Imaginate

Putting children at the centre of arts strategy and decision making



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- Forthview Primary School
- Granton Primary School
- Kinross Primary School
- Dallas Primary School
- Clifftop Projects Monday Art Club
- Pilton Youth and Children's Project
- Spartans Community Foundation Wee Connections group
- Cutting Edge Theatre Edinburgh drop-in drama sessions

With thanks to the Imaginate team.

How to read this report

This report draws together two distinct but complementary stands of research:

Desk-based research (Appendix i), conducted by Imaginate's PhD researcher Thérèse Kearns, reviews international case studies and peer-reviewed literature on children's rights-based participation in arts and cultural policy.

Direct consultation with children (Appendix ii), designed and led by Lou Brodie, gathered the views of 323 children aged 5–12 across eight organisations and 4 locations in Scotland.

The main body of this report synthesises both strands of research providing a Thematic Links section that draws the two strands together. Appendices i and ii provide the full detail of each strand for readers who wish to examine the evidence base more closely. We have also included appendix iii as additional information, offering some examples of Scottish cultural organisations who are putting children's rights approaches into practice within their company policy and delivery.

A note on demographic data: figures relating to participant demographics (neurodivergent status, SIMD, EAL, and ethnicity) are based on prior knowledge of the groups involved and facilitator observation. We did not formally survey participants or their trusted adults, so all demographic figures should be treated as approximate.



Cedric Audinot

Forthview pupils stage a protest for the launch of the 2023 Edinburgh International Children's Festival

Summary statement: What putting children at the centre of arts strategy and decision making could look like

"Politics and even science, some theories, are made with creativity, you have to think them through. The world would be less knowledgeable without creativity."

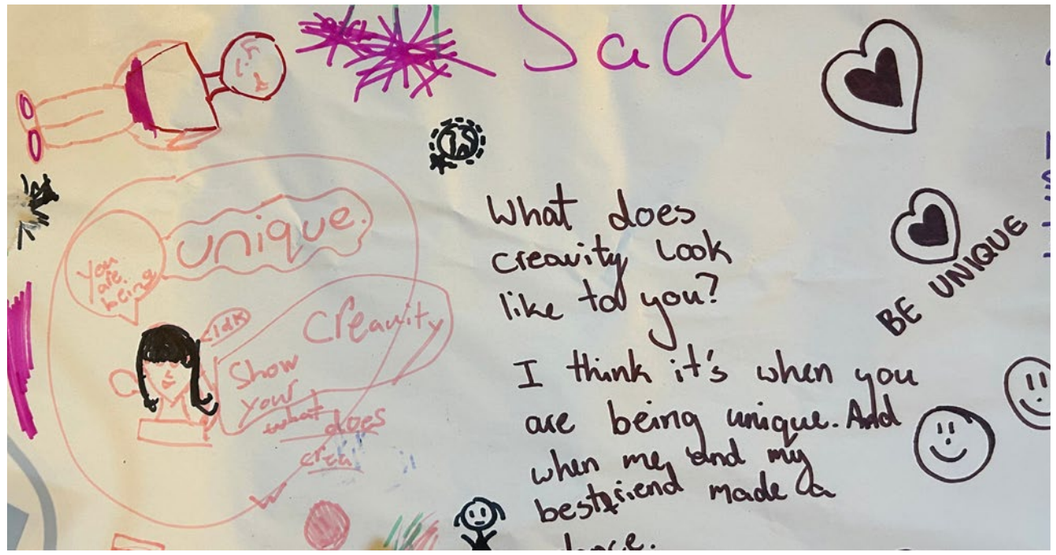
Denis, Dallas Primary School, aged 11

The development of arts strategy has historically been shaped by adult voices, adult frameworks, and adult assumptions about what children need from culture. Yet children aged 0–12 are not merely the passive recipients of arts and cultural provision, they are rights-holders, creative thinkers, and social actors with the capacity and the right to shape the cultural landscape they inhabit.

The question of 'what would it look like if the process of creating a babies', children's and young people's arts strategy was genuinely led by children themselves?' is both timely and necessary. In 2024, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child Incorporation Act was implemented into Scottish Law, placing a greater onus on organisations to work in rights-respecting ways with children. While Article 31 enshrines culture as one of children's inalienable rights, arts and culture themselves also serve as a vehicle for a much wider range of rights, including Article 12 (the right to be heard and taken seriously) and Article 13 (the right to share thoughts freely). To exclude children from shaping cultural policy is therefore not simply an oversight – it is a human rights issue.

Historically, children's participation in policy and decision-making was limited by societal assumptions about incompetence and vulnerability. The 'new sociology of childhood' in the 1990s began to shift this perception, recognising children as 'human beings rather than human becomings' (Qvortrup, 2009). Since then, participatory practice has grown significantly, yet meaningful child-led participation in arts and cultural policy specifically remains underdeveloped in Scotland. There is a significant dearth of literature and practice around children's direct input into cultural strategy at a national level. We feel it is important to acknowledge that the previous Youth Arts Strategy had a huge input from young people aged 13 to 25 and that youth advisory panels do have significant prevalence in Scotland, yet there is scope to further implement the voice of children aged 0–12 and explore participatory practices beyond panels.

What the evidence does tell us is that when children are genuinely consulted, their priorities are clear. They describe creativity as something that should feel open, free, and led by imagination, encompassing not only traditional art forms but building, inventing, dancing, designing, storytelling, and problem-solving. They call for practical change: free and local provision, accessible materials, trusted spaces, and adults who not only listen but act on what



Creativity and being unique: notes from a discussion with Granton Primary pupils.

they are told. Crucially, they express these ideas not through formal consultation processes but through the creative activities themselves – through drawing, making, playing, imagining and the conversations that emerged during the creative activities.

This points directly to the second question this report addresses: how can space be created for children's input and influence without requiring them to participate within adult-designed frameworks? International examples of rights-based practice, from Mammalian Diving Reflex in Canada to Polyglot Theatre in Australia and The Ark in Ireland, demonstrate that meaningful participation is relational, creative, and adaptive. It follows frameworks such as the Lundy Model of Participation (2007), which insists that children must not only be given space and voice, but must have an audience and, critically, influence. It recognises that participation is always an evolving process, and that the fear of getting it wrong should never become a reason for doing nothing. We recognise and highlight that marginalised children face additional barriers to participation and that these must be addressed with sensitivity and rigour.

This report draws together international desk-based research and direct consultation with children to explore what a truly child-centred arts strategy might look like, and how adults can create the conditions for children's voices to shape it. It does so in the belief that the level of children's participation in decisions that affect them is, as one practitioner has argued, 'a barometer of an institution's genuine commitment to human rights (O'Donnell, 2018 p.12).'

