

# Better Engagement Better Policy

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A case study on how children can influence  
Scottish Government policy.

**March 2024**





## Better Engagement, Better Policy

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This case study explores children's participation in policy development. It focuses on the **Democracy Matters consultation** and is divided into three interconnected sections.

### Part One:

A Children's Rights Approach

### Part Two:

Democracy Matters Consultation Q&A

### Part Three:

Reflections from Members of  
Children's Parliament

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## About Children's Parliament



# Part One:

## A Children's Rights Approach

### Context:

The Children's Rights Unit in the Scottish Government is keen to support good practice in how children can inform and help shape Scottish Government policy. The aim of this case study is to support the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) implementation and specifically younger children's participation in policy development. Through sharing and reflecting on examples of children's participation, the Children's Rights Unit aims to use such case studies as a supportive tool alongside other resources, including the Participation Framework to embed children's participation within Scottish Government. This case study specifically focuses on exploring the process of undertaking rights-based practice with children, ensuring their views and experiences help drive change.

### Introduction:

In 2017, the Scottish Government and COSLA jointly launched Democracy Matters, a consultation led by the Local Governance Review team to explore how local people could inform and shape local decision-making processes. It is the Scottish Government's intention that the closer decisions are made to local communities, the more effective they will be. Individuals and community groups across Scotland were consulted on the future of community decision-making. The consultation's outputs were taken on board by Scottish Government and helped inform the second phase of the Democracy Matters process.

The initial report from children can be seen here:

[childrensparliament.org.uk/our-work/democracy-matters-consultation/](https://childrensparliament.org.uk/our-work/democracy-matters-consultation/)

Based on the findings from the first phase of the Local Governance Review, the Scottish Government asked communities across Scotland to engage in further conversations based on the new Democracy Matters material and to 'imagine a different democratic future'. Children's Parliament was asked to support the engagement of children in this second phase. In November 2023, Members of Children's Parliament came together with members of the Local Government Review team to consider the new questions the Democracy Matters 2 consultations seeks to answer.

It was important to consider how the broader consultation questions could be translated into a relatable, understandable and positive engagement experience for children. You can access the original questions here: [gov.scot/publications/democracy-matters-phase-2-consultation-local-governance-review/](https://gov.scot/publications/democracy-matters-phase-2-consultation-local-governance-review/)



The Children's Parliament team worked to simplify the consultation topics and agreed to focus on the following elements of the Scottish Government consultation with children:

- Children's understanding of local democracy across Scotland
- What local democracy looks and feels like for children
- Democracy through the lens of children's rights
- Methods of involving children in decision-making in local communities.

The core questions explored with children were:

- How can children be involved in decision making/having a say?
- What are the barriers children face in having a say in the community?
- What do adults need to do to support children's participation in decision making?
- How will we know if children's participation in decisions is working?

## A Children's Rights Approach:

A children's rights approach furthers the knowledge, understanding and realisation of children's human rights as laid down in the UNCRC and other international human rights instruments. With such an approach we can use children's human rights standards and principles to guide behaviour, actions, policies and programmes across relationships, professional actions, policies and laws.

A children's human rights approach:

- Builds the capacity of children as rights-holders to claim their rights
- Supports children to defend their own rights and those of others
- Builds the capacity of duty-bearers to fulfil their obligations to children
- Recognises relationships based in human rights values are necessary for realising children's rights

*Tip: we undertook creative workshops on children's rights in the context of their lives*

*Tip: we built children's confidence to be able to say when their or their peers rights are challenged*

*Tip: we engaged the children's families, school staff and the policy leads in the process to understand a child rights approach.*

*Tip: we demonstrated in action relationships based on kindness, trust, respect and dignity.*



- Includes children's knowledge of what it is like to be a child, their ideas and their opinions
- Establishes a comfortable environment that supports and enables children to advocate effectively for themselves
- Enables adults to benefit from the rich learning intrinsic to these approaches.

*Tip: we created a safe environment where children participated freely and were listened to and valued.*

*Tip: we reported on the children's key messages and shared them with the Scottish Government's policy team, schools and more widely on social media to show the impact of a child rights approach and to ensure the children's messages about local democracy were heard and duly considered.*

*Tip: we decorated our physical space, we made it comfortable, and ensured access to the outdoors and created a positive emotional environment which is stress free, flexible and respectful.*

When a children's rights approach is adopted, it creates an inclusive space where children and adults are equal. This approach goes beyond mere participation or listening to children; it emphasises the cultivation of relationships, the establishment of a comfortable environment and the creation of a relaxed, slow-paced space that empowers children to voice their perspectives and share their lived experiences. In a rights-based environment, children's views and experiences are taken seriously and their ideas are translated into meaningful actions and must be listened to, and acted upon, as appropriate.

