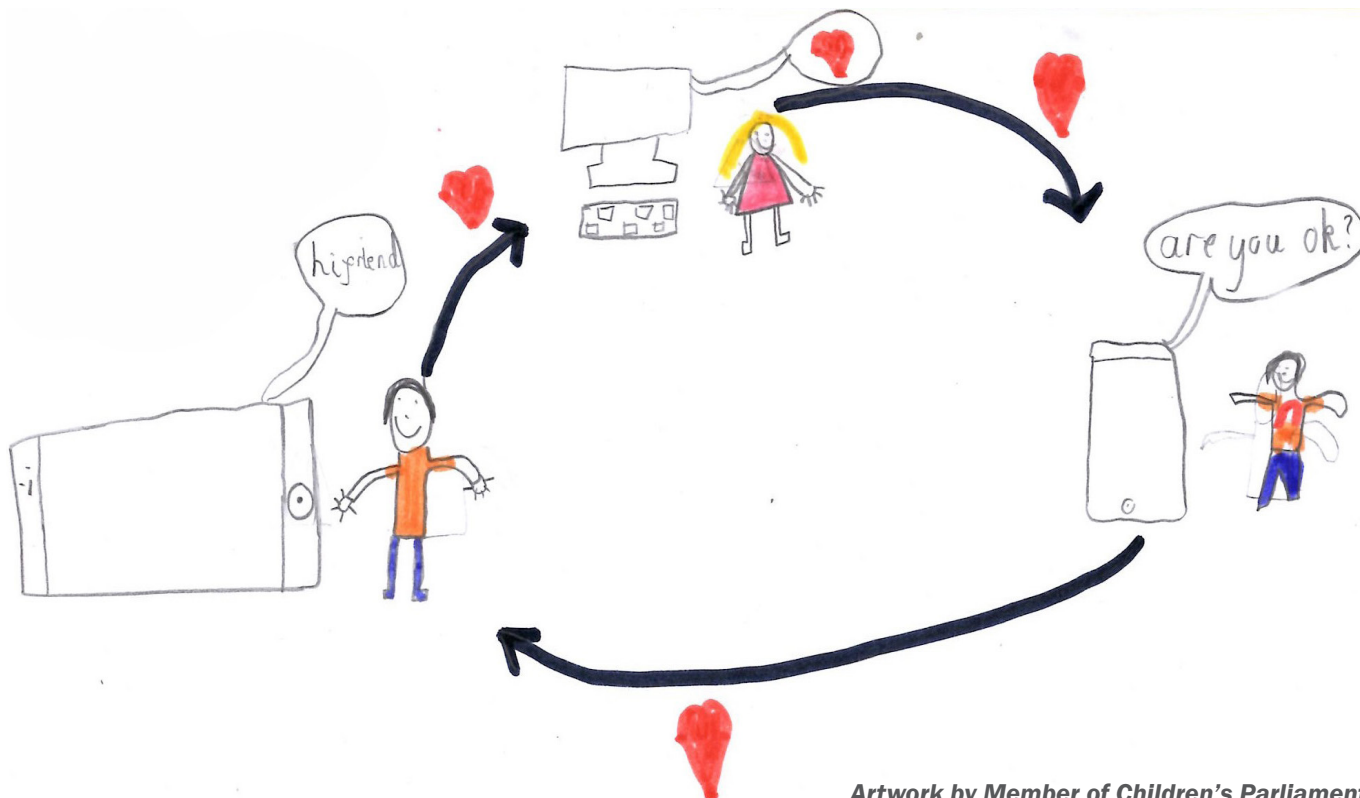
Children and young people spoke about using a range of different platforms to socialise.

Facebook was often used to connect with family, while Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Discord, and Reddit were popular for staying in touch with friends and exploring interests.

 *Facebook to connect with family.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and YMCA Paisley

For young carers, the internet can be a lifeline when their caring responsibilities make it difficult for them to go out and meet friends face-to-face. Social media also offers them the chance to connect with others who share their experience, pursue their hobbies and interests and access support:



Artwork by Member of Children's Parliament

I can find a sense of community online – people that have similar experiences to give advice.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Having a space to talk/learn about interests without feeling you're being annoying or important.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Stay connected and build relationships that I wouldn't be able to build otherwise because I am a young carer.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

For children in armed forces families, staying in touch online is essential for their sense of security:


Online is a good way to stay in touch if your parent is away.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland


Similarly, children and young people in armed forces families highlight how being online is critical to helping them stay in contact with parents or carers who are on deployment. Several children describe how having access to their phone is not just about convenience, but about peace of mind and psychological need. When schools ban phones, this sense of security is disrupted:

It's not enough to say your parents can call the school in an emergency – it is about knowing that you'll know – it'll put my mind at ease to have it.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland


 *Phones in the school are hard for us. The new rule about no phones is hard when your parents are away and you haven't heard from them. If my dad is at work or at sea and my mum is on a late shift – I need to know to feel safe – I need my phone!*
anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

For children and young people living in rural areas, digital connectivity can be especially important. In places where meeting new people or maintaining relationships with friends in other areas might otherwise be difficult, online platforms become a key tool for building and sustaining relationships:

 *Being online can help people in rural areas connect/make friends with people outside of their local community.*
anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland


5.3 Learning new things and having fun

In addition to staying connected, children and young people say the internet is a major source of entertainment, learning, staying informed and expressing themselves. For many, the internet offers a wealth of fun and creative opportunities. One of the most frequently mentioned positives is the variety of choices available:

 *Everyone can choose their own things to do/watch.*
Bb16, age 16, Falkirk
I like streaming shows and audiobooks I like.
Chaz, age 15, Edinburgh


Young people enjoy streaming shows, listening to audiobooks, playing online games, and browsing content on platforms like TikTok and Instagram. These options allow them to explore and pursue unique interests.

TikTok is a favourite for many, not just for entertainment but also keeping up with current events:

 *My favourite is TikTok because it's just you watching videos based on what you follow on it.*
anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland
TikTok is entertaining but also can keep up to date with current events.
anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland



However, they also noted downsides:

 *It's entertaining but also addictive...It's just you watching videos based on what you follow on it, but it's addictive.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Online gaming is another major source of entertainment. Children spoke about their love of Minecraft, Dragon City, Roblox, Fortnite, Fifa and others. These provided both entertainment and a sense of achievement through building virtual worlds:

 *I like playing games online.*

Charlie, age 5, Midlothian

I like playing Roblox and Minecraft with family, which we do online.

Toby, age 15

Favourite game is dragon city because you get to breed all different dragons and can even end up with legendary dragons.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Snapchat




TIK TOK



Artwork by young people supported by Circle and CYCJ

However, some younger children highlight bad language when playing games with others:

 *I feel safe most of the time – but if playing online sometimes strangers use bad language.*

Boss Batman, age 7, North Lanarkshire

Many young people enjoy creating content as well as consuming it. They see the internet as a space for creativity and self-expression:

 *I'm happy because I have my own [YouTube] channel.*

anonymous, supported by Barnardo's Scotland

Children and young people also say the internet is a valuable tool for learning and pursuing hobbies. Many use it to explore new skills and interests:

 *I like to use the internet to learn things.*

anonymous, supported by Barnardo's Scotland

I mainly listen to music and look up information about topics that interest me.

Gerald, age 10, North Lanarkshire


I have used it to learn how to bake and decorate cakes, as well as do fancy designs on my nails.

Toby, age 15

You can easily access information.

MSYP

For those seeking more formal learning or career opportunities, the internet also opens doors to skills and knowledge they might not otherwise have had easy access to:


 *Learning especially skills we didn't learn in school or from parents or carers. Can get help and guidance through vlogs and videos.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Looking for work and to upskill, online can be a helpful tool for this.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

The digital world also offers opportunities to share their views, participate in decisions and learn about opportunities that they might otherwise have missed out on:

 *There are many barriers that are still in place for young people when it comes to sharing their views and making change. So [we] were all very fortunate because we have lots of technology. A lot of the opportunities that we access through [youth volunteering group] or through other organisations, we wouldn't have been able to find out about them if we didn't have a phone or a laptop or an iPad that we'd be able to get online with so that cuts out a huge amount of the population of young people in Scotland who wouldn't be able to have constant access to technology or wouldn't have any access to technology so wouldn't be able to take part in these opportunities.*


Delilah, age 16, Glasgow

However, online learning and exploration can also come with risks. One young person shared how learning programming online had been valuable but also led to a negative experience with trading:


 *Learning programming... but lost money in trading.*

Mohammed Ali, age 15, North Ayrshire

Young people also express frustration with school restrictions on devices. Some feel that listening to music while working can help them concentrate, but schools often ban this:

 *[At school] use of mobile phones and earphones whilst working is restricted.*
anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and YMCA Paisley

Lastly, young people also flagged the dangers of artificial intelligence (AI) and how this might lead to false information. They recognise the importance of thinking critically when seeing stories online, and not always taking things at face value:

 *Misinformation especially in election period, young people get a lot of info from unreliable or AI-generated sources.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project

AI and algorithms gives just one side of the argument, so it's biased and not reliable.
Article 17 (access to info from media).

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project

If you study politics or modern studies at school you are probably better able to find reliable info, but you are vulnerable to AI-generated info, or mis-information about stuff.


anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project


5.4 Staying safe online

While children and young people appreciate the vast opportunities for exploration and learning, they recognise that being online also comes with risks. Many express concerns about addiction, harmful content, cyberbullying, misogyny, exploitation, misuse of personal data, and dangers associated with the growing influence of AI. They share that staying safe online requires balance, critical thinking and being able to access support. They urge adults to take these risks seriously and implement measures that will protect them from harm. Ultimately, children and young people express a desire to be able to access the many positives of being online while feeling confident that risks have been minimised, and empowered to navigate challenges that arise.

Safety

Children and young people share mixed feelings about how safe they feel online. Some feel confident on certain platforms, while others are victims or witnesses of threats such as cyberbullying, exploitation and inappropriate behaviour:

 *I feel safe depending on which app I'm on.*
Anna, age 15, Edinburgh

 *I spend a lot of time online. I think most of my friends I have made are from the internet. I don't feel overly safe online as I have had bullying and creeps messaging me. I have received unsolicited images from boys too.*

Alice, age 17, South Lanarkshire


Online is safe and a good place to grow. It's our modern way of living.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Not safe.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

The prevalence of catfishing (where individuals present a false identity) and strangers online is a concern for many:

 *Catfishing is scary; people are not who they say they are or pretending to be me. I have lost friends over fake accounts and it goes against my rights.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Easy chatting to paedos and creepy people.

MSYP

Online relationships – dangerous!!!!

MSYP

Some children and young people are careful to engage only with people they already know. However, for some – particularly younger children and those with additional support needs – they avoid the internet altogether due to safety concerns:


 *I only engage with people I know online.*

Bud, age 12, North Lanarkshire

I don't go online at all. It's not safe for me as I'm very vulnerable and too young just now.