Creative consultation methods: Summary

Imaginate consulted 323 children aged 5–12 across eight locations using two creative, participatory methods to gather children's views on creativity, arts activities, and how creativity should be supported. The Consultation took place between October 2025 and March 2026, a period of 6 months in total. Given that the subject of this consultation is about participation a participatory approach seemed most suited and aligned with children's rights.

Consultation methods

Hot Takes

A facilitated creative tea party in which children decorated a tablecloth, drew questions from a sparkly jar, and discussed themes about creativity and their relationship to it over hot chocolate. The transformed room (tinsel curtain doorway, white tablecloth as drawing canvas) signalled something special and encouraged playful engagement. Core questions explored what creativity means to children, what life without creativity would look like, and who or what supports them to try new things.

If I Were the First Minister (IIWTFM)

A role-play interview in which children 'became' the First Minister (using cut-out face images of two recent First Ministers) and were interviewed by a facilitator acting as a journalist. Questions focused on children's rights to cultural activity and what policy changes children would make. A classroom workshop version was also developed, incorporating discussion about the First Minister's role and a short FMQs role-play.

Microphones were used in both methods to support documentation and to signal to children that their voices mattered.

Participants and locations

- 323 children consulted in total (including 47 at the Children's Summit)
- Eight locations: five in North Edinburgh; others in Dumbarton, Kinross, and Dallas (Moray) in both schools and community/ youth centres
- 72% of participants based in North Edinburgh, reflecting high levels of socioeconomic deprivation (77.5% in SIMD 1–3), linguistic diversity (43% EAL), and ethnic diversity (25.6% global majority)
- Approx. 4% of participants were neurodivergent, learning disabled, or disabled, supported by two specialist groups

Ethics and facilitation

All sessions took place in environments familiar to children, with trusted adults making introductions. We sought informed consent, taking the time to explain what the project was about and giving space for participants to agree and know they could withdraw at any point. Audio recordings were used solely for transcription and deleted once notes were completed.



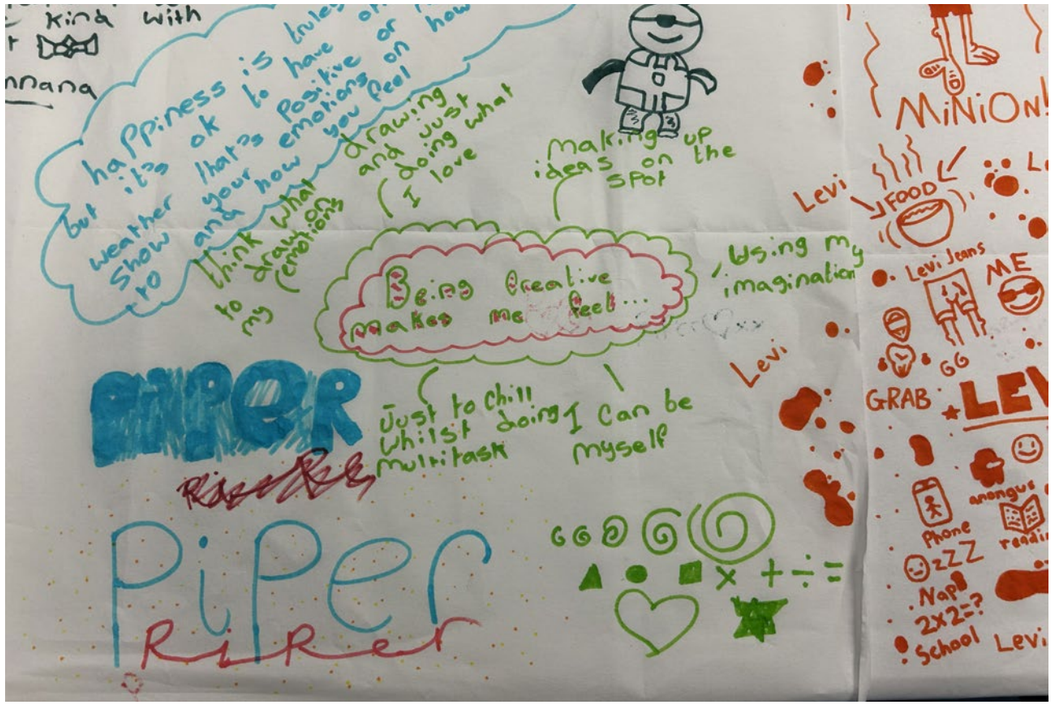
Levi from Granton Primary School's Hot Takes notes

Key learning

Both methods centred verbal contributions. For future consultations involving non-verbal children or those with alternative communication styles, introductory sessions or closer collaboration with trusted adults ahead of time would allow for better adaptation of methods. This approach was piloted successfully with Cutting Edge Theatre, a specialist organisation supporting learning-disabled children and young people through drama and theatre. For our session with Cutting Edge Theatre participants, we worked with their trusted adults to make small adjustments, such as children helping set up the space and this made a meaningful difference for the participating children.

"Yeah, you can be really creative when doing it. You can do it in loads of different ways. You can do it in your style that fits you. You can make a way to make it sound the same, but like, in your own little way"

Jaxson, Pilton Youth and Children Project Participant, aged 9 discussing how he feels about music



Piper, Granton Primary School pupil's Hot Takes notes

Creative consultation analysis – What the children told us



'If I Were the First Minister' at Forthview Primary School

Across our consultations, children demonstrated a rich, expansive understanding of creativity one that stretches well beyond conventional definitions of art. This section captures what they told us, organised around the themes that emerged most strongly from their words, and considers what those themes mean for how we design participation and shape strategy.

Facilitator: ***"How do you feel when you are being creative, First Ministers? Like, how does it make you feel?"***

Erin: ***"It makes me feel very happy, and when I do it, feels like I'm in a whole other world.""***

Exchange between facilitator and Kinross Primary School pupil during IIWTFM playground pop up

1. What would it look like if the process of creating an arts strategy centred children?

A Focus on Imagination, Freedom and Experimentation

Children consistently described creativity as something that should feel open, flexible and led by imagination. They emphasised the importance of not having too many rules and being able to create freely.

Others explained that when ideas come to mind, they simply **'draw it down'** or combine materials in new ways. Several children suggested that adults should encourage people to **'be themselves'** and not worry about doing things perfectly.

If children were leading the process, the strategy would likely prioritise freedom to explore, rather than strict definitions of what counts as art. Creativity would include drawing, building, dancing, singing, crafting, playing games, running, and even designing clothing or hairstyles.

Creativity as making and building

Many children linked creativity with making things, often using everyday materials. They described creating robots from boxes, castles from rubbish, or combining scrap paper and other materials to invent new objects.

Children often saw creativity as problem-solving and invention. One child described creativity as 'fixing broken things', while another suggested that recycling materials could become a way to build new structures or toys. In this view, creativity is not only about art but about building the world around us.