*Tip: A children's rights approach is about fostering a behavioural and cultural shift among adults, encouraging a mindset that respects and supports children's rights.*



## Process of Engagement:

Children's Parliament invited 15 children from the Child Human Rights Defenders (CHRD) group to come together for a three-day residential in November 2023. These children have participated in several Children's Parliament projects, including the annual Cabinet Takeover and come from all over Scotland, including Island communities. The children range in age from upper primary school to lower high school, come from a diversity of backgrounds with several who would be described as being 'children whose rights are most at risk'. All have a good understanding of children's rights.

For this project it benefited to have children from different communities and to have knowledge on rights: for other consultations that doesn't have to be the case. For example, a wide national reach might not be possible or appropriate all the time.

In the months leading up to the residential, the Children's Parliament team ran online sessions with the children to introduce them to the purpose of the consultation and introduce them to the concept of 'democracy'. The children were encouraged to think about the places they live, what services, amenities they use and activities they are involved in. The children also thought about the adults who live and work in their communities. In the month prior to the start of the residential, Scottish Government policy leads joined the group. It was important that children were introduced to new adults who would be joining them for the residential and also important for the Scottish Government team to get to know the children.

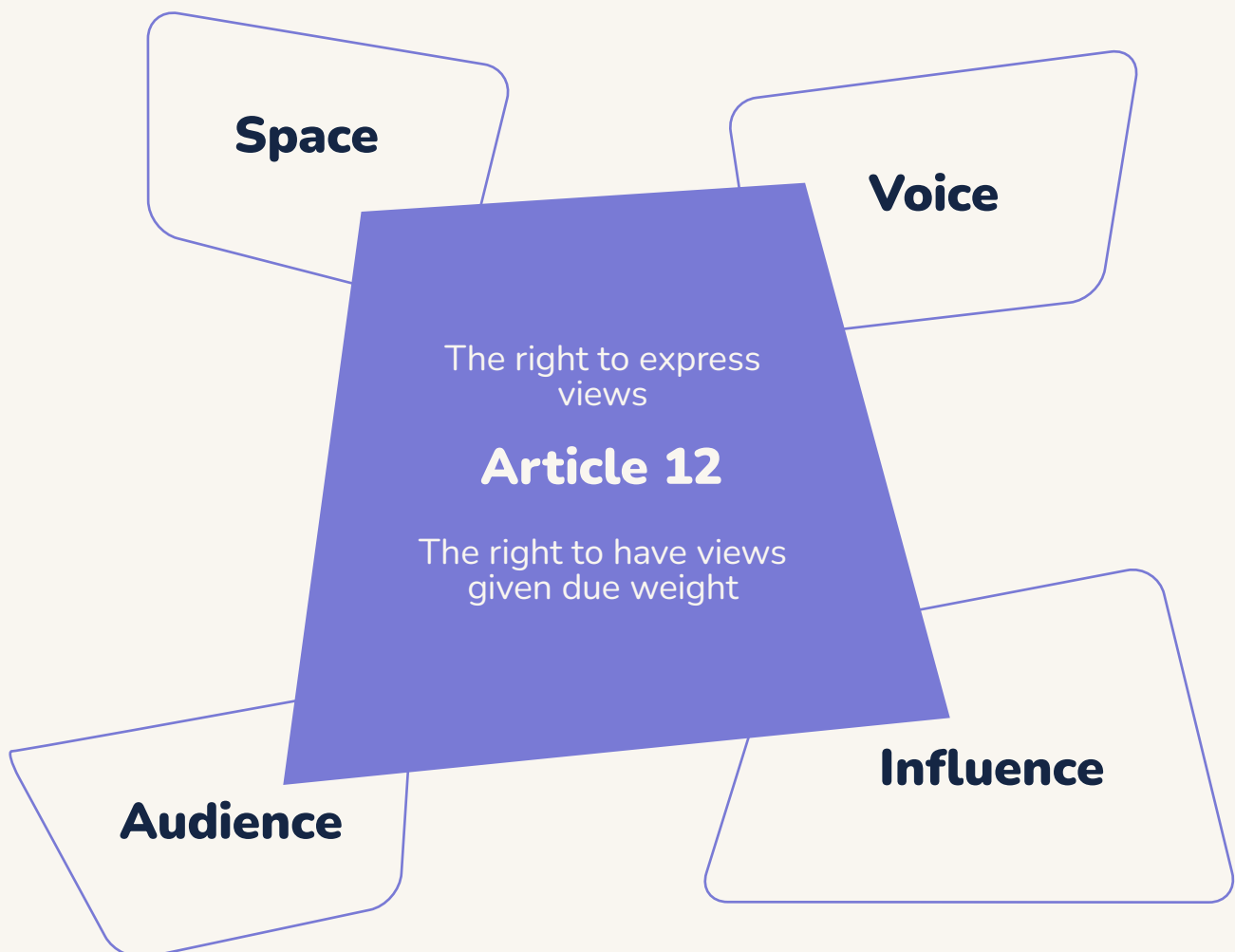
*Tip: When developing a consultation proposal, it is important to think carefully about which children to engage in terms of their age, lived experience, knowledge of children's rights, and location.*