Bud, age 11, North Lanarkshire

Many children and young people say that being online can sometimes negatively impact their mental health. Social media can contribute to feelings of insecurity and anxiety:

 *Negative impact on my mental health and don't feel safe being exposed online.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland


At the same time, others point to the benefits of online resources for accessing mental health support:

 *Kooth is a good resource. Childline is GREAT.*

MSYP

Cyberbullying and harassment

Children tell us that social media platforms can provide easy access for bullies to target their victims – often anonymously or under a false name. Others note that what feels like ‘gossip’ can escalate quickly:

 *Gossip which can be fun and makes me feel connected to society but can turn dangerous with trolls online.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

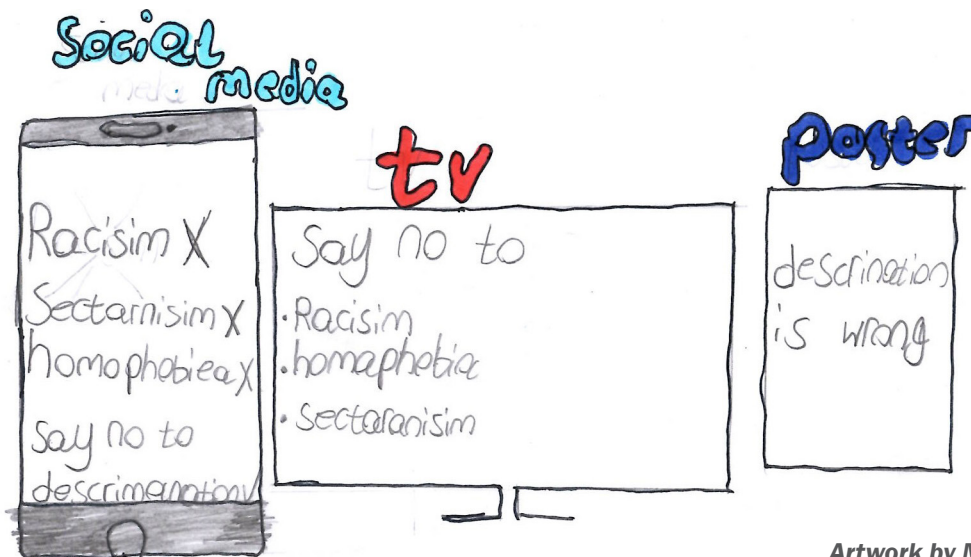
They also point to the prevalence of online hate and harassment, noting a culture of posting hurtful comments on strangers’ posts:

 *Hateful and unsafe comment section. Even for strangers. It makes me sad seeing them getting hate.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Pride in hating, people take pride in being the most hateful online.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland



Artwork by Member of Children’s Parliament

Children and young people feel that the lack of effective moderation only exacerbates the issue, with many calling for online platforms to do more to curb bullying and harassment:

 *Easy access to bullying; we need more online moderators.*


MSYP

[What would you change?] People being nicer. Just like stop the online bullying.

anonymous, age 16, East Lothian

Harmful content

Algorithms that shape online experiences can sometimes lead children and young people towards damaging content.

 *Confidence boost most of the time but sometimes if posts fall into wrong algorithm can be a really negative place and hard to get out of.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Toxic place.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Protection from violence – people may be exposed to harmful videos.


MSYP

Others highlight the ease of joining and setting up groups, some of which promote unsafe content:

 *You can easily join or set up groups online, but they may be harmful.*


MSYP

Some young people express concerns about the addictive nature of certain apps and content, like 'pro-ana' (pro-anorexia) material:

 *If I could change something about being online, I would make it less addictive and stop triggering stuff like pro-ana content.*

Anna, age 15, Edinburgh

Children and young people are also wary of AI-generated content, which can include inappropriate or harmful material:

 *It [AI] can come up with inappropriate stuff – 18-plus.*


Member of Children's Parliament (MCP)

AI makes it hard to tell if information/videos online is fake or correct.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland

Violence against women and girls

Girls and young women share that the internet is a breeding ground for misogyny and harmful stereotypes. Girls and young women report explicit images, harassment and sexist content and call for platforms to do more to take their concerns seriously.

 *Takes advantage of the innocence of young people who are unsupervised. This is through advertising and people like Andrew Tate.*

MSYP

 *Stereotypical opinions of woman on social media.*

MSYP

More sexism towards women on social media especially during election campaigns.

MSYP

Explicit images online/sexual harassment.

MSYP

Non-discrimination on social media/women not being taken seriously.

MSYP



The prevalence of explicit images and sexual harassment can deter young women from fully engaging online. Some identify specific platforms as allowing misogyny and incel culture to thrive:

 *Online spaces like 4chan create breeding grounds for misogyny.*

MSYP

Misogyny on platforms such as X is not being removed even after reported because of community guidelines.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project

Additionally, girls and young women also mention the pressure of unrealistic expectations promoted by invasive advertising and image manipulation. Others mention the use of AI to manipulate videos and photos, which is sometimes done maliciously by others:


 *Editing photos makes it hard not to compare yourself.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland

AI altering pictures is a really big issue for young women.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project


At the same time, girls and young women also identify the role of online spaces in providing opportunities for female empowerment:

 *Spaces where women can be empowered and uplifted do exist.*


MSYP

Privacy and data concerns

The right to privacy is a major concern for children and young people when engaging online. Many express anxiety about the implications of companies using their personal data. They say they do not trust companies to handle their data safely, and the complexity of online terms and conditions only adds to their discomfort:

-  *I don't trust online servers with my data; it makes me feel uncomfortable.*
anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland
- Scares me. Terms and conditions but I always accept as don't understand them.*
anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland
- Companies/data options are often unclear.*
MSYP


Some young people are particularly worried about being hacked and strangers being able to access their information:

-  *Paranoid about who can access my information and hack me.*
anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland




Artwork by Member of Children's Parliament

Others acknowledge the risks to their data – but that their mental health would suffer if they were unable to go online:

 *I feel my personal information is being stolen but don't know how to stop it. If I don't go online, I can't connect with anyone.*


anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Many children and young people feel that they do not have enough control over how far their data travels:

 *Lots of young people don't feel comfortable with their photos being shared online as much as they do or feel they have control of where their photos are.*


MSYP

As a result, some young people speak about taking proactive steps like keeping profiles private and limiting what they post online:

 *Don't post private life online and I feel safer for it.*


anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

However, others prefer more open profiles, feeling that this makes them able to connect with more people:

 *Don't keep account private and I accept most people as it makes me feel connected with people.*


anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Some children and young people are calling for more information and awareness about privacy rights, and for platforms that are more responsive to users' needs:

 *There should be more education on privacy rights online – the kind of data that companies can hold on you and you can request back to see how it is used.*

MSYP

Many of the conversations about data safety highlight the role of artificial intelligence (AI).

 *Young people don't get educated on how their data is used on social media and how companies use their data, it keeps me up at night worrying how algorithms and AI are using it!*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project



Exploring children's rights and AI

Members of Children's Parliament (MCP) explored the relationship between AI and their data:⁵⁹

"We should have the right to privacy. You need to be careful about what you share online about me."

"Don't share my location, that is very important."

"It made us really confused that so many companies can have your data."

"I am not happy as someone can know a lot about me."

"I don't think they [companies] think about children's rights at all."

"Children need to know about AI because young kids online can be careless and share personal data and they can get exposed and it can make them anxious and scared."

"AI must protect our rights!"

They decided to take the issue to the Executive Takeover 2024. Their calls to action around safety and security included:⁶⁰

- 1. There should be rules about how much and what data companies are allowed to gather about children. Companies should not collect or share data from children unless it is absolutely necessary.*
- 2. Companies should not use children's data to train AI systems without children being asked.*
- 3. Children feel AI can't always be trusted and isn't always safe – more child-friendly information about AI is needed, to help children make informed choices.*

Getting help to stay safe online

Children and young people recognise the importance of support from schools, parents, carers and online platforms to navigate the digital world safely. They believe that with the right guidance and systems in place, they will be able to access the benefits of being online, while minimising the risks.



If something goes wrong and no adults are there, children don't know what to do.

MCP, Shetland⁶¹

Role of online platforms

Children and young people feel that social media companies need to do more to protect their safety. They call for stricter guidelines, more proactive moderation, better reporting systems and clearer terms of service.

 *Companies should do more to protect us.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland


More safety regulations (reporting systems) e.g. Xbox.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and YMCA Paisley

Strong guidance and delete parts when are appropriate or AI made stuff, don't wait until viewers report it.

MSYP

Some children and young people believe that age limits should be raised for certain platforms:

 *Age limits need to be higher – e.g. 16+ for Snap, TikTok, Instagram.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

Guidelines need to be stricter.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland



Meanwhile, others feel that age limits are already set at the right level, or of limited use – as they are easy to bypass:


 *Good thing that social media have age-appropriate rules.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and YMCA Paisley

Age restrictions don't help, people just lie.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Some children and young people felt that both the individual and the company each had their roles to play:


 *I think it's personal responsibility for what you post online but companies should do more too.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

People should be calling bad behaviour out online like they would in person. No one should be a bystander even online and companies and governments need to take more steps to protect our rights online.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Overall, there are clear calls for platforms to do more to create safe, child-friendly spaces, where they can interact safely without being exposed to risks. Some suggest creating platforms specifically designed for children that could have additional safeguards in place:


 *Insta, Twitter, and TikTok should make apps especially for kids.*

MSYP

Platform for just kids.

MSYP

There are also calls for social media companies to do more to protect children and young people's mental health:

 *More protection for mental health on social media.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

While some point to examples of progress, such as Roblox putting a filter on swear words, children and young people generally feel that platforms could do more to prevent harms and provide them with better tools to stay safe online and develop good habits:


 *Inadequate support for developing healthy online habits.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland



Role of parents and carers

Children and young people often view parents and carers as the first line of defence in helping them stay safe online. Open conversations can help them feel more confident and secure. This highlights the importance of digital literacy for adults, so they can keep up with new and emerging issues and know how best to respond:

 *My mum is also very open. We talk about keeping information private from strangers and not engaging in conversations with them.*

Alfie, age 14, North Lanarkshire


My mum has helped me stay safe online and I can talk to her about anything. Other young people have shown me things which upset me from their online life and I didn't know what to do. I wish there were safe spaces for young people online.

Chaz, age 16, Edinburgh

My mum checks my devices and I know to let her know if something is bad.


Bb16, age 16, Falkirk

One eight-year-old boy told us that he only uses the internet on shared family devices and in the living room and that this helps him feel safe:

 *I feel safe online, I don't use a computer or smart phone but I used to watch YouTube on a laptop. Now, I watch it on the TV with my family.*

Rowpow, age 8, Midlothian

However, some children and young people feel that too much parental control can be restrictive, and express a desire for more freedom:

 *My parents are super protective of me online because my mum is a teacher. She checks what I am doing all the time which is annoying. I am not allowed social media. I just got an email address this year. My uncle built me a computer to play Minecraft on this year. I spend time online every day after 4pm and before dinner. I wish my parents gave me more freedom online.*

Tiglo, age 11, Perth & Kinross

Children and young people were quick to point out that parents and carers also have a responsibility to avoid practices that exploit children, such as using them as child influencers without informed consent. Young people express concerns about children being exposed to the online world for profit:

 *Family vloggers go against rights.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Kids are responsible for the income of their family when they are family bloggers – but they're not always receiving payment in the long run. They don't get breaks, always performing.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Performing kids and exposing them to online world without their consent.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Role of schools

Schools play a crucial role in supporting children to learn about online safety from a young age. Many young people say that internet safety is introduced at primary level:

 *We know a lot about internet safety it's been a hot topic at school from about Primary 6 – maybe before.*

Alfie, age 14, North Lanarkshire

Children recognise that these lessons have helped them to make informed decisions and recognise potential dangers. However, again they also recognise that schools will need to keep up with the fast rate of change and new risks emerging. This is particularly true given that many parents and carers with low levels of digital literacy look to schools and teachers for support.

5.5 What the adults have been saying..

The stories from babies, children and young people reflect many of the themes that are highlighted in the 2023 concluding observations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UN Committee).⁶² This section highlights some of those recommendations – drawing from Together’s child friendly version⁶³ – as well as the child-friendly response from Scottish Government.⁶⁴

What does the UN Committee say?



The UN Committee says governments should make sure all children have access to the internet. Not every child has their own phone or computer, so they should be able to get online in other ways – for example at the library.⁶⁵

The UN Committee also says governments should introduce new laws to protect children’s rights online like the right to privacy and safety. They should also help children, parents, caregivers, and teachers to learn more about using digital technology so they can help keep children and young people safe.⁶⁶

The UN Committee says that governments should do more to make sure that companies respect children’s rights. On online safety specifically, the UN Committee says that children should be protected from online crimes, and that platforms like TikTok should have rules that protect children.⁶⁷

The UN Committee also says that governments should use online campaigns to help stop racism, hatred and bullying behaviour.

What has the Scottish Government said?



In its response to the UN Committee’s recommendations, Scottish Government said it knew some children and young people found it hard to get online. It said it had created a programme called ‘Connecting Scotland’ to help them get online. Scottish Government also said it knows how important technology is for education. It said it was going to create a new document about how it could change how we learn in schools. Scottish Government said it wants to make sure that everyone gets the chance to learn digital skills.⁶⁸

Scottish Government also said that it knows sometimes people can try and trick or hurt children and young people online. It said that it has created a Child Online Safety Campaign to help parents and carers. It will help them talk to their children about online safety. Scottish Government said it will also keep putting new information on its Parent Club website so that parents and carers are kept up to date.⁶⁹



5.6 Ideas to help



Children and young people have shared powerful insights about their experiences online. Their stories highlight both the opportunities and challenges of the digital world, emphasising the need to fully embed a children's human rights approach across all online spaces. Based on what they tell us, here are key messages for furthering a children's human rights approach in the digital environment:

Embedding children's rights:

- Ensure children's human rights are at the heart of all policies and practices related to online platforms and digital technologies. As Bb16, age 16, from Falkirk said: "Fixed time limits would be good so you can't be online all of the time".
- Train parents, carers, and educators on children's human rights in the digital world and how to support children online. As Chaz, age 16, from Edinburgh shared: "My mum has helped me stay safe online and I can talk to her about anything. Other young people have shown me things which upset me from their online life and I didn't know what to do. I wish there were safe spaces for young people online".
- Make human rights visible and accessible throughout online spaces, with child-friendly terms of service and safety information. One young person supported by the Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland said: "Scares me terms and conditions but I always accept as don't understand them".