"Art allows people to express feelings when you can't talk about them."

Children's Summit attendee

Creativity as expression and identity

Children repeatedly described creativity as a way to express emotions and personality. Drawing, dancing, storytelling or crafting allowed them to communicate feelings such as happiness, sadness, frustration or excitement.

Others said creativity helps others understand 'who you are.' Creativity was therefore seen as essential to children's sense of identity and belonging.

Creativity as wellbeing and calm

Children also spoke about creativity as a way to relax or manage difficult feelings. Activities such as drawing patterns, colouring detailed designs, listening to music, crocheting, or dancing helped them feel calm and focused.

If creativity were removed, children believed they would feel sad, bored, stressed and left out. Some even said they would protest or continue being creative anyway because imagination is something they cannot stop using.

Creativity as learning through play

Across our consultation sessions children often connected creativity with learning. They described learning about sea life by building models, practising drawing characters, or discovering new skills through play, drama and experimentation.

For many of the children we spoke to, learning creatively felt different from traditional classroom learning. They explained that if learning was more playful and creative it would help them understand things in 'a different way.'

"Having an open area to join, or thinking, or doing anything, so there's no limits to what you can do."

Spartans Community Foundation Wee Connections participant

Children's priorities for action

When children imagined being in charge, they focused on practical changes that would make creativity easier to access:

- **Free or low-cost arts and cultural activities**
- **More local clubs close to where children live**
- **Spaces where children can choose what to do rather than follow strict instructions**
- **Easy access to resources such as paper, colours, cardboard, instruments and supportive adults**
- **Recycling centres that double as art centres, where people can make things from reused materials**
- **Better transport, so children can reach museums or cultural spaces**
- **Large public creative spaces, such as walls where children can draw**

Children also suggested creative festivals, art buses, and clubs where children could play games, make art and share food together.

"I would donate a lot of money to making good art classes for children — and not just art classes which can sometimes be intimidating, more like clubs where you can do whatever art you feel like, you know."

Clifftop Arts participant, aged 8

"I like drawing — I like drawing a lot! It just makes my... like if my mind is up to something I don't like, I just draw and it just gets out of my mind."

Charley aged 7, Forthview P3 pupil

2. How can we create space for children's influence without relying on adult frameworks?

Allow creativity to be the method of participation

Children did not primarily express their ideas through formal discussion or structured consultation. Instead, their ideas emerged through storytelling, drawing, playing, and imagining.

For example, children explained their ideas by describing dragons they drew, dances they choreographed, LEGO projects they built, or games they played in the playground. Creativity itself became the way they communicated what matters to them.

Creating space for children's influence therefore means allowing creative activity itself to be the form of participation, rather than requiring children to respond to adult-designed questions or processes.

Embed participation in everyday spaces

Children's ideas often emerged naturally in spaces where they already feel comfortable:

- Schools
- Community clubs
- Playgrounds
- Family spaces
- Informal groups with friends

Rather than expecting children to join formal consultations, adults can support participation by listening within these everyday environments. Children also emphasised that creative spaces should be local and trusted. Many said they would prefer clubs in places where their parents know the adults and where they are allowed to go independently.

Provide materials and opportunities rather than instructions

Children frequently emphasised the importance of simply having access to materials and resources. With cardboard, paper, colours or recycled objects they felt able to invent their own activities. This suggests that supporting children's voices may involve providing open resources and letting children decide how to use them, rather than directing specific outputs.

For example, children imagined:

- Art libraries or music libraries
- Community recycling art centres
- Large collaborative drawing walls
- Open clubs where children decide the activities

Trust children's perspectives

Children repeatedly suggested that adults should listen to children and act on what they say. One child explained that leaders should not only listen to children but 'do what they said.'

Children also recognised that creativity connects to wider rights, including education, expression and participation in culture. However, many were not aware that participation in cultural activity is itself a recognised right. Supporting children's influence therefore means treating creativity and cultural participation as essential rights, not optional extras and supporting children to know and claim access to their rights.

"Well, you should make more people actually listen to children cos you might actually take their suggestions in. But some people don't listen to those suggestions. You got to take them in and you gotta listen to them"

Pilton Youth and Children project participant, aged 9

Thematic links across the research

Both research methods and subsequent analysis centre on children's rights and meaningful participation, particularly in arts and cultural contexts. Several clear thematic threads run through them.

The UNCRC as a foundation

Both the desk research and the consultation analysis are grounded in children's rights frameworks. The desk research explicitly references Articles 12, 13, and 31 of the UNCRC, while the consultation analysis implicitly enacts these rights by letting children's own voices shape what an arts strategy should look like.

Moving beyond tokenism

A shared concern across the research is the risk of children's participation being superficial or adult directed. The desk research critiques 'adultism' and tokenistic consultation, while the analysis of our consultation argues that genuine participation means allowing creativity itself to be the method, rather than fitting children into adult-designed consultation processes.

Creative methods as the vehicle for voice

Across the research there is agreement that arts-based and creative approaches are the most appropriate way to consult with children in this age group. Examples of creative consultation with children exist in other areas of policy development in Scotland as evidenced by The Children's Parliament in areas of climate change and AI but not in arts and cultural policy. The case studies in the desk research consistently use drawing, making, and storytelling as consultation tools, directly mirroring our methodological approach.

Accessibility and inclusion

Throughout the research we highlight that marginalised children face additional barriers to participation and in particular non-verbal children. The desk research cautions that underrepresented groups are often only consulted about their minority status, while the analysis of the children's consultation reflects children's own calls for free activities, local provision, and better transport. Social inequality and community/economic justice were key concerns for a great many of the children we consulted.

The role of adults as enablers

Rather than gatekeepers, the research positions adults as duty bearers whose role is to create trusting, safe conditions for children's voices to emerge and, crucially, to act on what children say, echoing the Lundy Model's emphasis on influence as the ultimate measure of meaningful participation.

Conclusion and recommendations

If the development of a babies', children's and young people's arts strategy genuinely centred children, it would look fundamentally different from any policy process that has come before it. It would be a living policy, one that is constantly updated and evolving, reflecting that children grow quickly while policy moves slowly. It would be shaped by imagination, play, experimentation and freedom. Creativity would be recognised not only as art but as building, inventing, dancing, designing, storytelling and problem-solving, a way of making sense of the world and one's place within it. Children would drive it toward practical, equitable change: free materials, welcoming local spaces, clubs where they direct their own activity, and adults who don't just listen but act.

What children told us is not a wish list. It is a rights claim. Under the UNCRC, now incorporated into Scots law, children are not passive beneficiaries of cultural provision, they are rights-holders with a legal entitlement to shape it. To continue developing arts strategy without their meaningful input is not simply a gap in process; it is a failure of duty.