*Tip: It is essential to build in time at the start of the consultation to develop relationships between the children, the Children's Parliament team, and the policy leads, and to ensure the children have the necessary background knowledge on the policy area to participate fully.*



## Lundy Model of Participation:

The Lundy model of participation is a framework that helps understanding how children can be involved in decision-making processes that affect them. It was developed by Professor Laura Lundy, a leading expert in children's rights. In her model, Lundy explains the essential components that need to be provided in order to facilitate meaningful participation of children in decision-making processes.



This model provides a way of conceptualising Article 12 of the UNCRC which is intended to focus on educational decision-makers on the distinct, albeit interrelated, elements of the provision. The four elements have a rational chronological order:

**Space** Children must be given safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their view.

**Voice** Children must be facilitated to express their view.

**Audience** The view must be listened to.

**Influence** The view must be acted upon, as appropriate.



## The Approach:

When working with younger children, there are several key factors that must be taken into consideration in the planning of any event:

*Tip: it's critical to engage with children in a creative and fun manner, not solely based on talking.*

- Is the physical environment suitable and welcoming for children?
- Are the activities fun, stimulating and creative?
- Is there time for children to self-direct out-with the formal session timings?
- Do the children have enough information about what's happening and who will be involved?
- Is there a plan for the children to share their work and their recommendations with adult influencers and decision-makers?

A creative process was developed by Children's Parliament that would give children a way of thinking about how a town works; a process that would allow them to imagine where the key places, buildings and people were and how they connected. Once this was in place, the children could then use all they had created to consider how children could influence what happens in their town.

To this end, the team pre-prepared foam board buildings of differing shapes and sizes, which the children then finished off and placed around a skeleton infrastructure to create a town. The children named the buildings, school, health centre, library, children's rights museum, shops etc. and thought about the people who would populate these places. From this point of feeling ownership for the town, the children worked together to identify places and people that would provide them with the access and support they need to share their views and experiences, in order to inform local decision-making.

Whilst the consultation approach was planned, there is flexibility within the programme for it to change direction. We don't necessarily know the final outcome, it is an iterative process of sharing, exploring, checking and feedback.

Scottish Government colleagues participated fully in all the activities including joining in games and breaks with the children. This offered a first-hand opportunity to develop positive relationships with children who were relaxed in their presence and meant they were able to hear the background stories, hopes and aspirations of the children and relate this back to the aims of the consultation.

*Tip: the co-production process works best when the children and policy leads go on a journey together rather than the simple exchange of written information.*





On the final day, the children hosted a 'sharing event' where they welcomed Tom Arthur MSP, Minister for Community Wealth and Public Finance and other Scottish Government colleagues to Confidence Kingdom, the name the children voted upon to call their town. The children then explained how children in Confidence Kingdom could usefully share their views, experiences and ideas in child-friendly ways. For all their ideas please see link to the report, [childrensparliament.org.uk/our-work/democracy-matters/](https://childrensparliament.org.uk/our-work/democracy-matters/)

*Tip: final/sharing event supports the children to share their key messages directly to decisions makers. Where possible Children's Parliament aims to involve families so they can see their child's participation and also learn about a children's rights approach.*

To finish off the event, everyone sat together in a circle and had a conversation about Confidence Kingdom, why it is different to where children live at the moment and what children feel is most important. Children recognised that change doesn't happen overnight but were clear that adults should 'do what you can do now and put the things you can't do yet on a list and do them when you can'. The Minister and Scottish Government colleagues spoke about how powerful they found the session with the children and as this case study will demonstrate, is influencing new thinking and behaviours.