Equality and non-discrimination:

- Address digital barriers to ensure all children have equal access to online opportunities. As one young person supported by the Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland noted: "Disparities in deprived areas access to online spaces and devices (especially seen during covid)".
- Consider the specific needs of neurodivergent children, young carers and children in armed forces families when creating and implementing rules about mobile phone use in schools. Ensure children whose rights are at risk are included in these decisions. As one young person from an armed forces family said: "It's not enough to say your parents can call the school in an emergency – it is about knowing that you'll know – it'll put my mind at ease to have [my phone]".
- Combat online discrimination, particularly misogyny and sexism on social media platforms. One MSYP shared: "Misogyny on platforms such as X is not being removed even after reported because of community guidelines".
- Create inclusive online environments that celebrate diversity and protect those whose rights are at risk. As Anna, age 15, from Edinburgh said: "I like being online as I am generally quite isolated and it helps me feel less alone".

Empowering children:

- Provide age-appropriate information about online rights and safety across all age groups. As one Member of Children's Parliament stated: "Children need to know about AI because young kids online can be careless and share personal data and they can get exposed and it can make them anxious and scared".

- Support children and young people to develop digital literacy and critical thinking skills. One young person supported by the Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project noted: "If you study politics or modern studies at school you are probably better able to find reliable info, but you are vulnerable to AI generated info, or misinformation about stuff".
- Create opportunities for meaningful choices about online engagement and privacy settings. As Anna, age 15, from Edinburgh stated: "If I could change something about being online, I would make it less addictive and stop triggering stuff like pro-ana content".

Participation:

- Involve children and young people in the design and moderation of online platforms. One MSYP suggested: "Platform for just kids".
- Ensure inclusive participation online, especially for those in rural areas or with additional support needs. As LMHM, age 10, from Glasgow shared: "I like being online. It helps me regulate. I spend probably three hours online every day".
- Provide meaningful feedback when views are sought about online experiences and safety measures. As one Member of Children's Parliament said: "I don't think they [companies] think about children's rights at all".

Accountability:

- Establish clear, age-appropriate reporting and complaint procedures across all online platforms. One young person supported by the Scottish Youth Parliament and YMCA Paisley called for: "More safety regulations (reporting systems) e.g. Xbox".
- Ensure transparency in data collection and use. As one MSYP stated: "There should be more education on privacy rights online – the kind of data that companies can hold on you and you can request back to see how it is used".
- Regularly monitor and report on how children's human rights are upheld across online spaces. Members of Children's Parliament called for: "There should be rules about how much and what data companies are allowed to gather about children. Companies should not collect or share data from children unless it is absolutely necessary".

Overall, children and young people are calling for online spaces that truly listen to them, respect their human rights, and support them to safely access the benefits of the digital world while protecting them from harm.






Chapter 6: **Life in Scotland**

Artwork by young person supported by Barnardo's Scotland Welcome (Ukraine) Service

6.1 Introduction

Beyond life at home, at school, in the local community and online, children and young people also shared stories about life in Scotland as a whole. They shared what they liked, disliked and what they wished they could change to make Scotland a better place for everyone.


Common themes included putting children's rights into practice, and related issues of tackling poverty and ensuring equality and diversity. On a broader scale, children and young people spoke to global issues such as the need to put an end to wars and violence, and to stop climate change. This chapter explores their thoughts.


 *Living in Scotland to me is exciting. I really enjoy it. Some of the things I think are really good is that we have really nice scenery, free education, and there's a lot of amazing charities that work with young people and children in need.*


Willow, age 17, Glasgow

I think Scotland is a good place to live as kids are protected from harm.

Robin, age 12, Edinburgh


 **Q. If you had a magic wand. What would you change about life in Scotland?**


 *A. Have a time capsule in East Lothian.*
anonymous, supported by Circle

 *I feel happy about the future – because I get to have more baby woodlice.*
anonymous, supported by Barnardo's Scotland

6.2 Children's rights

Children and young people see incorporation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into Scots law as an important first step towards making their rights real. To them, it symbolises recognition and commitment, and those who campaigned for it are viewed as 'Rights Champions'. Members of the Scottish Youth Parliament (MSYPs) shared their thoughts:

 **Q. What's good about life in Scotland?**

 *A. UNCRC in law.*
MSYP


Q. What does a Rights Champion look like?

 *A. Everyone who fought for UNCRC incorporation.*
MSYP


While celebrating UNCRC incorporation, children and young people are concerned about the gaps between what is said in law and what happens in their daily lives. Children and young people highlight a variety of areas where action needs to be taken to ensure their rights are fully implemented in practice, including rights-based laws, increased awareness and understanding, building children's rights into budgets, and doing much more to involve children and young people in decision-making.

Rights-based laws


Children and young people identify that changing the law can have a powerful impact in driving culture change. One example is the law on equal protection:

 *Adults are good in Scotland e.g. an adult made its so you couldn't hit children.*
anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Youth Scotland

Children and young people feel that, beyond incorporation, further legislative changes are needed to uphold their rights:

 *Make laws to further respect rights.*
Ali


One area of focus is the law around age limits. Children and young people feel that the current law is not always consistent. A children's human rights approach to reviewing these laws requires consideration of whether the purpose of the age limit is to uphold a protection right (keeping children safe from all forms of harm), or a participation right:

 *Denied the right to alcohol at 16 but right to marry and have own family at 16 and it's just weird.*
MSYP
Need to rethink the laws of age restrictions.
anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland


Awareness and understanding

Children and young people also feel more can be done to improve awareness and understanding of their rights. This applies to parents and carers, professionals, organisations, all levels of government, and to children and young people themselves.

Some children and young people feel that adults are already doing a good job:

 *Grown ups in Scotland treat me amazingly.*
Rowpow, age 8, Midlothian

Meanwhile, others identify gaps in knowledge, skills and, at times, commitment:

 Art 42 says government has to make sure we know our rights – I haven't really seen them do this.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project

Poor understanding of rights and their incorporation into law especially in low SIMD areas.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland

Poor implementation of 'The Right Way project' principles accepted by government.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland

Parents and other adults in your life knowing about UNCRC.

MSYP

Educate people on children's rights including adults and children themselves.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project



Children might
not know what
a right is.

Artwork by Member of Children's Parliament

State of Children's Rights in Scotland 2024

As we have already seen in children's stories about life at school, there are mixed experiences of the extent to which children are supported to learn about their rights in educational settings.

 *I have learnt a little bit about my rights in school, but I don't know much about them.*


Ben, age 12, Aberdeenshire

My teachers didn't provide an education around rights.

MSYP


Child rights budgeting

Many of the stories highlight the impact of funding cuts on children's lives – including closure of youth clubs, services and a reduction in classroom assistants:

 *It [youth group for young people experiencing abuse] supported me in so many different ways after I'd left my own abusive home. But it also had to get shut down because there was a lack of funding and it meant that so many people missed out on these opportunities to get the help.*

Willow, age 17, Glasgow

Some highlight spending decisions that fail to consider children's rights and that this can put rights at risk:

 *The government will spend money on the national service scheme that is kinda forcing people to take part in something when their mental health is already through the ground.*

Willow, age 17, Glasgow

Children and young people recognise that public funding is under pressure and call for their rights to be built into budgetary decisions to ensure better outcomes for all.

Participation

A common theme is the desire for genuine and inclusive opportunities to take part in decision-making. This was the most frequently mentioned issue when children and young people were asked about life in Scotland and the role of adults around them.

Opportunities and barriers

Children and young people highlight the power of participation when they feel supported to get involved:


 *It's good because it lets people know your voice.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Refugee Council

Because the government make the good something to people living here and make a better life.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Refugee Council

Some recognise progress at Scottish Government level:

 I think the Scottish Government is doing a lot to try and increase awareness around young people's views and appreciate them and listen to young people. And that they take our wishes seriously and are starting to try and implement our ideas or our suggestions into society in Scotland.

Delilah, age 16, Glasgow

I think decision-makers listen a lot more than they used to.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland



Artwork by Member of Children's Parliament

However, others report a lack of opportunities to engage in decision-making at national level:

 *I don't feel I have much say in Scotland on the wider front.*

Alfie, age 14, North Lanarkshire

I honestly don't think the government listen to people like me.

Alice, age 17, South Lanarkshire

Decisions by the adults in charge of Scotland are not the best. I feel they don't listen. They could listen to what people want.

anonymous, age 16, supported by Circle

Don't feel I have a big say, like the everyday decision-making people.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

They call for more opportunities to be involved:


 *Adults should make us feel wanted by letting us talk.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

If people listened to us we would feel supported and would make change.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Others express frustration that when decision-makers do seek their involvement, this is merely tokenistic:

 *Decision-makers don't tend to listen, young people have spoken at events but nothing is getting done.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Try to listen but don't take action.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and YMCA Paisley


Poor uptake in involvement by government agencies.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland

Hearing but not listening (e.g. councillors not helping).


anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and YMCA Paisley

Some identify that meetings are held in places that are not always easy for them to reach:

 *Government consultation events – not accessible to people outside Glasgow or Edinburgh.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Young carers' stories reveal a particular sense that decision-makers use them as photo opportunities but don't take their concerns into account. Some feel that once decision-makers have got their photo, that is the end of the road – there is no further communication or feedback from the decision-maker about what they are doing with what they have heard:

 *Tick box/photo opportunity – that's how we get treated. People especially decision-makers listen to us, feel sorry for us, promise change then take a photo and never heard from again.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Being used in a photo but no follow up.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

As a carer, people want to hear your story and feel sorry for you but do nothing.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Other young people suggest that experiences vary greatly depending on which decision-makers they are engaging with. This suggests a need for greater mainstreaming of children's rights knowledge, understanding and practice throughout all parts of Scottish Government, Scottish Parliament and local government:

 *Experiences with decision-makers is not uniform, it depends on who you speak to.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and YMCA Paisley




For some children and young people, there is a perception that they need to know about politics before they can take part in decision-making. If they do not feel they have this, then they are less likely to take part when opportunities do arise. This shows the need for decision-makers to be clearer that opportunities are open to all – and that children and young people are recognised as the experts of their own lives:


 *I don't understand how the politics work.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

Many appreciate the efforts of charities and youthwork organisations to support them in having their voices heard, and for making opportunities more accessible and inclusive:

 *There's a lot of groups who work really hard with kids to allow them to like allow them to have these opportunities to go and speak to all these people and say this is what we want to fix.*

Willow, age 17, Glasgow


 *Opportunities to have our voices heard in consultation workshops and Scottish Youth Parliament and other extra curriculars.*

MSYP

Able to become involved in activities such as Scottish Youth Parliament, youth forums etc.

MSYP


However, for some, even when they are supported by these groups, they still feel that decision-makers are not listening. This highlights the need for decision-makers to feed back to children and young people on what they have heard and what they intend to do with this information. Even if they are unable to take action, it is important that children and young people know this and why:

 *Being part of young carers I feel like I am trying to change things but no one listens.*
anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Being a young person in a position of influence, particularly in Scouting, it is difficult to often be heard and listened to (intently) by adults.


anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland

Overall, there is a sense of frustration and disappointment, both with the limited chances to engage and with the quality of the opportunities that do exist. One young person identifies what they see as an inherent double standard:

 *We're expected to act like an adult but not treated as such.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and YMCA Paisley

Some children and young people conclude that polite letters and meetings are not the answer – suggesting more radical action to ensure decision-makers pay attention to their views:

 *They're not going to react to some letter from some nine-year-old. They're going to need a lot of letters... Yeah, we could protest.*

Member of Children's Parliament (MCP)



Willow's story, age 17, Glasgow

I think a lot of adults choose what they think's good for young people and not what young people actually need...I actually attended [a local authority conference] focused on improving the lives of young people in Scotland. The news of the meeting actually happening came out months after it actually took place, and not a single one of our ideas had been heard at all. There was nothing done. So it felt like a bit of a waste of time to be honest just being there.

