4.
Learning about AI
Shetland

What we did

On Shetland, Members of Children's Parliament worked with Maria Bell from digital consultancy company Mesomorphic and, remotely, Lydia France from the Alan Turing Institute (ATI). As a majority of the class in this location were new to the project this school year, it was necessary to adjust the focus of these sessions to allow more time and space for the children to learn some more general ideas and principles in relation to AI and children's human rights. So rather than launching straight into working on the children's ideas on how and what people should learn about AI, the first sessions focused on an exploration of real-world localised issues and how AI might be utilised to help. Lydia from ATI joined via video call to talk about a collaboration between ATI and the Met Office which aims to use AI to improve weather forecasting. The children on Shetland had recently experienced a period of very heavy snowfall which had had wide-reaching effects, and so the design challenge that Maria set Members of Children's Parliament focused on imagining ways in which AI could be used to help solve the various problems which extreme weather can cause on the islands.

On the following day, Members of Children's Parliament worked with local artist Jono Sandilands, who brought two printing presses into the classroom and led the children through a sign-making workshop. These signs reflected the children's thoughts and feelings on the work of the previous day with a particular focus on what they had learned about AI and why they felt it was important for children to learn about AI and children's rights. Meanwhile, the 'Little Mission' which the other schools also completed around this time focused specifically on the theme of 'learning about AI'. Some of the quotes in this section are from the 'Little Mission' classroom activities.

What the children told us

The Members of Children's Parliament in Shetland (and across the project) have consistently told us that they think it is important for children to learn about AI, that they have valued learning about it alongside learning about their rights, and that it is important to them that this learning is fun and creative. There were a variety of reasons given for why children should learn about AI and their rights. Members of Children's Parliament spoke about the increasing prevalence of AI now and what that would mean for their futures; they referenced the importance of understanding how the technologies work and how to use them for the sake of making informed choices and making the most of the opportunities that AI affords; and they spoke about the importance of education for keeping them safe.

> "I like learning about AI creatively with my friends."
>
> **Member of Children's Parliament, Shetland**

Image: Members of Children's Parliament work with local artist, Jono Sandilands.

> "We think they need to know how powerful [AI is] and what you can do with AI."

Member of Children's Parliament, Shetland

> "If something goes wrong and no adults are there, children don't know what to do."

Member of Children's Parliament, Shetland

Children's Parliament observed a preoccupation with issues around AI and safety, and the importance of children learning about AI in order to stay safe. The views and worries expressed mirrored those that we found when talking specifically about safety and security with the AI Team in Glasgow: the concerns often centered on the need for children to 'keep their data safe', not give away personal information or passwords, and to be wary of other online risks.

> "Children need to know about AI so they can be safe online."

Member of Children's Parliament, Shetland

> "If you put private information online you put yourself at risk."

Member of Children's Parliament, Shetland

That there was not always a specific link made to AI technologies suggests two things. Firstly, the existing focus within Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence on teaching children about online safety in the context of what they can do individually has been successful in raising children's awareness of the issue. Secondly, this understanding does not currently extend to broader privacy concerns around the use of children's data in training AI systems or how AI systems could be used to circumvent existing data protections, as discussed above. It is significant to note that the make-up of this group had a majority of Members of Children's Parliament who were new to the project this school year and so had not had the same opportunities to learn about these issues as the children in the other three groups (where we did see more engagement with those broader concerns). Results from the Little Mission suggested that some of the children in other groups who were well into their second year of learning about AI and children's rights had a more detailed and specific view:

> "AI is getting smarter and smarter every day. They know what you like on YouTube and that doesn't give you the right to privacy."

Member of Children's Parliament, Edinburgh

The preoccupation with safety is also linked closely to children's feelings; the concerns they had clearly indicated the value they put on feeling safe. Similarly, there was some recognition of the risk that inadequate or unreliable information could cause more harm than good.

> "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."

Member of Children's Parliament, Shetland

> "Children need to know because just a little bit of info can put them in danger and get them exposed and make them anxious."

Member of Children's Parliament, Shetland

The Members of Children's Parliament in this group viewed learning about AI as important for their futures. They are aware that AI will continue to develop at pace and that when they are adults it will likely play a much greater role than it does already. They therefore saw education about AI as necessary both for the sake of their future success and for the sake of ensuring that the risks of rapid AI expansion were mitigated against.

Children's Parliament

> "Children should have a say in how and what they learn about AI because the future will be AI."

Member of Children's Parliament, Shetland

> "When they grow up they will give it too much power [if children don't learn about AI]."

Member of Children's Parliament, Shetland

In terms of how and where they thought children would like to learn about AI and their human rights, Members of Children's Parliament were consistent in viewing school as a suitable location (although other suggestions were also made) and stressed the importance of fun and creativity, with several children referencing the approach taken by Children's Parliament as a factor in them enjoying this learning. The following were written responses the children gave to a question about how and where they thought children would like to learn about this.

