STARCATCHERS

Imaginate

Children's cultural rights: Including babies and children in the development of arts strategy



A report created from researching examples of practice and consulting with babies and children aged 0–12

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CYAA
Children's and Youth Arts Advocacy

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Creative consultation with Starcatchers

Introduction

This report brings together international desk-based research and direct consultation with babies and children to explore what an arts strategy, genuinely influenced and codesigned with children aged 0–12 years old could look like, and how adults can create the conditions for children's voices to shape it.

Children's and Youth Arts Advocacy (CYAA) is a Scottish network of leading and national arts organisations advocating for children and young people's right to inclusive, diverse, and transformative arts experiences. Creative Scotland commissioned the network to lead this project, delivered by members Starcatchers and Imaginate.

It synthesises two research reports produced by Starcatchers and Imaginate: Starcatchers focused on babies and children aged 0–5, and Imaginate on children aged 5–12. Both reports can be found in full here.

Our research identifies a clear gap in national level child participation specific to arts and culture, presenting Creative Scotland with a substantive opportunity to take a leading role in this emerging practice.

Our key recommendation is that policy makers develop a standalone strategy for babies, children and young people that genuinely includes and responds to their needs, interests, and rights. The recommendations below support the delivery of our key recommendation.

Recommendations

1. Make influence real, not symbolic

This is the strongest recommendation across both reports. Listening to the voices of babies and children without tangible influence is not participation; at best, it is a starting point, and at worst, tokenism.

2. Redesign the consultation process itself

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

3. Resource it properly: time, skills and structure

Recognise explicitly that this work takes longer than standard consultation, particularly with pre- and non-verbal children; that time is the work, not inefficiency.

4. Ensure genuine inclusion and diversity

Connected to the previous recommendation, attention must be paid to actively include children from underrepresented groups.

5. Build relationships and organisational culture, not just events

Bringing all the recommendations together will impact whole cultures, within organisations and beyond.

This is work that goes beyond single consultation projects and enables authentic participation in society for babies, children and young people.

Purpose

Children are rarely consulted in the development of government strategy, even when it directly impacts them, and the younger the children, the rarer their involvement is. When Creative Scotland's previous Youth Arts Strategy, *Time to Shine*, was evaluated in 2024 it was found that babies and children under 12 were underrepresented in both how the strategy was developed and the work that was delivered from it. This prompted Creative Scotland to explore how this gap could be addressed by commissioning Children and Youth Arts Advocacy (CYAA) to do the work described in this summary.

Starcatchers[1] and Imaginate[2] were asked to research past and current approaches to including babies and children in policy development, and to lead direct consultations with babies and children in Scotland. Starcatchers focused on babies and young children aged birth to 5 years and Imaginate on children aged 5–12.

Our research questions were:

- What would it look like if the process to create a babies, children, and young people's arts strategy was shaped by babies and children?
- How can we create space for input and influence that does not rely on children acting within adult frameworks?

1 *Starcatchers, Scotland's Arts and Early Years organisation.* https://starcatchers.org.uk

2 *Imaginate, The national organisation in Scotland, which develops, celebrates and presents theatre and dance for children and young people.* https://www.imaginate.org.uk

3 *United Nations (1989) 'Convention on the Rights of the Child' Geneva: United Nations. Available at:* https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx

Context

Scotland incorporated the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)[3] into domestic law in 2024. This creates a legal obligation for organisations to consider how they include and uphold child rights, which all apply from birth. There are 54 rights listed in the UNCRC; three hold most relevance to our work. Article 31 enshrines children's rights to arts, culture, play, rest and leisure and has a clear connection to arts policy. Articles 12 (right to be heard) and 13 (right to free expression) describe the influence children are entitled to, on decisions that affect them. The work of turning these articles into action is ongoing, and reports such as this one, contribute towards advising organisations and individuals on how to deliver rights-based practice.

Child voice is an important concept connected to the UNCRC that is often used when discussing participation and consultation. The word voice in this context refers to more than spoken or written language, a narrow definition which would exclude contributions from non- and pre-verbal children. Voice is about communicating intention, opinion and responses through whatever means are appropriate for the individuals engaging in that communication. This definition is essential for developing participation frameworks different to those made with verbally articulate children and adults in mind.