There's two sides to this so it depends. There's a nice side and a bad side. The nice side is obviously a lot of people like [youth worker] for example, very kind, understanding, caring, wants to make a change, wants to help us. But then there's also the not taken seriously which is obviously a lot worse. It's almost that stereotype of you're just a kid, there's not really much you can do. And I felt this quite a lot when [we] actually went to Holyrood. I felt it was quite one-sided, like we were so passionate about it but then there wasn't really anything done. It was more the stuff we did. And I don't know if maybe that's just down to the people who were in charge thinking that our opinions didn't matter but I definitely think that we were almost like being talked at, not talked to.

Voting rights and the relationship between UK and Scottish Government

Young people express strong views on voting rights, with many highlighting that while they can vote at 16 in Scottish elections, they have to wait until 18 to vote in UK elections. Children and young people feel that votes at 16 is an important route for them to have a say in how Scotland is governed.

 *Great that we can vote at 16.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland

I don't feel like I have much say in decisions, although I have more than I do with the UK Government. I like how we get to vote earlier, as that gives us more power.

Anna, age 15, Edinburgh

No because I don't get a vote!

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

Most of my friends are quite annoyed that we're not allowed to vote in the General Election but it's [votes at 16] incredibly important because it allows young people to share their views and also shows that the Parliament and the Government appreciate our views and understand how important it is to hear what we think as young people and allowing us to make political change.

Delilah, age 16, Glasgow

Some stories indicate a sense that decisions made in Scotland are more likely to respect children's rights than those made by the (then) UK Government. The suggestion of national service is one example:

 *Rishi was going to do National Service.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

This also sparks broader conversations about the relationship between Scottish Government and UK Government, with some feeling that Scotland's voice is limited within the Union and that it should become independent:

 *We are small mighty nation but I feel our voice is muted by our English counterparts.*

Alfie, age 14, North Lanarkshire



Life is super! I love life. Scotland should be independent.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

Access to justice – child-friendly complaints

Children’s access to justice is about them being able to claim and enforce their rights if they are at risk. It can include a range of measures from child-friendly information, access to supportive adults, legal representation and, in some cases, court action.

Stories from children and young people in armed forces families highlight the importance of, and need for, child-friendly complaints mechanisms. This group faces additional barriers to accessing justice due to the power imbalance between them and those making the decisions that adversely affect them. They say they do not know if they can complain, or to whom, or even how to make a complaint.

Some children say they have made complaints through existing mechanisms in education and health contexts. However, they say that these processes are not child friendly. Many are too slow – particularly for children who move frequently. Others feel that their complaints are not taken seriously. Children and young people call for complaints processes that have quicker response times and regular updates so they know their complaint is being taken seriously and dealt with in a timely manner.



We want to know who and what is being done about it. Regular updates especially don’t happen on [armed forces] base.

Kai

Better to complain to welfare but they don’t take it seriously. Children are not taken seriously.

Lucas

Children and young people also raise the importance of having complaints procedures that are accessible to younger children and those who may not be able to advocate for themselves:



Accessible for all ages. There should be different ways to complain and adults should make it possible.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

They feel an adult should be available to advocate for children and make complaints on their behalf. They feel such adults must be knowledgeable about children’s rights and the workings of relevant systems in order to provide the best support.



The MOD is more likely to listen to an MOD advocacy service. Maybe have it based in schools so you could go at the start of the day. Needs to also be confidential and easier to access.

Kai

 See my side of the story. See if you are OK.

Rory

Come up with ideas to prevent it happening to other people.

Charlotte




Extract from composite story by Forces Children Scotland


I feel like lots of decisions that are made about my stepdad's work have a negative impact on me but I don't know what I can do about that. My stepdad and mum have talked to me before about where we could go next on a posting but, ultimately, my stepdad and the Royal Air Force (RAF) will make the decision about what is best for the RAF and my stepdad's career. I don't think they take me into consideration at all when they make their decisions. I keep hearing about child-friendly complaints but I don't know whether or not I even have the right to complain. If I do, I don't know who to complain to, or if they would take me seriously.

I hear all the time about my right to be heard but my stepdad's work never asks me what I think and what would help me. I wish someone would ask me what help would work best for me. I also wish they would give me all the information I need to understand why they make the decisions they make.

Workers' skills and knowledge

 You don't need to be a child or young person to be a defender of children's rights.
anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project

Overall, children and young people say they need more adults in Scotland who are "Rights Champions". In discussing what makes a rights champion, ideas include:

 Someone who knows about rights and advocates for them resolves issues surrounding rights.


anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project

I feel like adults listen to me and wouldn't chuck ideas in the bin.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

Someone who cares deeply and challenges directly.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland

 *Someone who has confidence to call out where rights are not being met and where they are being met.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project

There's also the inspiring adults that are in my life and there's a lot of them that've really helped me push past my limits and achieve goals. And they just listen and they care about what I want to do and the change that I want to make.

Willow, age 17, Glasgow

Rights champs have to be informed about rights so they don't mislead or misinform young people so they get the right info about rights.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project

Someone who educates themselves and then others.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project

Someone who is inclusive of everyone's rights.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project

Young people supported by Scouts Scotland and the Scottish Youth Parliament felt that Rights Champions should have certain traits including:

 ***Approachable.***

Understanding.

Empathetic.

Knowledgeable.

Proactive.

Vocal.

Memory maker.


6.3 Equality and diversity

Children and young people are clear that not everyone has the same chance to succeed in today's Scotland. They call for action against poverty, racism, sexism, disability discrimination and other injustices to build towards a more fair and equal society, where diversity is celebrated.

Here, we focus on some of the most frequently mentioned themes.


Tackling poverty

Children and young people are clear that poverty remains a significant barrier to building a fair and equal Scotland. They highlight the stark contrast between the richest and poorest families, emphasising that not everyone has the same chance to succeed:

 *Scotland is not fair there are people living on streets and others in massive houses. Some people are very poor and others well loaded. Things are too expensive and not many things for free.*

Bb16, age 16, Falkirk

Some young people feel that politics and decision-making are often shaped by privilege, leaving those from poorer backgrounds feeling excluded or unheard. They call for greater representation of young people who understand the challenges of growing up without the same financial security as their peers:

 *Politics feels inaccessible if you don't come from a rich background.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

I would like to see more younger people in the Scottish Parliament as they know what it's like. I want to see people like me who didn't have family or friends to help them.

Alice, age 17, South Lanarkshire

Many acknowledge that Scottish Government has taken positive steps to address poverty. When speaking about what they like about living in Scotland, answers include:

 *Free university and prescriptions.*

MSYP


Free bus travel.

MSYP

Free period products.

MSYP

Yet children and young people believe that much more needs to be done. While these free initiatives are appreciated, there is a sense that they only scratch the surface of a broader issue. In their vision for a fairer Scotland, children and young people suggest further changes that would make life more affordable and inclusive. When asked what they would change with a 'magic wand', their answers reflect a desire for basic necessities that are more affordable and accessible for everyone. Circle supported children and young people in East Lothian to share their ideas:

 *Everyone would be more equal.*

Nappies should be free.

Houses should be cheaper.

Food would be cheaper.

Activities would be cheaper.

Activities would be free.

Vet bills would be free.

Everything not being so expensive.



Artwork by Member of Children's Parliament

Their comments demonstrate the impacts that the cost-of-living crisis is having on children and families across all areas of their lives. For these children and young people, tackling poverty is key to creating a Scotland where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

Tackling racism, prejudice and sectarianism

While children and young people recognise many positives of living in Scotland, issues of racism, prejudice and sectarianism persist, creating barriers to the truly inclusive Scotland they want to see. They call for action to address discrimination and to create a Scotland where everyone feels accepted and valued.

Some children and young people feel that Scotland lacks diversity, suggesting that greater inclusion of different cultures and backgrounds is needed:

 **Not diverse enough.**

MSYP

Many children and young people who have moved to Scotland from other countries report positive experiences. They highlight aspects of life that they enjoy, particularly school and the sense of welcome they have felt:

 **Q. What do you like about Scotland?**


 **A. Everything!**

Lewis, age 10, Glasgow

A. School.

Olivia, age 9, Glasgow

However, some also note underlying issues, particularly related to sectarianism and the divisions it causes within communities:

 *I think it's silly that people always argue about football clubs – where I live in Glasgow everyone fights about Rangers and Celtic. It isn't good.*

Misha, age 11, Glasgow

For those who have faced racism, the experience can lead to feelings of exclusion and not fully belonging to the community. In a discussion among asylum-seeking young people, this sense of alienation was voiced clearly:


 *Probably racist people are the ones who make you feel like you don't belong.*

Mohammed Ali, age 15, North Ayrshire



Artwork by Member of Children's Parliament

Children and young people are vocal about wanting change – and that Scotland needs to be a place where all forms of discrimination are actively challenged:

 *I would change all the injustices, like racism and homophobia, so that people were more accepted.*


Anna, age 15, Edinburgh

Their vision for Scotland is one where diversity is celebrated, and no one is made to feel different or unwelcome due to their background or beliefs. They call for a Scotland that is truly inclusive, taking proactive steps and tackling discrimination head-on to create a society where everyone can thrive.

Upholding disabled and neurodivergent children's rights


Children and young people's stories often reveal deeply personal and often painful experiences of disability discrimination. They share daily challenges, from physical barriers to societal attitudes, and call for greater understanding, respect and inclusion for disabled children and young people.

For some, the frustration begins with communication barriers, such as the lack of widespread knowledge of sign language:

 *Some grown ups understand but it is tricky when grown ups don't know sign language. The people in charge should make sure everyone can sign!*

Charlie, age 5, Midlothian

Others experience more overt forms of discrimination, like being told they cannot pursue a certain career path:


 *I was told I couldn't become a police officer because I'm autistic. This made me feel incredibly angry.*

William, age 10, Edinburgh

I feel like I am not treated great because I have learning disabilities and I struggle getting jobs but because I lack experience but I can't get job experience.

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland

Physical barriers in public spaces also make daily life difficult for many young disabled people. Some feel excluded from shops, services and their communities because they are not accessible:

 *I want Edinburgh and Scotland to be more friendly to people with disabilities. I don't want to be in my body but don't make me feel like a problem. I'm already suffering and in pain every day. Treat me like a human and give me the same choices you would give your child...I can't go in to a lot of shops and places because they don't allow wheelchairs. My mum tells them things not ok but they don't care. Sometimes Scotland makes me feel like I shouldn't be alive.*

Dave, age 13, Edinburgh

Disabled children and young people want to see greater representation in politics and decision-making. They also want to see more positive portrayals of disabled people in the media, rather than negative or stereotypical approaches that reinforce harmful attitudes. Overall, their stories highlight the urgent need for a more inclusive Scotland where disabled people are valued, their needs met, and their contributions to society are celebrated.



Rowan's story, age 17, North Lanarkshire

I feel like disabled people are really underrepresented in society, and our views are rarely considered. For example, I struggle to think of a disabled politician, and when it comes to representation in the media, we're usually either cast as villains or victims – caricatures really. You rarely see disabled people with positive traits or starring in primary roles. I feel disabled identity is often misinterpreted, presenting a false reality. One example that really stands out to me is how OCD is portrayed in the media. Overall, I feel that disabled people are shown as not fitting in – or not belonging – and this just reinforces societal messages.

We're also taught this whole thing about "not staring" at disabled people. And while I get the intention behind this, it ends up making many of us feel unseen, unknowable and invalidated. When people look away or avoid us, it's like we don't exist. And when you look at the news, it's frustrating to see how many disabled people are often depicted. So many stories focus on those fraudulently claiming benefits and being depicted like disabled people are a blight to society.

Within the disabled community, I do feel seen and connected. It's an inclusive space regardless of difference. I've built some really positive relationships because of this.

A lot of prejudices we face are deeply rooted in ableism and othering of differences. I feel that disabled people are viewed almost as if a piece of our humanity is missing. Some supports are viewed more negatively than others – for example attitudes towards wearing glasses compared to attitudes towards using a wheelchair.