> "We love the games and children will have fun!"

Member of Children's Parliament, Shetland

> "Children would like to learn about AI the fun way. Children would like to learn AI at school."

Member of Children's Parliament, Shetland

> "They might like learning with their class and the Children's Parliament. In a fun way. In class."

Member of Children's Parliament, Shetland

There were also some specific ideas on approach and some further thoughts on possible locations.

> "They would like to learn about it with AI in front of them. In school or in Children's Parliament – they should learn about it face to face."

Member of Children's Parliament, Shetland

> "Children should learn about AI everywhere."

Member of Children's Parliament, Shetland

Responses from the larger AI Team provided a range of other views and ideas on what and how children should be taught about AI and their rights. For the 'Little Mission', Members of Children's Parliament created placards declaring their key messages in this area. A clear message across the board is that children want to learn about AI and their rights:

> "More AI education in schools."

Member of Children's Parliament, Glasgow

> "How do I use AI?"

Member of Children's Parliament, Glasgow

> "Can you always trust AI?"

Member of Children's Parliament, Edinburgh

> "AI must protect our rights!"

Member of Children's Parliament, Edinburgh

> "Good AI can help children learn."

Member of Children's Parliament, Edinburgh

> "Let all children learn about AI!"

Member of Children's Parliament, Edinburgh

> "Children learn about AI, it has to be protected and safe!"

Member of Children's Parliament, Edinburgh

> "Children need to know!"

Member of Children's Parliament, Shetland

Finally, the workshops in Shetland brought up some more generalised concerns that the children had in relation to AI and the risks of it 'taking over' from humans.

> "AI will take us over one day."

Member of Children's Parliament, Shetland

> "I do think it will eventually take over. Because some people are being careless and programing it to do stuff that they're not bothered ... And I believe that in a few centuries then AI will be so intelligent that it will have personalities."

Member of Children's Parliament, Shetland

The children viewed change as necessary to prevent this from happening and, though they were not overly optimistic, Members of Children's Parliament were clear that it was the responsibility of government to safeguard against the risks of unchecked AI development. Children's Parliament asked them what they felt should be done:

> "The governments actually paying attention to what happens to us. They're not ... caring about climate change or anything. Why would they be going to pay attention to robots going wrong?"

Member of Children's Parliament, Shetland

> "Maybe you could make a video and you could send it to the government about what we believe might happen within a few centuries."

Member of Children's Parliament, Shetland

> "You could write a letter to them."

Member of Children's Parliament, Shetland

> "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, Shetland

Exchanges like these demonstrated that the children felt it was important that their views, and their fears, were taken seriously and acted on by adult decision-makers. They also demonstrated a fear that this would not happen – something which decision-makers must take into account - a children's rights approach requires that children's views are taken seriously and that they are given feedback on their engagement.

Image: Artwork from the Members of Children's Parliament.

Children's Parliament

What our partners told us

With the focus being broader for these workshops due to the cohort of children having had less AI engagement previously, there was necessarily less of an opportunity for the children to feed directly into a specific piece of work that our partners were currently engaged in as the sessions were tailored to meeting the needs of the class at this stage. Nevertheless, both Maria Bell (Mesomorphic) and Lydia France (the Alan Turing Institute) reported coming away from the workshop with useful insights and an enhanced appreciation of the children's capabilities.

"What surprised me was the range of applications the students created for using AI. They easily grasped the basic applications and generated some fascinating ideas that can be applied in their local areas."

Maria Bell

"I was surprised by their lateral thinking about very different topics."

Lydia France

These responses were consistent with what Children's Parliament found across workshops in all four locations: the professionals we worked with were impressed with the children's ability to engage with the subject matter and recognised them as capable of generating useful and relevant ideas. There were further benefits to partners in terms of their thinking around how to communicate effectively with children about AI and the impact it has on their lives.

"It's got me thinking about more hackathon ideas that we can use with students to help them understand the impact of technology. ... The whole event went really well, and I learnt a lot about audience engagement from the facilitators."

Maria Bell

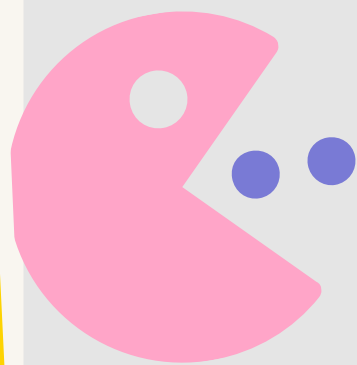"It has helped me think about how to communicate AI."

Lydia France

Image: Members of Children's Parliament pose with their A.I placards.

Children's Parliament