

Acting on **YOUTH PARTICIPATION**

How Youth Scotland's vital work supports young people
to shape the decisions that affect them



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Introduction

The context: empowering young voices for change

The role of Youth Scotland

Conclusion



Youth participation is deeply woven into the fabric of youth work, representing a core principle that has guided practitioners for many years. This report examines the vital role that young voices play in shaping their communities and the decisions that affect them.

Youth work has always instinctively supported young people as peers, creating safe environments where their perspectives are valued and their contributions recognised. As we explore the various case studies, models and frameworks of participation highlighted in this report, we will discuss the compelling reasons for involving young people in decision-making processes.

Youth Scotland believes young people are not just future leaders; they are equal citizens and valued contributors to our society today. Their insights can drive meaningful change and innovation, bringing fresh perspectives to existing challenges. By involving young people in decision-making, we support not only individual growth and development but also a ripple effect that can lead to systemic change. This report illustrates youth participation can transform programmes, initiatives and communities, ensuring that young voices are not only heard but actively shape the policies and practices that influence their lives.



Youth participation is a powerful way to spark positive change, not just for young people, but for their communities as well. It's all about empowering young individuals with the skills they need to take an active role in society, ensuring that their voices are not only listened to, but heard and valued.

In recent years, there's been a shift towards including young people in decision-making processes across various public bodies, including the Scottish Government and with key funding organisations. These stakeholders are now dedicating time and resources to ensure that young people are meaningfully involved and listened to. This change is fuelled by a deeper understanding of the rights of children and young people, particularly with the incorporation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into Scots law.

Incorporating the UNCRC

On 7 December 2023, The UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill was passed unanimously in the Scottish Parliament. Subsequently gaining royal assent on 16 January 2024, most of the Act came into force on 16 July 2024.

Under Article 12 of the UNCRC, every child has the right to express their views on matters that affect them. This means that all children and young people under the age of 18 should have a say in their families, communities, and society at large. Youth Scotland embraces this principle, striving to support all young people up to the age of 25 in advocating for their rights and actively participating in decision-making processes.

“Involving the people that it's impacting, you get a completely different perspective and a completely different voice. And that's crucial.” — Youth Scotland NLCF Youth Participation Project



Engaging young people effectively

Various models illustrate how to effectively engage young people in local decision-making. One such model is the Lundy Model, developed by Professor Lundy at Queen's University in Belfast in 2007.¹ This model highlights the essential conditions for delivering Article 12 of the UNCRC with clarity and integrity.

At its core, Article 12 emphasises two critical rights:

1. The right to express views.
2. The right to have those views respected equally alongside others.

These rights are further divided into four interrelated elements—**Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence**—each crucial for meaningful youth participation.

Endorsed by national organisations and governments, this model has transformed the global understanding of child rights-based participation, prompting a shift in both policy and practice. More organisations are recognising the importance of youth participation and investing in the training and support needed to empower young people. This inclusive approach ensures that even those furthest from their rights and least likely to be heard can step up and participate. The impact of this empowerment can be profound.

“It is impossible to overstate the impact of the Lundy model. It has changed the global understanding of child participation.”

— Chairperson of the European Network of Ombudsmen and Commissioners for Children²

Supporting young people's engagement

A key element of successful youth participation is the investment in resources for individual support and training. This ensures that all young people can take part equally. Evidence from the National Youth Social Action Survey 2019 (Ipsos Mori, 2020) reveals that a significant majority of 82% of young people want to make the world a better place, and 74% believe they can make a difference in their communities. This reflects the incredible energy and desire among young people to effect real change, provided they have the right opportunities.

In March 2022, the Scottish Government released the Institutionalising Participatory and Deliberative Democracy Working Group report, which outlines the values, principles, and standards for participation and democracy. The report emphasises that: *‘inclusion should be a guiding principle in decision-making and planning, with representatives of seldom-heard communities advising on best practice.’*³

The Working Group recognised the potential of system-wide values, principles and standards in this area and the principle of empowerment, which highlighted the approach required to succeed in developing youth participation, stating: *‘participants should be actively supported to develop their skills, understanding and confidence throughout a process.’*



The children and young people participation framework

In December 2023, the Scottish Government announced plans to commission a Participation Framework Agreement to reinforce its commitment to prioritising participatory processes and person-centred approaches. This follows the development of the Children and Young People Participation Framework, designed to enhance the involvement of children and young people in decision-making and policy creation, including those with protected characteristics. Youth Scotland has successfully joined this initiative alongside eight other providers.

“ Scottish Government’s vision for public participation is that people can be involved in the decisions that affect them, making Scotland a more inclusive, sustainable and successful place.”

— George Adam MSP, Minister for Parliamentary Business, 2023.

Recognising the vital role young people play in decision-making is crucial at all organisational levels. The Social Change Agency notes that the average age of a UK Board Trustee is over 60, with only 3% of Trustees under 30. There’s a tremendous opportunity to shift this dynamic, as demonstrated by the commitment to youth participation from the Scottish Government.