I also think that neurodivergent people like me are more likely to question and resist social norms such as gender and sexuality. We're more likely to experience multiple layers of marginalisation, for example if someone identifies as autistic and trans. Overall, I feel that dealing with ableism in Scotland (and more widely) would help to address wider societal issues. It's all connected.



Art gallery: What do we need to change in Scotland to have a better world?

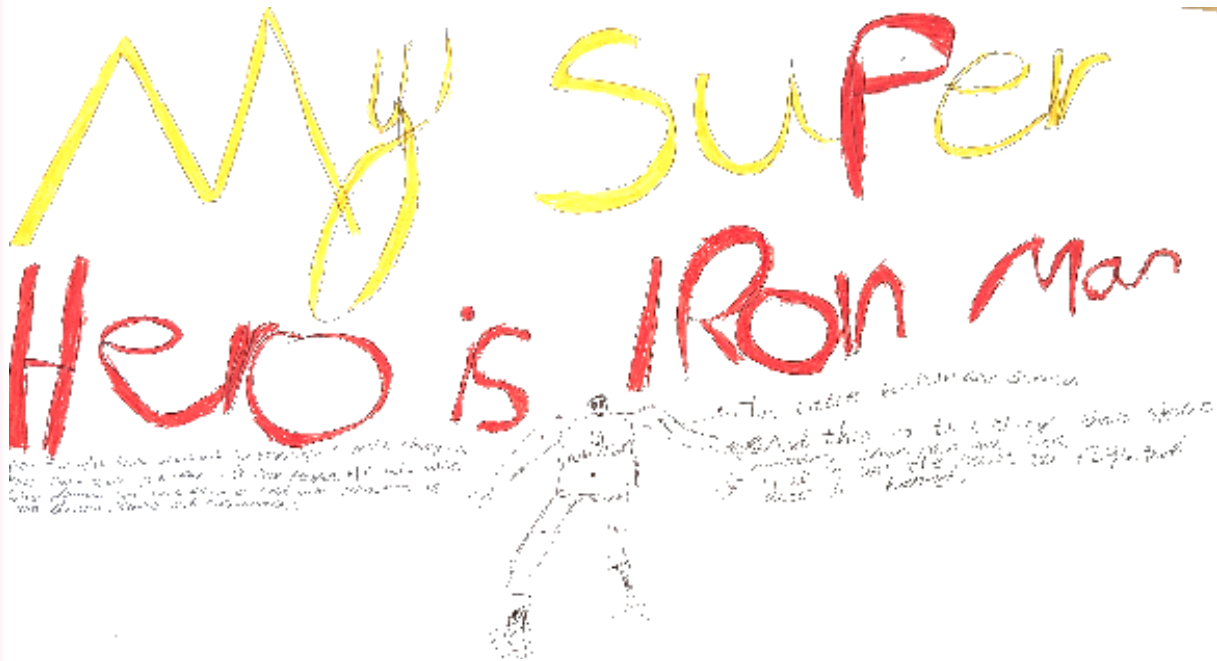
Children and young people who had moved to Scotland from another country created artworks to show what they want to change about Scotland and the world. Some created superheroes with special powers to help every child in Scotland:

Ilham, age 8, Glasgow



Lewis, age 10, Glasgow

My superhero is Iron Man. Iron Man will save Scotland by stopping climate change, will make stuff cheaper for poor people. He will also like defeat the bad people and also protect us from drunk people and kidnappers. These little buttons are screws. And this is this thing that shoots lasers that iron man has. That is the boost to fly. And also his hand.



Press this button to stop everything. And if you press the button it will heal the world and it will bring everything back to normal. My superhero is to heal the world and it will also take the violence away and bring good stuff in the world.



And if you press the button it will heal the world and it will bring everything back to normal. My Super Hero is to heal the world and it will also take the violence away and bring good stuff in the world.

Lola, age 9, Glasgow

Hi, my name is Lola, nice to meet you. This is a power on me – if I press it, I can stop war. Press me, it will change your heart...Don't press this because it will kill you but for me it will stop racism...This is a heart, if I press it, I can be strong.



My power is to wish, but good things like: stop littering or to stop war like something good not like I want money.

Hi my Name is Lola my power is to wish but good things like: Stop littering or to stop war like something Good not like i want money £ money.



Olivia, age 9, Glasgow

**To stop climate change!!!
Continue fair trade to help
farmers. Stop selling vapes!!!**



**Stop climate change...stop
world hunger...stop racism...
stop littering.**



6.4 Tackling climate change and environmental harms

One of the things children and young people love most about living in Scotland is its landscape and wildlife. Many stories share excitement for Scotland's environment and the freedom they have to explore it due to the 'right to roam'.

 *I'm happy that Scotland is not strict about land access. It means I can often explore unfamiliar places on my bike or go camping with my family.*

Robin, age 12, Edinburgh

I like the nature all around where I live.

Tiglo, age 11, Perth & Kinross


We have really nice scenery.

Willow, age 17, Glasgow




Artwork by Zola, age 13, Highlands

Many share a strong desire to protect the environment and combat climate change. Some point to actions already taken, such as Scotland's commitment to renewable energy:

 *I like that there is wind energy used and that there is a lot of wind farms. I would like there to be more wild animals even though there already is a lot.*

Rowpow, age 8, Midlothian


At the same time, there is a concern that some rural communities are facing the dual issues of a shortage of housing and farming practices that do not support wildlife:

 *Little is done to preserve local communities in rural areas due to large amount of farmland destroying wildlife and lack of homes created in rural areas.*

anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland



Several children spoke about the impact climate change is already having in Scotland – such as air pollution, increased storms and flooding.

 *People at our school had to go early and come later because of the bridge had collapsed because of the flooding.*

MCP, age 10, Perth & Kinross

Young children will be affected by the pollution in the air and then they could get lung damage.


Investigator, age 11, West Lothian

At the same time, children who had moved to Scotland from another country felt that Scotland was a safer place as it had less extreme weather and is not prone to natural disasters:

 *I'm safe in Scotland. There are a lot of earthquakes in Italy. It was quite scary.*

Lola, age 9, Glasgow

Many call for more proactive solutions, such as improved public transport and stronger measures to reduce environmental harms:


 *I think Scotland should try to be like Finland. I hate that stupid Brexit. I'm glad Boris Johnson and Liz Truss are not Prime Minister anymore. I care about the environment. I think there needs to be a litter police department in Scotland with cameras and big fines. I think we need more buses and trains. There used to be a station near me. The government should bring back the old stations.*

Tiglo, age 11, Perth & Kinross

Try to produce less waste, stop cutting down trees and make it cheaper to own an electric car.

MCP, age 13, Edinburgh

Overall, there is a strong desire for more to be done both within Scotland and globally to address climate change.

 *Icebergs are falling and melting, and penguins are dying and polar bears are dying.*
MCP, age 7, South Ayrshire

I'm really disappointed in humanity for mistreating the world and making it to come to this point.


MCP, age 13, Edinburgh

Governments around the world are trying to make money, but these methods may involve changing the environment and destroying the livelihoods of people of poorer nations. These poorer people may have no say in these changes.

MCP, age 13, Orkney



Children and young people feel frustrated that those in power are not doing more to address their concerns and feel that climate change is often not a priority for decision-makers. As highlighted earlier in this report, their calls include improving education on climate change and sustainability, including more positive examples, and greater involvement in decision-making:

 *It's up to you, me and all of us.*

Climate Changemakers, Children's Parliament⁷⁰

When are schools going to teach more young people about the importance of looking after our planet?

Willow, age 17, Glasgow

Children have got a big barrier. Some people just pat us on the head when we get proper good ideas and carry on with what they're doing and things will get steadily worse, if you think about it. They need to listen to us a lot more. They say, 'oh yes, we're listening'. Perhaps, they might have been just thinking we're being silly. They really need to take onboard what we're saying because if they don't, it's our future.


Investigator, age 11, Western Isles

I think that it's important that children are involved because it is going to affect our future. We want to grow up in a Scotland that's safe to live in.


Nadia, MCP, age 12, West Lothian⁷¹

6.5 An end to war and violence


Children and young people sent us their stories against the background of conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza. They express a strong desire for a world without war and violence, and the responsibility of adults to protect them from harm:

 *Adults need to respect children and do everything they can to make sure they are safe.*
anonymous, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament and Forces Children Scotland

Discussions about war are common among children and young people, including those with no direct experience. Many express empathy for refugees:

 *We wanted to talk about Ukraine and Gaza. Our teacher asked if refugee children have a right to feel safe. We said 'aye'.*
Trevor and Saint Herrington, both age 13, Edinburgh

Children and young people who have sought refuge in Scotland share a mix of emotions about their new life. Many speak about the safety and opportunities they have found in Scotland, while remaining conscious of the struggles they have endured.

 *I like [living in Scotland] because it's help us as we the younger people, so that anyone can get his/her rights that they didn't manage to provide us in our countries. As you know some of us went through a lot of difficult experience and our countries isn't safe due to the war and worst situations that made us to be prepared facing differences of bad experience just seeking for safety, love, peaceful and good life.*
anonymous, supported by Scottish Refugee Council

[On moving to Scotland from Ukraine] I like my new house where I live and there are nice things to do. I went to see the Kelpies – they are huge horses; everyone should ask their parent to take them. It is so amazing. I have lots of friends at school and I like winning at sports. I am happy in Scotland.

Kitty-Bella, age 7, Falkirk

[On moving to Scotland from Ukraine] I love Scotland! I like the school rules in this country. I don't like the weather. I like cities in Scotland. I like all places that I went.

anonymous, supported by Barnardo's Scotland


No problems since coming to Scotland, happy in [town]. Everything is good in Scotland.

Mohammed

[On moving to Scotland from Ukraine] I do not like the weather! It rains too much in Scotland.

Anna, age 8, Renfrewshire

While children and young people are relieved to find safety in Scotland, they continue to face uncertainty and anxiety about their future:

 *The only thing I am worried about is how long it will be to get a decision from the Home Office.*


Messi, age 17, North Ayrshire

These reflections highlight the complex experiences of children and young people affected by war and other forms of violence. They long for a world of safety, kindness, peace and love where they can thrive without fear.

6.6 What the adults have been saying...

The stories from babies, children and young people reflect many of the themes that are highlighted in the 2023 concluding observations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UN Committee).⁷² This section highlights some of those recommendations – drawing from Together’s child friendly version⁷³ – as well as the child-friendly response from Scottish Government.⁷⁴

What does the UN Committee say?

 *The UN Committee says that governments have to make rights real for children and young people. This includes things like changing the law, tackling discrimination and making sure everyone understands children’s rights.⁷⁵*

The UN Committee was happy to hear that Scotland was incorporating the UNCRC into law. It said Scotland should do this as soon as possible. The UN Committee also said that Scottish and UK Government should check all their laws and fix any that are unfair to children or don’t uphold their rights.⁷⁶


The UN Committee says that governments should: make children’s rights action plans; think about children’s rights when making decisions about how to spend money; get better at collecting information that helps them understand how well children’s rights are being respected; make sure that everyone understands children’s rights including through training; and make sure children have safe, child-friendly and private ways to complain if their rights are at risk of being breached.⁷⁷

In doing all of these things, the UN Committee is very clear that UK and Scottish Government should get children’s views and take these into account. The UN Committee reminds governments that every child has the right to share their views and be taken seriously in decisions that affect them – and governments need to do more to make sure this happens. The UN Committee says that UK and Scottish Government should pay special attention to making sure younger children, disabled children and children who live away from their families have this right protected.⁷⁸ The UN Committee also says UK Government should speak to children and young people about lowering the voting age from 18 to 16.⁷⁹

On tackling climate change, the UN Committee says that governments should do more to reduce pollution, support children to learn about climate change and listen to their views when making decisions about the environment.⁸⁰

On ending wars and violence, the UN Committee says UK Government should ban the sale of weapons to countries that are known to use children as soldiers. It also says UK Government should think about changing the rules so that young people can only join the army if they are 18+.⁸¹ Lastly, the UN Committee says that UK and Scottish Government should give special protection for asylum-seeking and refugee children and make sure they have everything they need to live a safe and happy life.⁸²

What has the Scottish Government said?