The good news is that the path forward is clear. Children showed us, through the consultations themselves, how participation can work: creatively, relationally, in spaces they already trust, through methods that treat making and imagining as legitimate forms of voice. They do not need to be fitted into adult frameworks. They need adults willing to follow their lead.

This will require cultural organisations, policymakers and funders to do something genuinely difficult: to relinquish the assumption that they already know what children need from culture, and to build the relationships, time, and feedback loops that allow children's influence to be real rather than symbolic. While Lundy (2018) reminds us that tokenism may be a starting point or a reason policy makers do not engage at all with consultation with children, voice alone is not fully effective without influence. The children we consulted deserve more than that and so does the strategy that will be built in their name.



Child participant in discussion at The Children's Summit

The following actions are invited by the research. Please also refer to the desk research appendix for further evidence and reading.

Treat consultation design as an iterative process co-shaped with children from the outset, not a fixed methodology applied to them

- Allow creativity itself: drawing, making, storytelling, play, to be the primary method of consultation rather than formal discussion or adult-designed questionnaires
- Adapt consultation methods to suit the specific group of children being consulted, treating it as an evolving and responsive process
- Use a mixture of one-to-one consultation formats and group work where possible
- Embed participation in everyday spaces where children already feel comfortable, such as schools, playgrounds and community clubs (Horgan et al, 2015).

Ensuring genuine influence

- Require that policymakers attend at least some consultations in person. Relying solely on organisations to relay children's views can dilute both the evidence and the accountability and having policy makers present is mutually beneficial for adults and children due to the 'humanising effect' of being present together (Marshall et al, 2015)
- Build in mechanisms to communicate back to children how their views have influenced decisions, closing the feedback loop
- Give children meaningful roles in shaping the process itself, including consultation design and analysis of findings
- Set a clear timeline for communicating back to children how their input has shaped decisions, in language and formats accessible to them. Silence after consultation is its own message
- Establish a named role or body responsible for ensuring children's influence is tracked and reported throughout strategy development.

Inclusion and diversity

- Actively involve children from underrepresented groups, including disabled children, from rural areas and from lower-income backgrounds
- Ensure participation is voluntary and that recruitment or involvement methods do not inadvertently favour children with particular skills, such as public speaking (McGinley and Grieve 2010)
- Consult marginalised children on topics beyond their minority status
- Consult children in rural and island communities with equivalent rigour to urban settings, including through digital and touring methods (for example building in travel and accommodation budget to any consultation approach) where necessary
- Access provision for consultation must be provided, in line with EDI requirements.

Practical and material support

- Recognise free and local access to creative materials and activities as a baseline condition, not an aspiration. Provision that requires travel or payment structurally excludes the children whose voices are most needed
- Create open-ended spaces where children can direct their own creative activity rather than follow instructions.



Celebrating the end of the children's summit November 2025

Relationships and organisational culture

- Acknowledge openly that this will take longer than a traditional consultation process time for relationship-building is not inefficiency, it is the work
- Invest time in building trust and relationships before consultation begins
- Train staff in children's rights-based approaches and participation frameworks such as the Lundy Model or Together Scotland's suite of training
- Foster an organisational culture that genuinely values children as capable social actors rather than passive recipients.

Ethics and safeguarding

- Develop a clear ethical protocol covering consent, anonymisation, safeguarding, use of photography and acknowledgement of power dynamics
- Ensure children are meaningfully credited for their contributions, not just acknowledged in a footnote. Consider whether financial or other compensation is appropriate
- Ensure all participation is voluntary with child-friendly information provided throughout.

Beyond the scope - Additional observations

Several other observations emerged from the children that fall beyond the scope of this report; nonetheless, we feel it is important to acknowledge and honour what we heard.

We consistently noted that children across different contexts viewed national centres dedicated to a single artform as places to visit rather than spaces where they see creativity genuinely thriving. In their own words, they want clubs, which we interpret as spaces akin to arts centres, where multiple artforms intersect with active community engagement, and where local trust and regular use are established. This raises an important question about the future role of artform-specific venues and whether they are meeting genuine need.

Creativity as a mode of participation reveals just how fundamental the need to be creative is for children. We all struggle at times to articulate our needs, constrained as we are by the limits of language, creativity opens up multiple avenues for communication. Adult-designed structures have progressively closed off these avenues in favour of standardisation and the creation of universal meaning. This was expressed with particular insight by Eilidh from Kinross, who designed a school where grown-ups could practise playing.

"Eilidh's School for Grown-Ups to practice playing. It would be run by children with classes for adults."

Eilidh, Kinross Primary School, aged 8



Eilidh's School for Grown-Ups

Appendix i: Desk-based research – Full report

Background

This desk research derives from a project led by CYAA (Children and Youth Arts Advocacy) and Creative Scotland exploring how to involve children aged 0–12 in developing a new arts strategy. This arm of the research was conducted by Imaginate and focuses on children aged 5–12; Starcatchers is separately focusing on babies aged 0–5.

It is a pertinent time to conduct this research, given that in 2024, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child Incorporation Act was implemented into Scottish Law. This places a greater onus on organisations in Scotland to work in a rights-respecting way with children and, in this context, to fulfil their cultural rights and citizenship.

While Article 31 enshrines culture as one of children's inalienable rights, arts and culture themselves also serve as a vehicle for a much wider range of rights, including Article 12 (the right to be heard and taken seriously) and Article 13 (the right to share thoughts freely). As cultural citizens, children have the right to access and participate in cultural life; to be excluded from cultural life is to be excluded from full citizenship.

Historically, children's participation in policy and decision-making was limited by societal notions of incompetence and vulnerability. This perception began to shift during the new sociology of childhood in the 1990s, as children were recognised as social actors and 'human beings rather than human becomings (Qvortrup, 2009).' One of the main accelerators of this change was the creation of the UNCRC in 1989. Since then, scholarly discourse, policy and practice have strived to implement a children's rights-based approach, leading to a surge in participatory practice and children's involvement in decision-making.

Methodology and limitations

Scoping tools including ProQuest and Scopus were used during the research process; however, many of the case studies relied on insider knowledge, which is characteristic of the arts and culture sphere and indicates a need for more formalised sharing of rights-based practice.

Most case studies are situated within a performing arts context, in order to narrow the scope; other inclusion criteria included consultations that were rights-based, with children aged 3–12, and with underrepresented groups.

It must be acknowledged that the case studies are mainly grey literature from organisational reports, with potential biases in evidence intended to appeal to funders, although the overall findings and recommendations draw on peer-reviewed literature to add rigour and balance this perspective. Additionally, all case studies are from the Global North, lacking perspective from the Global South, a gap that reflects a broader absence of research on participatory practices in relation to children's cultural rights globally. Language barriers when translating Norwegian and Danish reports also present a limitation.