“ I even learned more about myself, like personal development, more skills... and friends I met. It really gave me a boost, it made me feel great about myself, to know I was feeling heard.”

— Youth Scotland Young Grantmaker

Promoting participation: the golden rules

While youth participation has gained traction recently, it’s not a new concept. The 7 Golden Rules for Participation, published in April 2013, were designed to reshape how professionals think about and facilitate the participation of children and young people. Developed through consultations with young people and research with professionals, these rules help practitioners grasp the essence of what the UN means by participation and guide them in empowering young people to engage in decision-making:

The 7 Golden Rules

1. Understand my rights
2. A chance to be involved
3. Remember – it’s my choice
4. Value me
5. Support me
6. Work together
7. Keep in touch

Developed through consultations with young people and research with professionals, these rules help practitioners grasp the essence of what the UN means by participation and guide them in empowering young people to engage in decision-making.



The positivity of social action

One of the positive outcomes of youth participation is its ability to nurture effective contributors and responsible citizens. Research shows⁴ that young people involved in meaningful social action tend to feel a stronger sense of belonging in their communities and take on more active roles. This makes encouraging participation in social action projects all the more essential.

According to research by our partners, UK Youth, engaging in social action significantly benefits young women's and girls' mental well-being, confidence, resilience, and leadership abilities. Furthermore, it enhances the social and emotional capabilities of all young participants (UK Youth, 2021).

The data also shows that young people from more affluent backgrounds (41%) are more likely to engage in meaningful social action compared to their less affluent peers (29%) (Ipsos Mori, 2020). The National Youth Social Action Census 2019 highlighted reasons why some young people don't participate: 'it not occurring to them to take part'; 'friends not doing this type of thing'; 'few/no opportunities in their area.' This suggests that the opportunity is not always clear to young people or the offer is not attractive enough for them to want to participate.

Initiatives designed to directly reach young people who are underrepresented can bring youth participation to the fore, raising awareness, enabling peer influence, and increased opportunities in local areas.

“Running the event was very exciting and challenging. Organising the logistics and the lessons kept me on my toes but at the end, I felt a unique sense of fulfilment because I knew this was going to be the start of something great in the lives of the youths that participated.”

— Inspire 2022 participant, (social action programme)



About Youth Scotland

At Youth Scotland, youth participation is at the heart of everything we do. As the largest national youth work organisation in Scotland, we are committed to changing lives through community-based youth work and believe that youth participation is crucial for delivering meaningful change. With over 600 member organisations supporting 2,350 youth groups, our projects and services span a diverse array of communities—from small rural towns to bustling urban centres.

Approximately 66% of our member groups operate in some of Scotland's most deprived areas, while around 28% serve rural and island communities. We recognise the importance of inclusivity, ensuring that every young person has the opportunity to participate.

At Youth Scotland, we empower our network of community youth groups by providing essential training, resources, youth leadership

programmes, guidance, and access to funding opportunities. We believe that effective youth participation requires a solid foundation of training and personal development. This support helps young people build the confidence they need to engage fully in decision-making processes. Many of the principles of the UNCRC are integrated into our projects and services, with Article 12 being a cornerstone of our work.

“I think the biggest difference for me has been the ability to work in groups. Before this project I would always ask if I could work alone. I never felt like anyone listened to me and I never felt included so I just stayed quiet. I learned how to manage in a group. I felt listened to, included and respected. It showed me that groups can be fun!”

— Youth Scotland Young Grantmaker



Expanding our youth participation

Over the past five years, we have significantly increased our youth participation initiatives in response to the needs of our members and the evolving priorities of the funding and youth work landscapes. Our recent projects include consultations, young grantmaker programmes, social action community projects, and the Young Islanders Network, all directly involving young people in outcome-based youth participation and youth voice.

Our established training modules, such as 'Involving Young People in Decision-Making' and 'Bored Meetings?', equip our workforce to facilitate meaningful youth participation and ensure relevant activities are implemented effectively.

Youth Scotland leverages our significant experience in youth participation, combined with our established networks, to amplify 105,000 young voices and help them make a tangible impact in their communities. While youth-led projects require time and investment, the outcomes, when done well, are truly transformative. Not only do we trust young people to define their processes, but they also learn to trust themselves.



Enabling youth leadership

For over thirty years, Youth Scotland has enabled young people to develop leadership skills and experience through structured support and training. In 2022-24, we engaged 8,430 young individuals in our leadership and participation programmes. Our goal is to ensure that every young person across all 32 local authorities has the opportunity to develop everyday leadership skills and use their voices to effect change in their communities.

Developing young leaders fosters a culture of participation and encourages volunteering and community engagement. Our 'Grow Your Own' approach serves as a powerful model for young people, demonstrating the positive impact of taking on leadership roles. The skills, learning and confidence gained through these experiences – which are in turn recognised and accredited by youth awards – enhance their prospects for successful transitions post-school.⁵

Our 'Involvement Training' programme positioned Youth Scotland at the forefront of youth participation in Scotland. This initiative promoted meaningful involvement and communication between young people and adults, boosted self-esteem and confidence, and created connections among youths from diverse backgrounds.