 *In its response to the UN Committee's recommendations, Scottish Government said it wants everyone to live without hate or prejudice.⁸³ It wants Scotland to be a cleaner, healthier and happier place for everyone.⁸⁴*

Scottish Government said it knows that some families need extra help. It wants to focus on them to make sure they get what they need. Scottish Government said it was learning more about what makes it hard for these families so that it can support them. It said it was giving extra money to some families through the Scottish Child Payment.⁸⁵

Scottish Government said that when people have been forced to leave their homes and countries, it wants people to decide to come to Scotland. It said refugee children and their families should feel welcome and be part of the community from the day they arrive. They should be able to go to school, see a doctor, feel safe in their home and start to make new friends. Scottish Government said it has made a plan to help achieve this. It will work on making this better – including by speaking with refugees and the people who are helping them.⁸⁶

6.7 Ideas to help



Children and young people have shared powerful insights about life in Scotland. Their stories highlight both the progress made and the work still needed to fully embed a children's human rights approach across all aspects of life in Scotland. Based on what they tell us, here are key messages for furthering a children's human rights approach:

Embedding children's rights:

- Ensure children's human rights are at the heart of all policies, practices, and decision-making processes in Scotland. As one MSYP noted: "UNCRC in law" is a positive aspect of life in Scotland.
- Train all adults working with and for children on children's human rights and how to embed them in their work. As one young person supported by the Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project said: "Educate people on children's rights including adults and children themselves".
- Make human rights visible and accessible throughout Scotland. As Ben, age 12, from Aberdeenshire shared: "I have learnt a little bit about my rights in school, but I don't know much about them".

Equality and non-discrimination:

- Address poverty and inequality proactively across Scotland. As Bb16, age 16, from Falkirk stated: "Scotland is not fair there are people living on streets and others in massive houses. Some people are very poor and others well loaded".
- Ensure equal access to opportunities and support for all children, regardless of their background. As Alice, age 17, from South Lanarkshire said: "I would like to see more younger people in the Scottish Parliament as they know what it's like. I want to see people like me who didn't have family or friends to help them".
- Create inclusive environments that celebrate diversity and combat discrimination. As Anna, age 15, from Edinburgh stated: "I would change all the injustices, like racism and homophobia, so that people were more accepted".

Empowering children:

- Provide age-appropriate information about rights and how to claim them. As one young person supported by the Scottish Youth Parliament and Women's Empowerment Project noted: "Art 42 says government has to make sure we know our rights - I haven't really seen them do this".
- Support children and young people to develop self-advocacy skills. As William, age 10, from Edinburgh shared: "I was told I couldn't become a police officer because I'm autistic. This made me feel incredibly angry".
- Create opportunities for meaningful choices about their lives and communities. As Tiglo, age 11, from Perth & Kinross said: "I think Scotland should try to be like Finland... I care about the environment".

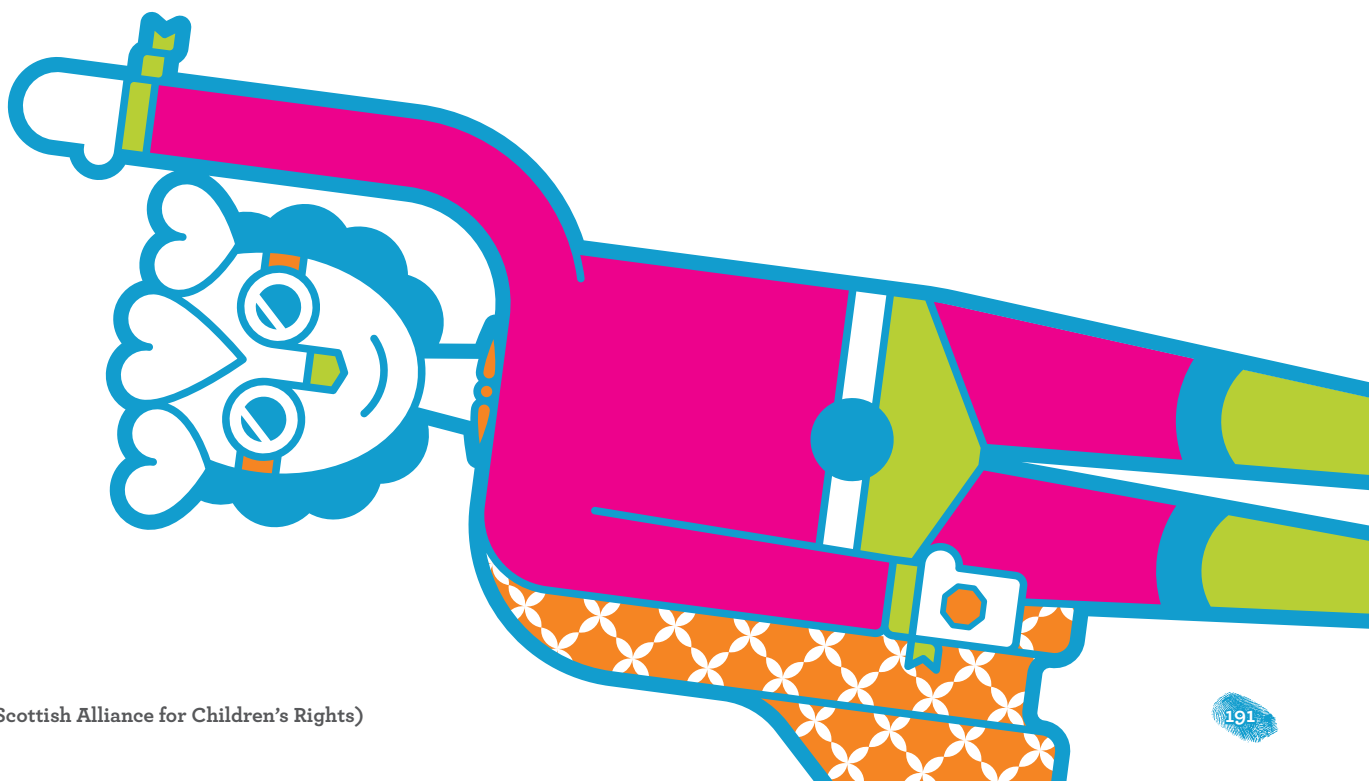
Participation:

- *Involve children and young people in decision-making at all levels of government and society. As Delilah, age 16, from Glasgow noted: “I think the Scottish Government is doing a lot to try and increase awareness around young people’s views and appreciate them and listen to young people. And that they take our wishes seriously and are starting to try and implement our ideas or our suggestions into society in Scotland”.*
- *Ensure inclusive participation, especially for those whose rights are most at risk. As one young person supported by the Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland said: “Government consultation events – not accessible to people outside Glasgow or Edinburgh”.*
- *Provide meaningful feedback when views are sought. As one young person supported by the Scottish Youth Parliament and Carers Trust Scotland shared: “As a carer, people want to hear your story and feel sorry for you but do nothing”.*

Accountability:

- *Establish clear, age-appropriate complaints procedures across all areas of children’s lives. As Lucas, a child from an armed forces family, said: “Better to complain to welfare but they don’t take it seriously. Children are not taken seriously”.*
- *Ensure transparency in decision-making processes affecting children and young people. As Charlie, a child from an armed forces family, noted: “Accessible for all ages. There should be different ways to complain and adults should make it possible”.*
- *Regularly monitor and report on how children’s human rights are upheld across Scotland. As one young person supported by the Scottish Youth Parliament and Scouts Scotland said: “Poor implementation of ‘The Right Way project’ principles accepted by government”.*

Overall, children and young people are calling for a Scotland that truly listens to them, respects their human rights, and supports them to reach their full potential. They want to see action on poverty, discrimination, climate change, and violence, and to be involved in shaping the decisions that affect their lives and futures.

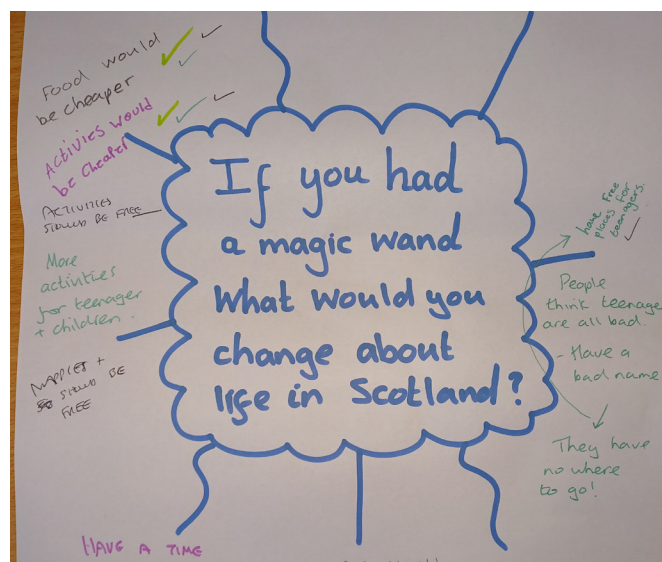
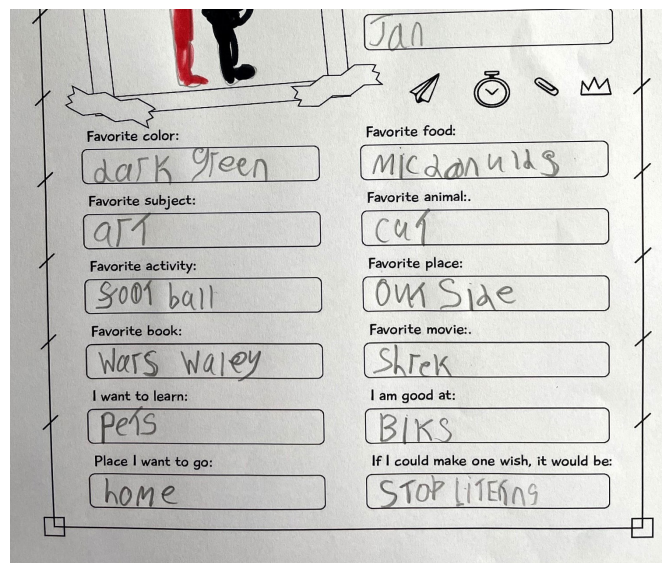


Appendix 1: methodology

This report was developed using a participatory approach, ensuring that the views and experiences of over 200 babies, children, and young people were central to its findings.

Our approach included both direct and partnership-based facilitation methods, allowing us to reach children and young people in various settings. We engaged with fourteen partner organisations across two phases to gather diverse perspectives and experiences from babies, children and young people living all over Scotland. Children and young people also had the option of sharing their experiences directly with Together, including through an anonymous survey.

This is the first time that we have approached the State of Children's Rights in this way. In previous years we have gathered evidence mainly from the perspective of supporting organisations and professionals. From the initial planning and development phases through to engagement, we relied on ongoing feedback and collaboration with partner organisations and the participants themselves. This helped shape the project methodology, report structure and content, ensuring that it truly reflects the experiences and stories shared by babies, children and young people.



Below is a summary of the key steps taken to produce the report.

A visual timeline is provided in [Appendix 2](#) and an overview of participant demographics in [Appendix 3](#).

1. Early planning and research (October - December 2023)

Together's policy team worked alongside an independent participation consultant to explore how best to engage babies, children and young people in the project. We wanted to ensure that our approach was rights-based and built upon the nine basic requirements for children's participation as set out by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in General Comment 12.⁸⁷

To ensure that our methodology was well-informed and robust, we conducted initial research interviews with 11 organisations who work directly with babies, children and young people. This included a mixture of Together members and non-members. We were keen to learn from everyone's perspective about what approaches work best for the babies, children and young people they support. We also spoke with colleagues at the Children's Commissioner for Jersey who had completed a similar project – Life on the Rock⁸⁸ – to learn from their approach.

The organisations we interviewed were:

1. Aberlour Children's Charity
2. Carers Trust Scotland
3. Children First
4. Children's Commissioner for Jersey
5. Families Outside
6. Forces Children Scotland
7. LGBT Youth Scotland
8. Romano Lav
9. Scottish Refugee Council
10. Starcatchers
11. Intercultural Youth Scotland

The interviews were structured around key questions that focused on the most effective ways to engage children and young people, particularly those whose rights are at risk, trauma-informed approaches, the best methods for collecting their stories and experiences, any challenges we should anticipate and how best to mitigate these.

Interview feedback shaped the overall approach of the project. One significant proposal was to frame the project around gathering children's 'stories' rather than framing it in the language of children's rights. Organisations told us that the children and young people they support have different levels of understanding about their rights and different levels of confidence in using rights language. Organisations suggested that framing the project in broader terms would help reduce barriers to engagement.