Case studies

The following section presents a selection of international case studies of arts organisations, charities or government bodies implementing a rights-based approach to their practice with children aged 3–12 (some examples also include teenagers and young people).

A thread connecting each case study is their relationship to the UNCRC in domestic law; most countries represented have fully or partially incorporated the UNCRC into law. A shared overarching value is the role of adults as duty bearers, nurturing relationships and creating authentic spaces for children's voices to be heard and to lead to influence.

While there is significant literature on policy consultation with children in the fields of health (Hietanen, 2025), education, family law and social services (Tisdall and Hill, 2010), and on academic co-research with children (Seidel, et al, 2025), there is a dearth of literature on Article 31 and child consultation around arts and cultural policy at a national level.

Case Study 1: Mammalian Diving Reflex – Canada

Source: Darren O'Donnell (2018) Haircuts by Children and Other Evidence for a New Social Contract (Coach House Books, Toronto). Annual Report 2023: 30 Years of Regular Ass Folks.

This performing arts company critiques an 'adultarian world' and calls for a new social contract that values young people based on their rights, rooted in the UNCRC. Their ultimate goal is succession, with young people taking control of the company. Their rights-based methodology - the Succession Model of Youth Labour Engagement (SMYLE) - emerged from projects such as Haircuts by Children, where children aged 8–12 were trained by professional hairdressers and carried out haircuts on adults for payment. This model has been exported globally and has toured to Glasgow.

SMYLE is built on several principles: Succession (young people ultimately take control); Division of Labour (work divided by expertise and lived experience); Friendship (intergenerational relationships with appropriate safeguarding); Collegiality (young people as colleagues, including board membership); Division and Sharing of Social Capital (connecting young people to artistic networks); and Low Numbers, High Impact (prioritising depth of relationship over breadth of reach).

The company's 2023 Annual Report celebrates children who participated in early projects now working for the company as producers, finance administrators and partnership coordinators, and serving as president of the board. Central to their approach is recruiting participants from their community to reflect diversity and platform marginalised voices.

"Children and young people should be folded much more into the decision-making processes that drive our society; the level of their participation read as a barometer of a given institution's commitment to human rights."

Darren O'Donnell, Mammalian Diving Reflex

"By providing the space for children to prove themselves as creative and capable members of society, our works are not performances about children's rights, but rather active exercises of them."

Mammalian Diving Reflex Annual Report 2023

Case Study 2: Polyglot Theatre – Australia

Source: Voice Lab project report (polyglot.org.au/voice-lab/)

Voice Lab is a consultation process designed by Polyglot, a Melbourne-based children's theatre company, to empower children to have their voices heard and enact meaningful change. Children enter a cosy dome with cushions, put on headphones, and are asked questions by a concealed facilitator who treats them as experts. The consultation starts with simple questions ('what's your favourite colour?') and the facilitator changes the light in the dome to show they are being listened to.

Available online or in person, Voice Lab offers benefits including privacy, time, a relaxed space and individual attention — a one-to-one consultation rather than a group process. It is aimed at children aged 4–12. Children reported feeling respected, valued, and having their opinions taken seriously.

"Children are often overlooked when it comes to life's big questions, and if they are asked for their true opinions, they generally give the answers they think adults want to hear. Voice Lab challenges this learned experience, providing children with an unmediated space in which to express themselves without inhibition."

Polyglot Theatre

Case Study 3: The Ark – Ireland

Sources: Annual Report 2023 (ark.ie); Horgan, Martin and Cummins-McNamara (2019), An Evaluation of the Operation and Impact of The Ark Children's Council [Executive Summary] (Dublin: The Ark).

The Ark is a children's arts organisation and venue widely recognised for placing children's rights at the core of its policy, with Article 31 of the UNCRC as a founding principle. Their Right Here Right Now! festival - a three-day event co-created by young people - culminated in a Children's Rally where 500 children gathered outside Meeting House Square with posters, speeches and a song they had created together. Their SPEAK UP, SPEAK OUT! campaign, in partnership with Irish Rail, displayed children's views on rights on posters across train stations nationwide.

The Ark's Children's Council, founded in 2016, consists of children aged 9–11 who advise the board on strategy, attend and co-programme events, host scratch nights, and speak at symposia. An independent evaluation found children reported feeling listened to, respected and empowered, with positive impacts on confidence, communication, social awareness and wellbeing. Challenges identified included the need to diversify Council membership, improve feedback loops, and increase staff training in participation.

"Children have a positive experience on The Ark Children's Council and are very positive about the activities and staff they engage with. They feel they have an important role in art production and in representing children's voices in The Ark."

Evaluation of The Ark Children's Council, 2019

Case Study 4: Helium Arts – Ireland

Source: Helium Arts Youth Participation Framework: Youth Voice, Community and Inclusion 2025–2028 (helium.ie).

Helium Arts is a charity that brings arts and culture to young people aged 6–16 with long-term illnesses and disabilities. Their participation framework was co-created by members of their Youth Advisory Group (YAG) and non-members. The framework references both Hart's Ladder of Participation and the Lundy Model, and its four values are: Community and Creativity; Accessibility and Inclusion; Youth Voice as a Process; and Impact and Influence. Creative methods used in developing the framework included shadow puppets (for children aged 8–12), zine-making, and collaborative banner-making.

"At Helium Arts we believe that youth participation is a collaborative process rooted in relationships and mutual respect. In meaningful youth participation, we work with young people, and not for them."

Helium Arts Youth Participation Framework

Case Study 5: Kultur Crew – Denmark

Source: kulturcrew.dk/english/

Established in 2010 and inspired by the Norwegian 'students as organisers' model, Kultur Crew empowers children aged 8–12 to become cultural organisers of events in their schools. Roles include hosting events, inviting artists, advertising to fellow pupils, and supporting technical production and evaluation.

Case Study 6: Kulturtanken - Norway

*Source: BUSK Report (*kulturtanken.no/en/prosjekt/busk-children-and-young-peoples-voices/*).*

Kulturtanken, the organisation also responsible for the Cultural Rucksack in Norway, published the BUSK report in 2019 and presented it to the Ministry of Culture as part of the development of a white paper on arts and culture for children and young people. Working with schools, arts organisations, arts festivals and their youth council, Kulturtanken gathered children's and young people's views from kindergarten to the end of secondary school. Methodological tools included surveys, conversations and arts-based methods such as contributing to a collective book — The Great Cultural Message — at schools and festivals. Findings were social-justice oriented, including calls for greater inclusion of disabled young people, lower participation fees and greater environmental consideration.