Our understanding of babies and children as rights-holders, creative thinkers, and social actors shaped our approach to this project. Children are not human *becomings*, passive in their absorption of culture as they wait to gain adulthood and full personhood, but human *beings*, active in the shaping of their environments and whole as they are. We are not asking *if* babies and children could contribute to an arts strategy for them, but what it could look like and how best to go about it.

How the research was conducted

To answer the research questions our two organisations worked independently and then brought their findings together to create this short summary.

The desk research followed a similar process in both organisations with Rhona Matheson researching examples of babies and young children informing arts policy and practice, and Thérèse Kearns doing the same for children aged 5–12. Both built on their existing knowledge of the arts sector to identify existing reports and publications, with additional searches using scoping tools ProQuest and Scopus. The sample was limited by the time available and does not represent the full range of participatory, child-led arts engagement happening in Scotland and beyond, which also occurs at an undocumented grass-roots level not included in our literature search.

Babies and young children: For the creative consultation 4 artists delivered 10 creative sessions across 2 nursery settings in East Ayrshire and Argyll and Bute. Charlotte Allan drew on *Voice of the Baby*[4] methodology to plan and reflect on these sessions, developing responses to the children over multiple visits. The artforms engaged with included visual art, music, storytelling, puppetry, and movement, with opportunities for both spectatorship and participation. The consultation took place from August to October 2025 with 34 babies and young children and 11 staff members taking part in the sessions.

Children aged 5-12: Lou Brodie led the creative consultation for Imaginate, meeting children across 8 locations in both schools and community or youth centres. Five of these were in North Edinburgh and the others were in Dumbarton, Kinross, and Moray. Children were invited to share their thoughts on creativity through arts-based methods. In *Hot Takes* children arrived at a transformed room where they were offered hot chocolate and asked to draw or write about creativity on the tablecloth in front of them. In *If I Were the First Minister* children were invited to step into a photo cut-out of a current or recent First Minister and field questions on arts and creativity for children in Scotland. 323 children took part between October 2025 and March 2026.



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

4 *Drury, R., & Blaisdell, C. (2023). Voice of the Baby: A reflective guide for the arts. Starcatchers.* https://starcatchers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Voice-of-the-Baby-A-Reflective-Guide-for-the-arts.pdf

Findings

The individual findings of each of these aims can be read in the full reports, both of which also offer conclusions and recommendations from their focus age group and approach. This summary document brings together the findings from both organisations, developing themes from the Imaginate data analysis to include the key findings from Starcatchers.

These themes include the views of the children we met and describe elements of a baby and child-led approach to policy development that is both possible and desirable. The four themes are:

1. Moving beyond tokenism
2. Reaching for inclusivity
3. Centring quality relationships
4. Holding key values

1. Moving beyond tokenism

The inclusion of child voice must go beyond a surface level of engagement for appearance's sake and be authentic and meaningful. This is a challenge that has been raised by Lundy[5] and others who advocate for high-quality child and youth participation in contexts outwith arts and culture. Only including babies and children in bounded adult-led consultations can be limiting in that those consulted may not see any real impact from their contributions. Participation that upholds Article 12 of the UNCRC, the right to be heard, should be ongoing and take place everywhere that decisions are made which impact children's lives.

One of the most important factors in enabling meaningful participation is having adequate time. Non-standard forms of communication can take longer than familiar verbal question-and-answer formats to be understood and shared. The trusting relationships that are necessary for authentic connection also take time to develop. At an institutional level, time is needed to create a responsive system which makes space for child voice, such as the cross-sectional work in Ireland[6]. There is a tension here, in that children's lives move a lot faster than the typical speed of policy development. Feedback loops therefore need to be small as well as large. For a baby, being recognised and responded to in the moment of creative play affirms their participation, taking steps to make sure those moments are regularly available acknowledges their importance.

The desk research described a variety of ways creative methods have been a valuable addition to consultations outwith the arts and cultural sectors. They were essential for both of our consultations in enabling meaningful engagement with the babies and children we met. When creative facilitators and artists bring their expertise into the service of supporting communication, this allows young participants to share their concerns, thoughts and feelings in ways that are meaningful and purposeful.