Another important suggestion was to use a combination of direct and partnership-based approaches. While partnerships with trusted organisations would provide a safe, supportive environment to children 'known to' these organisations; opportunities for direct engagement – such as ways for children to submit stories directly to Together – were also important as they would enable us to reach children who might not be connected to an organisation and those living in rural areas.

Organisations highlighted that our approach would need to be mindful of the many challenges faced by babies, children and young people – as well as those faced by the organisations supporting them.

Our timeline would need to be flexible and realistic, able to adapt to children and young people's busy lives, school and other commitments. There would need to be an ongoing feedback loop, particularly since the project would take place over several months. The project would also need to be responsive to challenges faced by specific groups of children and young people – such as those in armed forces families who might be available for a story-gathering session but have moved to a different school by the time the report is published. Many organisations highlighted issues around their own capacity and limited resources. They said ongoing support from Together would encourage them to get involved.

Based on these findings, we decided to adopt a combination approach whereby we would recruit a range of partner organisations to deliver 'story-gathering sessions', while also having various routes for children and young people to submit stories directly to Together. We began designing a range of resources for children, young people and adult facilitators. We shared these with a young adviser (Member of Children's Parliament) who provided initial feedback. The resources were then updated ready to be tested during the next phase.

2. Development phase (January - April 2024)

We decided to have two phases of engagement, with the intention of updating and adapting the resources over time to improve the experience for babies, children and young people as well as the process of facilitation.

A development phase was initiated from January to April 2024. We recruited five organisations to test the draft resources with children and young people. The criteria for organisations included the diversity of experiences they represented, geographic spread, their capacity to engage in the project and their safeguarding policies. The selection process was conducted by the independent participation consultant.

The organisations involved in this phase were:

1. Art at the Start, University of Dundee
2. Barnardo's Scotland
3. Circle
4. Children and Young People's Centre for Justice (CYCJ)
5. Play Scotland

Each organisation planned and hosted a story-gathering session (or sessions) using the draft resources developed by Together. The resources included a children and young people's pack and a facilitator pack with activity ideas. The **facilitator pack** was designed to be used flexibly, allowing organisations to adapt their approach to the specific needs and preferences of the children and young people they support. The pack included a range of activities to cater to different learning styles and opportunities for group-based as well as one-on-one engagement. Some examples included:

- **The time capsule:** children and young people fill an empty box to tell people in 100 years' time what life was like for them in 2024. Participation workers support conversations about what they've decided to include.
- **Conversation game:** children and young people design paper fortune tellers with questions under each corner about each other's lives. They then take turns to play the game and ask their friend the questions.
- **Dream house drawings:** children and young people draw their current house using a black pen. They then use colourful pens to make the changes that would turn it into their dream home.

As part of the development phase, we worked with Art at the Start, a project based at University of Dundee, to develop an approach for gathering the experiences of babies and early years children. Art at the Start developed activities to support caregivers to ‘tune in’ to their babies’ communication by observing them during a sensory play session; what did their babies like and dislike? How had their baby communicated this? Caregivers were then supported to observe their babies’ communication over the course of a day and use this to narrate the day from their babies’ perspective.

The feedback we received during the development phase was extremely valuable, helping us to identify challenges and make specific improvements ahead of the public launch of resources and the next phase of partnership work. For example, we learned that some children and young people had found the draft written materials challenging. They also wanted to know more about how their stories might be used – including uses beyond the report itself. In response, we updated the children’s pack and created a video version; we also created a child-friendly video of the consent information to make these resources more accessible. These adjustments helped ensure that children and young people would be able to access the information they needed in the format that worked best for them. We also updated our facilitator pack with additional information on supporting autistic and neurodivergent children’s involvement, including the use of symbols and visual session plans. We heard feedback about consent forms and that it would be helpful to create specific resources for parents and carers, particularly those supporting their baby or young child to take part. In response, Together created an information pack for parents and carers and updated the consent process.

Together was able to make a small financial contribution to each partner organisation. This included £320 as a contribution towards participation worker time; reimbursement of travel, accessibility and other workshop expenses; plus a contribution per child to compensate them for their time and expertise. Partner organisations consulted with children, young people (and caregivers where relevant) to decide how they wanted to receive this – some opted for individual vouchers while others chose to put this towards a fun group activity.

At the end of the development phase, Together prepared personalised thank you letters and videos for the children and young people involved. These reflected on what we had learned from their stories and what would happen next.

The development phase engaged 38 babies, children and young people (aged nine months to 16 years old).

3. Engagement phase (May - July 2024)

Together launched its public call for stories in May 2024. We published the final resources on our website, namely:

- **For children:** a **two-page leaflet**, **longer leaflet**, **Easy Read guide**, **video explainer** and **survey**.
- **For facilitators:** **facilitator pack with activity ideas**.
- **For parents and carers:** **information leaflet**.



We promoted the call for stories across our social media platforms and through our member network, inviting children and young people to share their stories with us in whatever format worked best for them (written, artwork, audio, video etc). Children could choose from a range of routes to submit their stories to us – including email, Freepost, WhatsApp or by filling out our **survey**. The open call was supported by an access fund to support children and young people facing financial barriers to their involvement.

Alongside the open call, Together recruited 12 partner organisations using a similar process to that used in the development phase. The organisations were:

1. Aberlour Children's Charity
2. Action for Children
3. Barnardo's Scotland
4. Circle
5. East Ayrshire Advocacy Services
6. Families Outside
7. Play Scotland
8. Relationships Scotland
9. Salvesen Mindroom Centre
10. Scottish Refugee Council
11. Scottish Youth Parliament
12. YouthLink Scotland

Each organisation used our updated resources to plan and deliver a story-gathering session (or sessions) tailored to the needs and preferences of the children and young people they support. Some organisations opted for a group-based approach, whereas others opted for one-on-one conversations with a support worker (this was particularly the case for topics that children might find upsetting). Some organisations opted for a peer research approach, whereby young people planned and delivered story-gathering workshops with their peers. Again, Together was able to make a small financial contribution to each organisation involved as well as the participants themselves.

Informed consent was crucial. Our consent pack included a video explainer, consent forms for different ages and Easy Read versions. Children and young people could tell us exactly how they wanted us to use (or not use) their story – for example in the report itself, on our website and/or on social media. For privacy reasons, we invited children and young people to choose a 'made up name'. This would enable them to identify their story whilst not compromising their privacy. Children and young people could also choose whether they wanted their age and local authority included next to their story.

Alongside the story-gathering sessions and survey, several organisations shared findings from recent projects with children and young people. This included evidence from Children's Parliament and from Forces Children Scotland.

Overall, the engagement phase involved 186 babies, children and young people, aged 11 months to 17 years old. Four of these children had also been involved in the first phase. A further nine young people aged 18-23 took part in discussions with the Scottish Youth Parliament and provided support and encouragement to their younger peers.

Participation workers' diaries

Participation workers shared how they went about planning their story-gathering sessions, adapting these to children's needs, as well as their reflections and feedback from participants:



Circle's diary: supporting babies and toddlers to share their stories

I planned sessions for one of our baby-weaning groups and a toddler group. Using Together's resources, I aimed to support caregivers to tune into their babies' cues – such as gestures, movement and noises– and build up to them narrating a day from their baby's perspective.

We spoke about their babies having rights and making choices. We discussed the different ways their babies communicate. For example, in the baby weaning group we observed babies' cues whilst offering new foods, tastes and textures. Sometimes they would turn their head away (possibly meaning I don't want any more), making positive noises (meaning I really like this), rubbing their eyes (meaning it's more my sleep time than eating time), throwing food on the floor (possibly playing, not having fine motor skills as yet, or possibly don't like it).

In the toddler group's first session, we observed them playing with water and sand and practised narrating things based on their cues. Parents took turns narrating for their child and responded well to their cues. This group has bonded well over the months and they also have a secure attachment with their babies. They are supportive and trusting of each other, which allows them to open up about their struggles, particularly around postnatal mental health.

During the second session, the parents asked if they could do messy painting, so they stripped the babies down to nappies and vests and we let the babies play with paints in whatever way they wanted. In these photos, Bob was trying to eat the paint, so his mum distracted him by doing footprints and showing him the sponges until he started to eat the sponge. I encouraged his mum to narrate for him: 'I'm so happy getting all messy I would like to eat it but my mummy won't let me, I'm happy to touch all the colours and make some pictures on the paper'.



After a few weekly sessions I asked the parents in the toddler group if they would like to try narrating a morning/afternoon of their baby's day. The parents weren't quite confident enough to try it yet, so I suggested we try it together in another group session. This helped the parents find confidence in narrating without being judged. Parents validated and praised each other's narration which was important in this process. Building strong, trusting relationships with parents and carers was key. Many of those we support are single parents, face physical or mental health issues, and/or live on the breadline. They need to be listened to and cared for with sensitivity and empathy and I wanted them to know I was there to support them.

When I was first aware of this project, I was curious as to how it would work with parents and babies. Practising the narration technique enabled wonderful, quality conversations with parents that have helped them to learn and become more aware of their actions and responses to their babies' cues and behaviours.

Using the narration technique in group play allowed for much wider conversations than might otherwise have been the case. In particular it helped to unpick assumptions that parents can make about their babies. It also allowed parents to open up about their feelings about other important milestones and parenting approaches and attitudes. The narration approach empowered parents to share positive feelings of the bond they have with their babies as well as the confidence to share feelings of guilt and pressures of their parenting. Parents shared powerful feedback:

"I was smiling all the time, I picked the best day to do it, Mimi was in a very good mood. I almost started crying few times as it was emotional".

"[I'm] going to try and print it off and put it in her wee memory box as how often do you get to look back on something like that. It was a lovely activity to really explore the perspective of her world. It filled my heart typing it out and seeing the love, understanding and trust we have in each other even in the very small and often mundane parts of our day".

Going forward I feel it is important to continue with the values of this practice and I will adapt my practice to encourage more narration. It's important for parents and carers to understand that they play a crucial role in supporting their babies' right to be heard. These open conversations can help them respond more effectively to their babies' cues and help them understand that their babies can and do make choices at such a young age.

Play Scotland's diary: supporting children from migrant backgrounds to share their stories

At the start of the workshop, we delivered a child-friendly explanation of its purpose and activities, ensuring clarity on how children's contributions would be used. We then circulated a copy of last year's report among the children, which provided context and helped them understand the workshop's objectives. We think this is really helpful in enabling the children to visualise the report's final format.

The children that participated in the workshop were from migrant families so had English as an additional language. We focused a lot of our approach on hands-on activities so that the children were able to communicate their stories in a way other than through verbal communication. We ensured we used clear language without jargon so that we were as easy to understand as possible.

We facilitated active engagement by encouraging the children to take us on tours around their school, enabling them to share their perspectives on various areas and express their likes and dislikes. Engaging them in hands-on activities such as drawing their houses and brainstorming changes they'd like to see encouraged lively discussions about their home lives. They were also able to show us artwork that they had previously done and were proud of. We feel this encouraged trust and relationship building. While the children were engaged in drawing activities, we engaged them

in conversation, asking thoughtful and open questions about their drawings. We encouraged them to elaborate on their artwork and share more about their personal narratives if they wished to.

By providing an environment of openness and acceptance, we noticed that the children gradually opened up and became more comfortable to chat away until they had exhausted the topic and moved onto something else. We were sure not to judge what they were saying, which I think fostered a sense of trust and safety. During our workshop, we had a few sensitive subjects come up, such as concerns about rats in their home and another involving a visit to their home by the police. Rather than pressuring the children for details we took on a supportive stance, allowing them space to talk about the subjects at their own pace. We took on the role of an observer and attentive listener, ensuring that they felt heard and respected.

Despite having obtained permissions from both parents and children beforehand, we offered the children the opportunity to decline participation if they wished, respecting their autonomy and preferences. Some children were very keen to talk and add to the conversation that we were having; others were a little shy. We gave the children time to get to know us and feel comfortable in our company, by chatting to them as they were engaged in drawing activities, asking open questions about what they were drawing and their lives. We developed a rapport with them which made them more confident in speaking out later on when taking part in other activities. We ensured that everyone had the opportunity to share their story at their own pace. We respected individuals who chose not to engage and refrained from pressuring them into discussing their experiences.