At the end of the consultation, Cameron from the Local Governance Review team shared his insights and reflections on the process and how it can inform the development of more effective participative processes across Scottish Government and beyond. In Part Two of this pack, you can hear directly from Cameron.

In the coming months Children's Parliament will remain in dialogue with Cameron and the policy team to get feedback on the longer-term impact of the children's input. This feedback will be in a child friendly format (e.g. letter, a visit, a film) and explain to the children the impact of their work and if ideas have not been followed up, the rationale for that decision making. Children understand not all their ideas (or the intent of their ideas) will come to fruition, but getting feedback on why is key.

*Tip: getting feedback on the impact of the children's participation in the short, medium and longer term is an important part of rights based practice.*



## Part Two:

# Democracy Matters Consultation Q&A

As mentioned in part one of this pack, Cameron from the Local Governance Review team shared his insights and reflections on his engagement and how it can inform the development of a more effective participative process across Scottish Government and beyond. In the following Q&A, you can hear directly from Cameron.

### Q1 Why did you choose to engage with children in your policy making?

The goal of Democracy Matters is to devolve decision making to more local levels, empower communities and ensure everyone who wants to can get involved in decision making. If we bring something new, it is a natural starting point, why not involve children? I saw the value of engaging children in the initial Democracy Matters consultation and felt there was more to be explored. From phase one it was clear that children wanted a greater say in the decisions that impact them most and I was keen to conduct further engagement to understand how their involvement could and should look in practice.

One of the consultation's objectives was to ensure that as many voices as possible were heard in the conversation. We aimed to engage people who don't ordinarily engage in consultations, including children, especially younger children who are rarely heard.

**“If we feel like our opinions are valued as children, then we will feel like our opinions are valued as an adult, and our children will feel like their opinions are valued, and that will go on for generations”.**

- Member of Children's Parliament, 11

Tip: children have a right to have a say on issues which affect them.



## Q2 What did you hope to learn from your engagement? What did you actually learn?

I wanted to understand how children felt they could engage in democratic structures. Whether there is anything already existing that they are part of and think about whether it could integrate into anything new.

I thought we could link our plans to involve children with school councils, but Members of Children's Parliament told me exactly why I was wrong and that perhaps not all school councils worked in the way I'd assumed! I thought that could be how we could link the local community body to schools and that's how children could be represented. A Member of Children's Parliament said: 'No, nobody listens to my school council and we just make decisions about nothing.' This is just one example of how the assumptions I held were challenged or disproved, which was exactly the point of this engagement.

I wanted to see how children could be involved and whether they want to make decisions themselves, or be in a position where they could influence decision-makers.

I learned there is an absolute appetite for parity of esteem between children and adults in decision making; that children want to have more of an open democratic approach to decision-making, where they can be involved in voting and have a say.

I've heard the phrase 'we are taking a children's rights approach' but to actually be able to see that in effect and to see how it changed the adults in the room, and how they engaged with children, and how children engaged with each other, I found really, really powerful. It's about instilling that mutual respect on a human level.

*Tip: a children's rights approach is far more than listening to their views. It is about developing equal relationships.*



### **Q3 What were your expectations before engaging with children and did your expectations shift? If so, what changed?**

Before joining the delivery, I wasn't sure what to expect, or what a creative, participatory approach would look like. I quickly recognised the benefits of bringing creativity into the process. A creative approach helps capture people's attention and makes their engagement more enjoyable. I know people in communities want something new in relation to their participation in local democracy, but there was no evidence that a different approach would actually work, mainly because these kinds of approaches require some experience to know what works and what doesn't. I think learning through play is an approach that I'd quite like to use more and institute more broadly into our government engagement. Going through this process is helping re-frame how I think I will do future engagement processes.

Moving forwards, I think the approach of working closely with a smaller group over a longer period of time and allowing them to grow their knowledge base is a really powerful way of engaging in an in depth and comprehensive way and I'd be keen to replicate it with adults as well as children. It was the specificity of the views from the children that really I took home with me.

**“It was the specificity of the views from the children that really I took home with me.”**

- Cameron, Local Governance Review team member

Tip: undertaking consultations over longer periods of time allows for greater depth and quality of evidence



## **Q4 What are your reflections on the process of engagement with children?**

It's obvious that the critical thing is the relationships that are built up between the children and the adults. The children knew and felt that all the adults around them took them seriously; something I felt was rare for some of the children.