5 *Lundy, L. (2007) '"Voice" is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child', British Educational Research Journal, 33(6), pp. 927–942.*

6 *Government of Ireland (2025). Principles for Engaging with the Arts* https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/20250611_Principles_for_Enaging_with__the-Arts_an_Overview_of_their_Development.pdf

2. Reaching for inclusivity

A finding from the consultation with children aged 0-5 was that though some in this group had complex and confident language skills there was a lot of value placed in the opportunity to engage in non-verbal play and communication. This was found in imaginative play with an attentive adult, as well as child-led exploration of materials and musical games created with other children.

The participants of the 5–12-year-old consultation made calls for free activities, local provision and better transport. Inequality and justice were frequent key concerns.

Marginalised children, including non-verbal children, face additional barriers to participation with underrepresented groups found to often only be consulted about their minority status. Babies and very young children are also often excluded from participation on the grounds of their limited language and perceived lack of agency.

A focus on verbal feedback was found to be centred in most consultations, including in the Imaginate research with the children aged 5-12. In considering how we step outside of established frameworks it is important to try and not be held back by fear of getting it wrong. Approaches that are truly inclusive and collaborative are by design a learning process for all involved.

3. Centring quality relationships

It is not uncommon for adults to speak on behalf of children, especially when they are very young. Centring adult voice and verbal language has resulted in consultations with babies being conversations with their adult carers. Within the Voice of the Baby Methodology[7] applied in the consultation with 0–5-year-olds, adult carers were included within the Kite Model of participation. In this model, artist, carer, and others are recognised as important but not the only participants in networked creative communication.

Across all parts of this project, we saw our own position as adults as duty bearers rather than gatekeepers. Within the consultations we took a role in creating the trusting, safe conditions for children's voices to emerge. Beyond this, our duty is then to act on what we have been told and be the enablers of children's influence. The children who took part in the consultations asked for flexible and accessible opportunities to be creative. The provision of this requires resources that adults have control of; responding meaningfully to the voices of babies and children requires tangible action. A genuine relationship includes learning from one another.

When artists step into a room of babies or children, they do so knowing that they do not know exactly what will or will not happen. Policy makers should enter into authentic consultation with babies, children and young people with a similarly open mind.

7 *Drury, R., Blaisdell, C., Matheson, R., & Ruckert-Fagan, C. (2025). Hearing The Voice of the Baby Through Participatory Arts: Enriching the Lundy Model of Participation. The International Journal of Children's Rights, 33(4), 807–833.*

4. Holding key values

Children in the 5-12 age group spoke and drew about how important creativity was to them as a way of expressing and feeling true to themselves. It could also be a form of communication only with the self, not intended for others but an active way of managing feelings or improving wellbeing. Creativity was understood as being about imagination, freedom, and experimentation. It was described as essential both now and as a means to build a positive future. Babies expressed their individual interests and preferences and a discernment between their roles as spectators or as active co-creators depending on the offer being made. The young children aged 3-5 had a keen interest in creative offers, particularly valuing opportunities to blend their playful explorations of materials and ideas. In the nurseries the presence of visiting artists allowed babies, children and adults to try new things, for example a boy who did not normally engage in drawing doing so with extended focus.

Children's rights underpin many of the positive examples of practice detailed in the desk research, as a shared language it is valuable in communicating and building a body of practice. Accessible provision of artistic and cultural experiences is a rights claim that brings with it a route to the realisation of other rights. To take a rights-based approach is to meet babies and children as whole, competent individuals. When we are asked to consider what an arts policy, truly influenced by children aged 0 to 12, would look like, we are asking what it would mean to genuinely listen to and act on children's needs and ideas. As with the challenge of reaching for inclusivity, it is important not to be daunted by the impossibility of listening to every child in Scotland within a short consultation. The babies and children we did meet were clear that they valued creativity. They are asking for access to meaningful and varied opportunities.

Conclusions

The babies, children and young people who took part in this research had plenty to say about creativity, given the right space, time and trust to say it. This summary can only gesture towards the richness of what they shared and what we learned in listening to them. The full reports go much further; setting out the detail behind these findings, the methodologies of consultation, and practical guidance for anyone working to put children's rights led practice into action. We encourage policy makers, funders and arts organisations to read both reports in full, and to treat them not as a final word but as a starting point for positively rethinking how children shape the strategies made for them.

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