We explained anonymity to the children and encouraged them to choose aliases to maintain anonymity, they really enjoyed this and were very happy to use the aliases to share their stories. To capture their stories, we took notes on their discussions, ensuring to respect their privacy by using aliases. This information was later included in the feedback that we sent to the children following the workshop, they were happy for us to include the information and felt comfortable that it was under their alias, which may allow them to identify it if published.

Mindroom's diary: supporting neurodivergent children to share their stories

We adapted the resources from Together's facilitators' pack for use with a neurodivergent audience by including more specific questions, suggesting that participants may choose one or several topics to explore in greater detail. We also included time to assess whether participants were familiar with the language of children's rights and how this related to the questions. We shared the resources with participants ahead of time to provide predictability and reduce anxiety, as well as inviting any questions before meeting. This also allowed participants additional time to process their thoughts before attending the sessions. We provided age-appropriate art materials including comic strip templates to support participants in sharing their stories but allowed young people to guide the sessions.

We held six story-gathering sessions, each adapted to the needs and preferences of the children and young people involved.

We worked with partner schools to facilitate story-gathering sessions with small groups of children and young people. This provided an opportunity to discuss any identified support needs ahead of the sessions. We facilitated two school-based sessions with two pupils attending each of them. On each occasion, the pupils were already familiar with each other and with the room where the session would take place. Two members of Mindroom staff were present to support their participation alongside additional school staff members where this was requested. Coming towards the end of the school term meant we had limited time to organise further school-based sessions.

We also worked on a 1:1 basis with four children and young people currently receiving support from our Direct Help and Support Service. Some of these sessions took place online – others were in-person either at the Mindroom office or at the young person's home. One young person's mum helped provide extra support. These 1:1 sessions could be more flexible with some participants opting to create further work at home after an initial introduction to the project. We then discussed this work in follow-up sessions.

Across the sessions we provided a range of age-appropriate creative materials and approaches to support children and young people to explore and share their views. This included creating comic strips, artwork and discussions.

Barnardo's Scotland's diary: supporting autistic children to share their stories

In our first session I explained verbally about the project, the aims of the State of Children's Rights Report, consent and how the young people's information was going to be used and I came away thinking that I had not received feedback from the young people that they had understood what I was saying. So the next time we had a session, I had created a timeline on Widgit that used easy to understand symbols to explain the concepts more visually. This worked better and it gave the young people and their families something to refer back to if they wanted to ask questions.

We wanted to do a couple of the activities so that the young people had different opportunities to talk about what was important to them. Most of the young people we worked with are autistic so it was decided rather than a long session looking at two or three different activities in one go, we instead did short sessions focusing on one activity at a time. We also did the activities in separate sessions as well. This was all so that the young people would only have to concentrate on the activity for a short time, but also so that they had plenty of time before and after the activity to have fun.

The effective methods we used were very much based on what the young people would find interesting, exciting and fun. Therefore, the activities were either active, creative or practical for the young people to get involved in. In particular for the documentary that the young people made, the young people got to choose how involved they wanted to be in sharing the story of youth group. We had to work flexibly with this knowing at the beginning some young people might not be keen to participate until they saw the activity in progress. This happened – one young person didn't want to film anything or speak, but half way through the activity we checked in with her again and she then took the camera and did an amazing job at filming some artwork that was on the wall.

For one of the groups, we had a sensitive topic of the youth group coming to an end that was difficult to navigate for the young people. Part of our strategy to navigate this

was to return a few times to the group, so that they could process the information that they had been given about the closure and give them time to be able to form their own responses to how they felt. Being patient and reflecting on the processing times for our young people was important recognising that this would be different for each child. Our relationship-based practice and our trauma informed approach also means we have a good grounding to be able to tackle some of the more sensitive topics.

4. Reviewing submissions and drafting (August to October 2024)

Upon receiving all submissions, the Together team mapped each story against relevant UNCRC cluster areas and key themes. This structured approach allowed us to clearly present the experiences of babies, children and young people in a way that evidences Scotland's progress and gaps in implementing the latest concluding observations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. This approach will also help us in future work with children and young people, allowing us to better communicate how their stories connect to their rights.

We found that children's stories were usually structured around different 'spaces' – such as their life at home, at school and in their local community. We chose to reflect this in the chapter titles, with each focusing on a different aspect of their lives and providing actionable steps for Scottish Government, duty bearers, organisations and individuals within each of these spheres.

5. Feedback and review

To maintain a continuous feedback loop, we made sure to keep babies, children and young people informed throughout the report's development. At each phase of engagement, we sent personalised letters and video updates, sharing the progress of the report, outlining what steps were coming next and most importantly expressing our gratitude to the babies, children and young people for sharing their stories with us.

In October 2024, we shared a draft of the report with partner organisations alongside a draft of a child-friendly and an Easy Read version. This enabled children, young people and partners to give us feedback on how the stories had been presented – as well as the chance to make any changes.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the process of creating this report was built on strong partnerships, ongoing feedback and review. Throughout both the development and engagement phases, we worked closely with partner organisations and participants to check how our approach was working and to adapt it as required. The feedback we received was instrumental in shaping our overall approach, the final resources, structure and content of the report.

We are incredibly grateful to the 220 babies, children and young people who took part – and to the supporting adults and organisations who helped them to share their stories.

Appendix 2: project timeline



1. Methodology and initial lanning (October - November 2023)

- Conducted interviews with 11 organisations to inform methodology.
- Created first draft of children's pack and facilitator pack.



2. Feedback from Children's Parliament (December 2023)

- Review of draft resources by Member of Children's Parliament.
- Updated resources produced.



3. Development phase (January - April 2024)

Story-gathering and testing:

- Recruited five organisations to test the draft resources with children and young people.
- Induction sessions with partners and ongoing support.
- Developed methodology for babies and early years.
- 38 participants engaged in story-gathering sessions.

Feedback loop:

- Thank you letters and videos to all participants.

Accessibility:

- Updates to approach, resources and consent process based on feedback.
- Developing Easy Read and video resources.



4. Engagement phase (May - July 2024)

Launch:

- Launched open call for stories – open to all children and young people under 18.
- Recruited 12 organisations to deliver story-gathering sessions.

Story-gathering:

- 139 participants in story-gathering sessions
- 47 survey participants

Feedback loop:

- Thank you letters and videos to all participants.



5. Reviewing submissions and drafting (August - October 2024)

Submissions:

- Logged, categorised, and reviewed.
- Established a pseudo-anonymised system to protect participants' privacy.

Drafting:

- Drafting in September-October.
- Internal reviews conducted.



6. Design and review (October - November 2024)

- Review by partners, children and young people.
- Final edits.



7. Launch (December 2024)

Appendix 3: participant demographics

Some participants chose to share additional details about themselves on their consent form. This section was optional. Where information was provided, it helped us to understand more about the child's story and about the diversity of the babies, children and young people involved in the project.

As this information was self-reported and optional, the resulting data does not cover all participants, nor all of their diverse and intersecting characteristics. This data should accordingly be viewed as a 'snapshot' rather than a comprehensive picture. Occasionally information was shared with us in another way, such as an email or published report, we have reflected this in the figures below where appropriate consent was given.



Number of participants: 220

- 38 during development phase.
- 186 during engagement phase (of whom 47 were survey participants)
- Four participants took part in both phases. They have been counted once in the overall figure of 220 participants.

Gender:

- Female: 80
- Male: 51
- Non-binary: 2
- In another way (not specified): 3
- Prefer not to say: 2

Age:

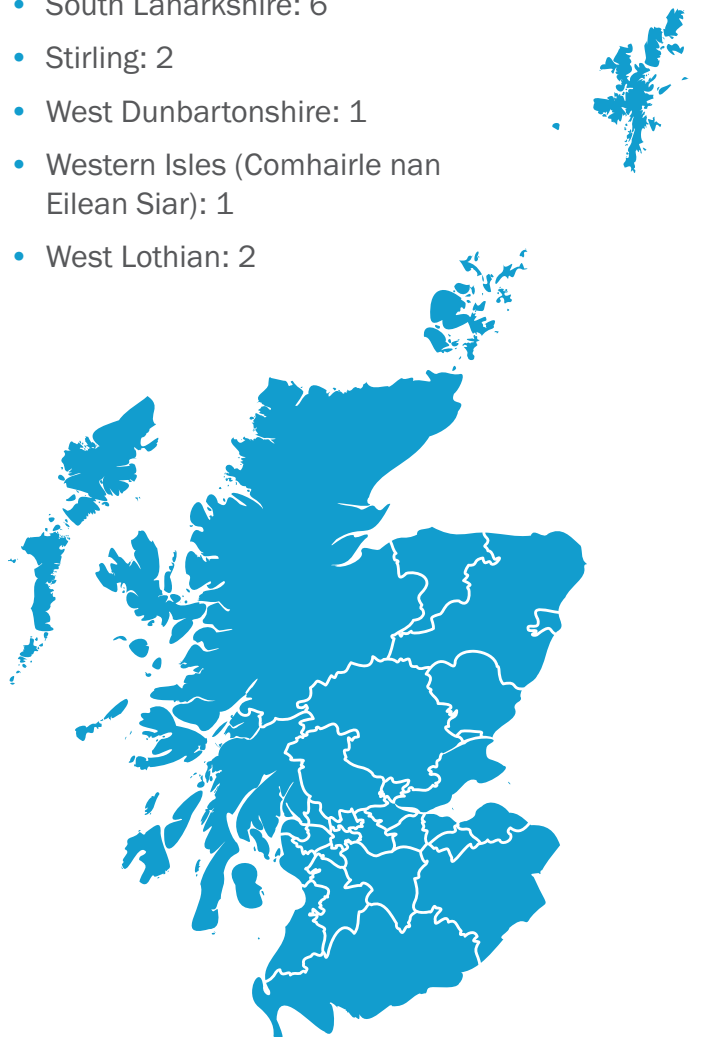
- 0-4 years old: 13 (youngest participant was 9 months old)
- 5-7 years old: 12
- 8-11 years old: 38
- 12-15 years old: 45
- 16-17 years old: 30

Additional characteristics/background:

- Care Experienced: 12
- Black, Brown or minority ethnic background: 15
- Refugee, asylum-seeking or migrant background: 19
- Disabled: 13
- Neurodivergent (including autism and ADHD): 29
- Parent in prison: 8
- Parent or carer in armed forces: 48
- Young carer: 14
- LGBTQI+: 6
- Victim/witness of crime: 2
- Contact with justice system: 9

Local authority areas:

- Aberdeen: 4
- Aberdeenshire: 3
- Angus: 1
- Argyll & Bute: 1
- Clackmannanshire: 1
- Dumfries & Galloway: 6
- Dundee: 6
- East Ayrshire: 9
- East Dunbartonshire: 0
- East Lothian: 8
- East Renfrewshire: 1
- Edinburgh City: 20
- Falkirk: 4
- Fife: 4
- Glasgow City: 28
- Highland: 4
- Inverclyde: 1
- Midlothian: 3
- Moray: 0
- North Ayrshire: 3
- North Lanarkshire: 22
- Orkney Islands: 2
- Perth and Kinross: 5
- Renfrewshire: 1
- Scottish Borders: 4
- Shetland: 0 (included indirectly through Children's Parliament submission and anecdotal evidence)
- South Ayrshire: 2
- South Lanarkshire: 6
- Stirling: 2
- West Dunbartonshire: 1
- Western Isles (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar): 1
- West Lothian: 2



Endnotes

- ¹ Together (2023). Launch of Together's #RightsOnTrack campaign for World Children's Day. <https://www.togetherscotland.org.uk/news-and-events/news/2023/11/launch-of-together-s-rights-on-track-campaign-for-world-children-s-day/> [Date accessed: 05.11.24].
- ² CRC/C/GBR/CO/6-7.
- ³ CRC/C/GBR/CO/6-7.
- ⁴ Together (2023). Scotland's 'to do' list. <https://storymaps.com/stories/5e2cb7b123304000987cbcd6a7095093> [Date accessed: 17.10.24].
- ⁵ Scottish Government (2024). United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – concluding observations 2023: SG initial response – child-friendly version. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/united-nations-convention-rights-child-scottish-governments-initial-response-2023-concluding-observations-un-committee-rights-child-child-friendly-version/documents/> [Date accessed: 15.10.24].
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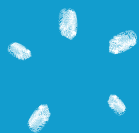
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