A conversation with one of the Children's Parliament team has stuck; "if any of the sessions don't work, it's because we've not quite hit the mark. It's not because of the children." I find this approach very powerful and if we all internalised that, it would just be a very different society that we live in.

## **Q5 What does a children's rights approach mean to you, following the process of engagement?**

I saw how a children's rights approach influenced how children treated each other. In different contexts or with different generations working together, some children might find it challenging to communicate respectfully with other children and adults. All the interactions were kind and respectful.

That feeling of being equal came through everything, from how the adults and children talked to one another, to how everyone sat on the floor together at the same level. That makes a difference. I also noticed that adults never raised their voices – and neither did the children.





## Q6 How did your policy benefit from engaging with children?

It's still a little bit early, but I certainly think that working with the children has made us think more broadly about participation and the different ways we can engage the whole community beyond obvious approaches like elections.

I've had a few conversations with different communities since my engagement with Children's Parliament. I shared with a development trust, who were keen to engage children and young people, my recent positive experience with Children's Parliament and told them "We did this recently and, you might not be able to do a three-day residential, but it's possible". It's possible if you take a slightly more imaginative approach and let the kids lead the way.

We've been able to go back and talk to other people in government as well and tell them how good an experience we've had and how rich the findings were, encouraging others to think about doing this kind of engagement. Even within a short period, my engagement has already had a positive impact in my policy area.

*Tip: policy change takes time, but it's critical to measure the impact of the children's input and report this back to participants when you can.*

## Q7 Were there any surprises for you in relation to the process or outcome?

I think the respect and kindness displayed by everyone involved in the process surprised me. Not that I expected the session to be disrespectful but there was a warmth and an excitement from the children and adults that if we could bottle and apply elsewhere, I think we'd be in much better place generally!



## Q8 What were the challenges/barriers to engaging children in policy making and how were they overcome (if they were)?

We're not set up to be able to engage properly with children. As policy civil servants many of us don't have that skill set ourselves. The policy makers could probably find a way to get invited to a primary school and run an assembly, but that would not be enough to achieve meaningful engagement with children. So, it's actually having the expertise and the skill set to be able to do it.

When there is considerable pressure to deliver, it can mean that engagement is sacrificed or can be tokenistic in order to meet deadlines. I think all my Scottish Government colleagues would like to be better at delivery of effective consultation and engagement. Better engagement means your policy is going to be better, right?

Democracy Matters' policy area is 'very broad' and that could involve anything and anyone. We are in a good place in that we can try new things and do things a little bit differently; however, other policy areas aren't in the same position and they're quite pressured and sometimes engagement is sacrificed in order to meet deadlines.

It's important to consider what's possible before setting unrealistic expectations; to balance the ability to undertake quality engagement with the time and resources available and to be confident something positive and influential will come from it.

The Participation Framework is going to help in the long run by making it easier for policy leads to access top quality engagement professionals.



## **Q9 What advice would you give one of your policy peers who might be thinking about involving children?**

I think it would probably be to speak to you, practitioners.

## **Q10 What needs to change in the Scottish Government to enable children's participation to happen more often and in more places?**

It's sort of a mindset really, which I think goes beyond government and is more of a societal issue. And it's what Children's Parliament talks about in terms of having to capture 'hearts and minds'. It's about not seeing any subset of the population as irrelevant or without a voice that's worth listening to, even if it doesn't feel like it's obvious that your policy feeds into a certain group. Having had conversations with colleagues across government over the last few months I'm confident that that's changing and we're improving.







## Part Three:

### Reflections from Members of Children's Parliament

After the consultation was completed, Children's Parliament asked the participating children what they felt about the engagement with Cameron and other representatives of Scottish Government.

The children shared how positive it was to meet Cameron, and other decision-makers, either online or in person. They highlighted how impactful it was to build relationships with them.

**“ It felt different – we could explain our ideas from the start. Usually, we had a limited time to talk to them, but now we had lots of time to explain all of our ideas. ”**

One of the Members of Children's Parliament explained their feelings on Cameron's participation during the residential, explaining that spending time with them created a safe and comfortable space to share their views fully.

**“ They were familiar... you got to know them; it was nice. ”**

**“ If you got to know them better, like Cam, they just chipped in to our needs. ”**

**“ Whatever we said, we know we could trust them. ”**

**“ The government don't have much time to speak with people, but they made the time and stayed with us the whole trip. ”**



Another Member of Children's Parliament commented that having people from the Scottish Government in the sharing event made them feel proud.