Key Findings from the Desk Research

The Lundy Model

A parallel linking most of the case studies is the reference to or use of the Lundy Model of Participation (2007). Its four elements are:

- Space: children must be given the opportunity to express a view
- Voice: children must be facilitated to express their views
- Audience: the view must be listened to
- Influence: the view must be acted upon, as appropriate

A key part of meaningful participation is influence. Children grow quickly but policy moves slowly, so considering timelines and communicating impact back to children is crucial.

Participation Is Imperfect and Evolving

"Participation is always imperfect: there could always be more time, more resources and more children involved."

Lundy (2018), p. 252

The fear of getting rights-based participatory approaches wrong and thereby doing nothing is worse than trying approaches that are collaborative and an evolving learning process for all involved.

The Role of Policymakers

Academic research has demonstrated that policymakers need to be directly involved in consultation with young people rather than relying on NGOs to funnel back information. Face-to-face contact is essential for building trust and has a 'humanising effect' (Marshall et al, 2015), making policymakers more likely to understand children's lived experience.

Relational and Intergenerational Participation

Participation is relational and intergenerational (Mannion, 2007; Wyness, 2012). It is the quality of relationships between children and adults that can lead to transformative participation.

Creative Methods

Arts-based and creative methods are primarily used to engage with children aged 5–12 within these case studies. While creative methods are widely employed as a consultation mechanism in various sectors, there is very little research within the arts and cultural sector specifically on young people's views on cultural policy.

Urban-Centric Gaps

Many of the case studies are urban-centric. The Ark and Helium Arts are notable exceptions in striving to consult with children in rural areas through digital means a trend that has been popularised since the Covid-19 pandemic.

Marginalised Children

Marginalised children are more likely to be excluded from decision-making and policy especially disabled children with complex communication needs (Martin and Franklin, 2009) and even when consulted, it is often on topics related to their minority status rather than on broader issues that affect them with calls for more intersectionality in consultation (Tisdall, 2015; Hub na nÓg 2024).

Ethics and an Ethics of Care

When consulting with children, ethical considerations must include voluntary participation (informed assent), child-friendly information, safeguarding, acknowledgement of power relations, incentives and compensation, use of photography, anonymisation and crediting for input (ChildEthics.com).

Key considerations and recommendations

The following questions are posed for Creative Scotland and partner organisations:

- How will face-to-face contact and relationship-building with children being consulted, be facilitated in shaping the new arts strategy?
- How will the project ensure an adaptive and responsive process in line with the needs of the children?
- How will a diversity of children's voices be ensured?
- How will time for relationships and trust to form be built into the process?
- Are staff involved in this project informed or trained in children's rights-based approaches and frameworks?
- How will children be recruited in an inclusive, voluntary way that includes minority voices?
- Is there an ethical protocol in place for how ideas and opinions are collected from young people?
- How will children be involved in consultation design, feedback, and analysis of the data collected?
- Will digital consultation methods be employed?
- How will feedback and impact be communicated to children after the consultation and policy creation?

Conclusion

This desk research provides a snapshot of international examples of how arts organisations integrate the child's voice into their policy and practice. Consultation methods tend to be creative, follow a participation model such as the Lundy Model, and value collaboration, shared power and intergenerational dialogue. There are advantages and disadvantages to all methods; best practice tends to involve an element of co-creation with children and adaptation to the specific group and context.

Childhood is a heterogeneous experience (Baraldi and Cockburn 2018). There is wide diversity within childhood across ethnicity, gender, class and disability, and the individual child must be considered within consultation, especially children who are underrepresented and face additional barriers. Strong relationships and trust with adults informed in rights-based practice, alongside a collaborative and adaptive approach shaped by the voice and needs of the children, are key to transformative participation with the potential for greater societal change.

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Appendix ii: Creative consultation – Full methods statement

Methodology overview

The consultation used creative, participatory methods designed to support meaningful engagement with children aged 5–12 about creativity, their experiences of arts activities, and their ideas for how creativity should be supported. We used the Lundy Model of Child Participation to guide the choices that we made when we constructed our approach.

Our approaches prioritised playfulness, role-play and informal conversation in order to create comfortable environments where children could express their views. Two primary consultation formats were used: **Hot Takes**, a facilitated tea-party discussion, and **If I Were the First Minister** (IIWTFM), a role-play interview activity. Both methods were designed to foreground children's voices while enabling responses through conversation, drawing and performance.



Hot Take table at Granton Primary School

1. Consultation methods

This section outlines the approaches Imaginate used to consult children as part of the CYAA fieldwork research. It describes how the sessions were delivered and highlights key observations from the facilitation process.

Hot Takes

Hot Takes was designed to create an informal and playful environment where children could share their views through conversation, drawing and writing. The format takes the form of a creative tea party where children decorate a tablecloth while exploring questions drawn from a biscuit jar over a cup of hot chocolate. It is designed for a meeting space with a table large enough for at least six children. Ideally two facilitators are present: one to host the session and one to take notes, although the session can be delivered by a single facilitator.

The format uses simple scenic design to transform a meeting room into a tea party setting, helping children feel the consultation is special. The pristine white tablecloth becomes a canvas for children's doodles, ideas and drawings, encouraging playful rule-breaking and creative expression. The approach emphasises informal conversation and creative conviviality.

Set up

Changing the Threshold – The entrance to the room is decorated with streamers or a tinsel curtain to create a playful threshold. In every setting where we hosted Hot Takes, both children and adults commented on the transformed doorway. This small intervention sparked curiosity and signalled that something different was happening in a familiar space.

Setting the Table – A high-quality paper tablecloth was laid out along with cups, ideally ceramic mugs where washing between sessions was possible, or insulated paper cups depending on the setting. Once the children arrived, felt-tip pens and markers were placed on the table. Each child was invited to write their name on the tablecloth in front of them, creating a DIY place marker. Many children commented on how enjoyable it was to draw on the tablecloth, describing it as a fun or unusual opportunity to 'break the rules.'

The Hot Chocolate – Hot chocolate was offered with dairy and non-dairy milk, alongside a juice alternative for children who preferred it. Each child was served in turn and could add marshmallows to their drink. We made a point of purchasing good quality hot chocolate, this was important to the children and something that they noticed and commented on.

The questions

Three main questions were drawn from a sparkly jar to prompt discussion, with facilitators offering follow-up questions were helpful. Children could respond verbally or by drawing or writing on the tablecloth.

The three main questions were:

- What does being creative mean to you?
- What would happen if you weren't allowed to be creative?
- Who or what helps you to try new things?
- Follow-up questions included:
- What ways are you creative?
- What's your favourite way to be creative?
- How does being creative make you feel?
- If you were in charge of children's rights to creativity, what changes would you make?





'If I Were the First Minister' at Forthview Primary School

If I Were the First Minister (IIWTFM)

IIWTFM was designed to encourage children to express their views through role-play and humour. The consultation takes the form of a playful interview in which children temporarily 'become' the First Minister. Two enlarged images of the current and a former First Minister, with the faces removed, allow children to 'become' the First Minister instantly. A facilitator then interviews them as if they were a journalist.

Children are encouraged to imagine themselves as the leader of Scotland before being asked questions about creativity, children's rights and what they would do as First Minister to support children's right to cultural activity.

At the request of two schools, a classroom workshop version was also developed. This session included discussion about the role of the First Minister, role-play activities, and a short version of First Minister's Questions (FMQs), with pupils taking turns to act as the First Minister while others asked pre-written questions.

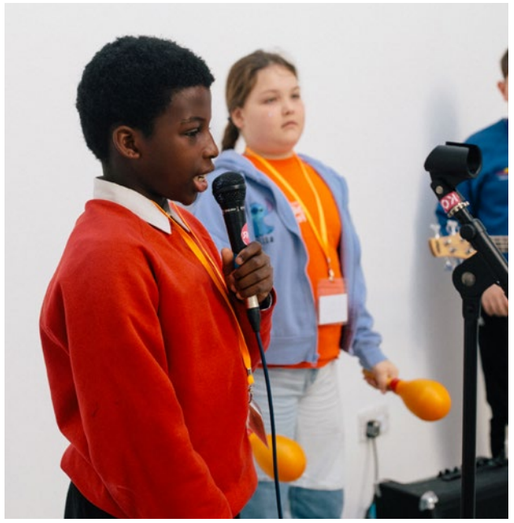
Example questions:

- First Minister Why is creativity important to you?
- Why is creativity important for children?
- As the First Minister of Scotland, what would you do to make sure children get their right to take part in creativity activity?
- As First Minister of Scotland what would you do to make sure all children get to see live performances of dance. Theatre and music and get to visit places like art galleries and museums?

In some schools a short assembly presentation was delivered before playground sessions, so pupils had seen the facilitators beforehand. While not essential, this helped build familiarity and interest.

Microphones as a convention

Microphones were used to support both accurate documentation and children's sense that their voices were being heard. They are a recognisable performance convention that children often associate with having their voices amplified or with creating video content. Anecdotally, many children appeared to enjoy the spotlight created by the microphone and its clear signal of who was speaking.



David, Forthview Primary Pupil at the Children's Summit

2. Participants and locations

Demographic insights come from prior knowledge of the groups involved and observations made by facilitators, as we did not formally survey participating children or their trusted adults.

Number of children

In total, 323 children aged 5–12 were consulted. This includes 47 children who participated in our first Children's Summit, where an afternoon discussion session used the Hot Takes questions as a starting point, though not the full Hot Takes format. Further info on the Children's Summit can be found on the Imaginate website here.

Geographic distribution

Sessions were delivered in eight locations, five of which were in North Edinburgh, with a mix of recent project partners and organisations or schools we had recently connected with. The remaining three locations were Dumbarton (West Dunbartonshire), Kinross (Perthshire), and Dallas (Moray). Overall, 72% of participating children were based in North Edinburgh, with 28% in the other locations.

Demographic context

Two of the groups we worked with specifically support children who are neurodivergent, learning disabled or disabled, representing around 4% of participants. Anecdotally, we are aware that additional children may identify in this way, though we cannot confirm this.

In North Edinburgh, particularly Muirhouse, Pilton, Granton and Drylaw, 77.5% of pupils live in SIMD 1–3 areas, 43% have English as an additional language, and 25.6% are from the global majority. Sessions in North Edinburgh reflected this ethnic diversity more strongly than those in the other three locations.

Outside North Edinburgh, all groups were known to Imaginate through Theatre in Schools Scotland or our creative engagement and artist development work. This meant we had existing relationships with trusted adults, although the children themselves were new to us as facilitators. In North Edinburgh this varied: some groups had worked with us for over three years, while others had only recently connected with the organisation.

3. Ethics and facilitation context

Informed consent

Time was taken at the start of each session to explain why we were here and what was going to happen. Each participant was able to agree to take part by providing oral consent, and it was made clear they could withdraw if they want and ask questions at any time.

Trusted adults

In all sessions we were introduced to the children by trusted adults. In most cases these adults remained present during the consultation, although some school sessions were delivered without school staff in the room.

Familiar environments

All sessions took place in environments familiar to the children in school and community centres. Being introduced by trusted adults and working in known spaces supported smooth facilitation and helped ensure children felt comfortable participating.

Recording and data handling

Children's contributions were recorded to ensure accurate capture of their words and quotations and to platform the voice of the child directly. Audio recordings were used solely for transcription and documentation purposes and were deleted once written notes had been completed.

Learning: What might we change?

Our consultation process, whilst creative and focused on fun, centred verbal contributions from the children we worked with. In an ideal situation, particularly for children who are non-verbal or whose communication styles do not centre on verbalisation, we would explore the opportunity for an introductory session(s) with the children. This would enable us to better understand their needs and adapt or shift the methods accordingly.

Additionally, or instead, we could look for more preparatory interaction with trusted adults. We took this approach with one specialist organisation supporting learning-disabled children and young people through drama and theatre. The adaptations were quite small: children set up the space for the tea party themselves rather than arriving in to an already decorated room, and their trusted adults supported the session by reframing or repeating questions in ways that helped the children respond.

Where possible we communicated with each group and the participants what our next steps would be, what we would be doing with the words we had recorded and the opinions they had shared with us. We committed to each group that we would share our report with them in some way either through a return visit or digital means via their trusted adults. In hindsight we should have built these sessions into the timeline and have programmed them as part of our deadlines. Should ourselves or any other organisations choose to repeat our methods we would advise and ensure that this sharing of impact is better embedded into the delivery plan.

Appendix iii: Children's Rights and Cultural Organisations in Scotland

Five Case Studies through a UNCRC Lens

In addition to the international examples and case studies offered in Thérèse Kearns' report, Imaginate have compiled five examples of cultural organisations in Scotland that are centering children's rights in their approaches and practices. We know there will be other examples across the nation but offer these as a helpful beginning in understanding how the UNCRC and a children's rights approach is shaping cultural provision at a grassroots and organisational level.

These examples have been drawn from publicly available information and profiles found online; the companies have not been interviewed, but they have consented to the summaries offered below. It is also important to note that all the organisations profiled here work with children and young people across a broader age range than the 5–12 age bracket that Imaginate has focused on in its consultations.

The five organisations profiled below each demonstrate, in different ways, what it means to treat children not as beneficiaries of cultural provision but as rights-holders. Their work is grounded, explicitly or implicitly in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Lyra, Edinburgh

Based in Greater Craigmillar since 2012, Lyra runs Artspace, currently Scotland's only performing arts venue exclusively for children and teenagers. Founded and led by Artistic Director Jo Timmins, Lyra explicitly frames its work around Article 31 of the UNCRC: the right to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. Everything Lyra offers is free, underpinned by pastoral care including food, transport, Youth Arts Workers and specialist one-to-one support.