**“ Makes it more important - it feels like we've made more of a difference because they care enough to come and see us. ”**

The children discussed the difference between decision makers spending time with them face to face and getting to know them, versus receiving a report at the end of the project.

**“ We can see their expressions and hear their advice – they can communicate with us in person. ”**

**“ They can understand where you're coming from (when) you're saying stuff from the heart. ”**

**“ If you actually speak to someone they will actually listen. Reading a report is kind of dreary. ”**

**“ You feel great after talking to people who are interested. ”**



## Flynn's Reflections

In this reflection, Member of the Children's Parliament, Flynn (aged 10), shares some of his experiences of taking part in the three-day residential as part of the 'Democracy Matters' consultation.

**“ If you are given an opportunity, you should take it. ”**

On the first day, we met everyone at the Attic (a venue in Blanefield, Glasgow) and got settled in before building our community. At the start, we didn't know what our town would look like but when we began to build the trees and buildings, it started to take shape. We built it into a heart shape to represent that we are one big family. We placed the homes in position and when it was complete, it looked like a perfect place you would want to be in. I felt proud of what we achieved together.

We also had fun times together and visited the animals at the petting zoo, I loved the alpacas and the funny goats! We also had a movie night too, with popcorn.

On the residential, we learned it's children's right to be involved in decision-making. Not just adults know what they're doing. Children have good ideas that need to be shared. It's important that children make decisions for their future; it's not the adult's future, it is ours.

The most important thing I learned from the residential is that if you are given an opportunity, you should take it. I learned a lot on the residential including what are the most important qualities for decision-making. You shouldn't be scared to speak up, but you should also be patient and listen well. I also learned a bit about myself, and I know I can do more than I thought I could. The Children's Parliament Team helped me feel more confident in myself and made me feel valued.

This was my first residential with Children's Parliament. At first, I felt a bit strange being away from home for three days. I was a bit nervous before I went because I didn't know everyone that well. People I had met at online meetings before the residential became my friends and I had a great time when I was there.

Being involved in the Democracy Matters project, I felt that I definitely had a say and that felt important to have my voice heard. I felt proud to be representing my school and the children in Scotland in this project. When we met Tom Arthur MSP, I felt he was definitely going to do something about what we had said. He was really interested to hear our ideas about involving children in decision-making. I trusted him when he said he would put forward our ideas to the Scottish Government.



## Rida's Reflections

For Member of Children's Parliament, Rida (aged 13), this was her third Children's Parliament residential. Rida shares some of her experiences taking part in the residential through her reflections below.

**“ It is important that children are involved in making big decisions as it's going to impact them as well. It's unfair if they are just going to have to stick with it, whether they like it or not, and they don't even get a choice. ”**

**“ Over the residential, I observed what a happy, healthy and safe community looks like. I also became more confident and aware of how children should feel and be respected. ”**

**“ Being involved in this project made me feel happy to be able to contribute in making children's views heard, and how the community is supposed to be. It made me feel like I was a part of something important and helping the community become a better place for everyone. This also makes me feel important as I was able to work and give ideas on a community. It also made me feel like children are heard. ”**

For more details about the residential, please visit **Part One** of this document.



# Gallery

**Children designing their town's name sign.**



**MSP Tom Arthur listening to children's ideas in the sharing event.**



**Equal space where everyone, adults and children alike, are sitting in a circle on the floor.**





The children made a Participation Cake. The cake was made up of ingredients needed for adults and children to work together in a meaningful way.



Outdoor break and time with Alpacas.



Group photo of the sharing event with Members of Children's Parliament, our colleagues from the Scottish Government and the Children's Parliament staff team.





# About Children's Parliament

Established in 1996, Children's Parliament is dedicated to the realisation of children's human rights in Scotland. Our dream is that children grow up in a world of love, happiness and understanding. Our mission is to inspire greater awareness and understanding of the power of children's human rights and to support implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) across Scotland.

Through our rights-based, creative practice, we support younger children up to 14 years of age from diverse backgrounds across Scotland to meaningfully engage in local, national and international decision-making processes. Whilst we ensure our work reflects the views and experiences of all children in Scotland, our targeted programmes work with marginalised and seldom heard children.

Learn more about our work and get in touch by visiting [childrensparliament.org.uk](https://childrensparliament.org.uk)