Lyra's rights-based approach is comprehensive. It addresses Article 2 (non-discrimination) by removing the socio-economic barriers that prevent children in deprived communities from accessing cultural life. It enacts Article 12 (participation) by engaging children and young people as co-curators and collaborators, not passive audiences. Its anti-racist commitments and EDI framework speak to the intersectional nature of discrimination that children's rights frameworks must address. Most powerfully, Lyra's vision, that the children it works with today will lead the organisation in the future, is a long-term investment in children as rights-holders, citizens and leaders.

https://www.lyra.co.uk/

Rumpus Room, Glasgow

Founded in 2018 by artists and community workers Catrin Jeans, Nadia Rossi and Angel Walker, Rumpus Room is an artist-led studio in Govanhill, Glasgow, co-produced with, for and by children and young people. It is focused on the principles of community, autonomy, experimentation, and long-term relationship-building, creating a space where art and social action emerge from the community itself.

Rumpus Room centres Article 12. Children and young people are genuine authors of the programme: the studio is shaped by all of those who become part of it. When children approached Rumpus Room wanting to make banners for the 2019 Youth Climate Strikes, a self-initiated Young Activist Group was formed and run by the young people themselves. Rumpus Room's explicit recognition that climate change is a children's human rights crisis connects Article 31 to Articles 6 and 24 the right to life and to a healthy environment.

Rumpus Room's collaborators are children, young people, families, artists, educators, activists, youth workers, other grassroots organisations and anyone else who comes through the studio door. The deliberately open, non-institutional model ie: a studio and garden rather than a formal venue, reduces the barriers of intimidation, bureaucracy and gate-keeping that often prevent the most marginalised children from accessing arts spaces showcasing a commitment to non-discrimination and belonging (Article 2).

Uniquely, Rumpus Room foregrounds play as a serious and rights-bearing activity. It is dedicated to collaborative arts practice in mutual exchange with children and young people to challenge how we play, learn and make art. By treating play as something worth examining and protecting, they implicitly resist the erosion of unstructured, child-led time that is a growing concern in children's rights discourse.

https://rumpus-room.org/

Room 13, Highlands

Room 13 began in 1994 when a group of children at Caol Primary School, Fort William, set up an art studio, formed a management committee, opened a bank account and ran the studio as a business appointing an adult Artist-in-Residence to work alongside them. Today, Room 13 International is a registered Scottish charity providing young people aged 8–25 with free access to professional studios in Caol, Lochaber, as the touchstone for a global network of studios operating on the same model.

Room 13 does not consult children or give them a voice within an adult-led structure; children are constitutionally in charge. Adults are present to do, as the organisation puts it, 'the boring bits', while young people run the studios and make art. This is Article 12 lived as governance. Room 13 also challenges what Article 31 means by insisting that children are not audiences or apprentices but artists in their own right. Its rural Highland base makes a quiet but vital point about geographic equity: cultural rights are not an urban entitlement.

http://room13international.org/

Imaginate: Creative Encounters

Launched by Imaginate in partnership with North Edinburgh Arts, Creative Encounters (2022–2026) was a three-and-a-half-year landmark project placing children's voices at the heart of the creative process. Working with schools and community groups in North Edinburgh, including Forthview Primary, Pilton Youth & Children's Project, North Edinburgh Youth Arts Collective, and Spartans Community Foundation Wee Connections, the project gave children the chance to commission and co-create new pieces of theatre and dance, from selecting the artists they work with to designing and presenting performances at the North Edinburgh Community Festival and the Edinburgh International Children's Festival Family Day.

Creative Encounters' rights contribution is explicitly and structurally built around the UNCRC's Article 31 right to relax, play and take part in a wide range of cultural and artistic activities, but it does not stop there: the project treats children as rights-holders whose views must be expressed and listened to (Article 12), free to express themselves (Article 13). The team ran weekly workshops covering the UNCRC, festival curation, content creation, dance and theatre. These sessions were shaped by children's own ideas and opinions, for example, turning their enthusiasm for content creation into their own news programme, Fake Moustache News.

The project became a vehicle for wider organisational change, with Imaginate advancing their development of a children's human rights approach to their work. This allows them to connect the UNCRC explicitly to aspects of their work or company policies, for example protecting LGBTQ+ young people under Article 2's right to protection against discrimination and Article 6's right to life and healthy development. The project's impact is evidenced rather than assumed: 79% of Forthview pupils reported that the project helped their confidence, with children identifying specific roles they wanted to grow into, such as public speaking, filming, and supporting peers. Creative Encounters demonstrates a rights-based approach built not around a single participatory invitation but around sustained, structural power-sharing, treating children as commissioners and co-creators rather than passive audiences.

https://www.imaginate.org.uk/artists/projects/creative-encounters/

Clifftop Projects, West Dunbartonshire

Founded in 2020 by producer and creative arts facilitator Lottie Barker, Clifftop Projects is a Community Interest Company based in Dumbarton, working across West Dunbartonshire to ensure equal access to the arts for children, young people and families. Its programme includes free Art Youth Clubs, an Intergenerational Dance Company, and the Art Hub: a street-level resource where children can collect free art supplies and creative challenges without registering, travelling or paying.

Clifftop's rights contribution is rooted in radical accessibility and inclusion. The Art Hub model brings Article 31 directly into children's everyday neighbourhoods, removing every institutional barrier. Its explicit LGBTQ+ affirmation supported by work towards the LGBT Youth Scotland Charter enacts Article 2's non-discrimination principle for children whose identities are often made invisible in community spaces. The Youth Voices strand creates a structured mechanism for children under 25 to shape the organisation's future. Clifftop demonstrates that a rights-based approach does not require scale: it requires consistent, principled commitment to the idea that no child should feel the arts are not for them.

https://clifftopprojects.co.uk/

Conclusion

Taken together, Lyra, Rumpus Room, Room 13, Clifftop Projects and Imaginate's Creative Encounters offer a compelling and varied picture of what a children's rights approach to cultural provision looks like in practice across Scotland. Each organisation operates in a different context: urban and rural, large and small, long-established and newly formed. Yet, all five share a foundational conviction: that children are rights-holders now, not future citizens in waiting. They are united by a rejection of the idea that cultural provision for children is an act of charitable generosity. Instead, each organisation, in its own register and context, insists that access to arts and culture is something owed to children. That their voices and creative agency deserve to be taken seriously, and that the structural and practical barriers preventing children from claiming these rights are problems to be solved, not facts to be managed. In doing so, they are not just excellent examples of Scottish arts organisations, but living models of what the UNCRC looks like when it moves from law into life.

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