Thousands of young people across Scotland have completed this training and have made valuable contributions to their communities as a result.

The programme enabled:

- meaningful participation and involvement of young people;
- improved communication between young people and adults working with them;
- increased skills and capacity-building;
- improved confidence and self-esteem;
- and opportunities for young people from different areas to come together, share experiences and have fun.

The 'Involvement Training' programme iterated and evolved into our current iLead programme, a youth leadership programme co-produced with young people to reflect their changing needs and aspirations.

“It has made me have an opportunity to be open and more confident about myself and how I express myself to my community and youth group.” — Youth Scotland Young Grantmaker



The iLead pathway: empowering future leaders

The iLead pathway provides a flexible framework for youth participation and leadership development. We've utilised this pathway as the foundation for various projects, ensuring that young people feel confident and competent to use their voices effectively, make an impact, and bring about positive change.

Through our participation programmes, we empower young people to take on roles such as young grantmakers and event planners while consulting on a range of services and resources. The goal of 'iLead' is to equip young people with essential everyday leadership skills.

Our dynamic and interactive delivery style makes learning enjoyable, even when tackling complex subjects. We break content into manageable sections and incorporate regular breaks to maintain engagement. Our skilled trainers are adept at reading the room and adjusting the programme to suit the needs of the participants, drawing on a rich array of activities to ensure a tailored learning experience.

The iLead Pathway comprises three stages that guide young people through their leadership journeys:

- 1. Engagement:** Exploring diverse learning opportunities.
- 2. Empowerment:** Taking the lead in their communities and transforming ideas into social action.
- 3. Advancement:** Serving as peer educators and inspiring fellow young leaders.

Evaluation data reveals that participation in the iLead programme significantly boosts self-confidence and self-esteem, enhances leadership skills, and enables young people to be actively involved in decisions that affect their lives. In 2023-24, among those completing iLead Engage sessions through our Generation CashBack programme, 99% reported feeling more confident, 95% noted improved leadership skills, and 94% felt more connected to their local communities.

We value and celebrate the journeys and achievements of young people in our iLead sessions and other programmes by recognising and accrediting their achievements via the Scottish Qualifications Authority, aligning with the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF).

Youth Scotland's youth awards celebrate and recognise the learning journeys of young people by accrediting the activities they engage in. Whether it's earning a Hi5 Award (SCQF Level 2), a Dynamic Youth Award (SCQF Level 3), or a Youth Achievement Award (SCQF Levels 4-7), these awards offer a meaningful way for young people to showcase their accomplishments.

Earning a youth award boosts confidence and contributes to a sense of achievement, while providing a valuable addition to college applications or CVs. These awards are especially beneficial for young people who may find that traditional education doesn't suit their learning style or needs, offering an alternative route to recognising their successes and capabilities.



Supporting stakeholders in youth engagement

We have a proven track record of partnering with organisations to enable meaningful engagement with young people. With an increased focus on youth participation, many organisations, including public bodies, funders and the Scottish Government, have sought our expertise. This growing dedication to youth participation represents a positive shift across sectors, driven by a stronger commitment to recognising the rights of children and young people, particularly with the incorporation of the UNCRC into Scots Law.

Youth Scotland is well-positioned to assist public bodies, national and local government, third-sector organisations, and corporate entities in enhancing their youth engagement efforts. We've successfully collaborated with organisations like Heritage Lottery, Audit Scotland, and NHS Lothian. Our significant expertise ensures that consultations and engagements with young people are meaningful and impactful.

Our support includes training for staff and leadership teams, equipping them with the skills and knowledge necessary for effective youth participation. This enables younger team members to take on entry-level positions and be active participants in decision-making processes. Additionally, we offer direct training opportunities for younger staff members, helping them build confidence and skills to engage in important discussions and decisions.

By collaborating with stakeholders across the wider community, Youth Scotland can influence how organisations, businesses, and government bodies involve young people. Shifting decision-making power to young people – and recognising them as equal partners in the process – can lead to significant systemic change.

“ Before I did [iLead training], I wouldn't talk to new people, I'd just wait until they talked to me. But now I can go out and meet new people and start a conversation and that. I've looked at stuff differently and I've built up my confidence, I definitely achieved that.”

— Young person who completed Youth Scotland's iLead programme



Ethical considerations in youth participation

While youth participation plays a vital role in systemic change, it is essential to approach it with a strong commitment to ethical practices. When working with young people, it is crucial to ensure they are informed about their rights. Ethical considerations must be front and centre, ensuring that every young person's participation is a positive and meaningful experience.

It is important to recognise young people for their participation and contribution to the process. Practitioners must consider whether to, or how to reward young people for their participation. This may be through training, support or residential experiences, as well as the opportunity to contribute to community decisions. Alternatively, it might be that remuneration is offered, in the form of vouchers, cash or other means. It is also important to

ensure that knowledge is valued and accessible. The insights of young people can greatly enrich development opportunities when their voices are recognised. Youth Scotland and community-based youth workers support young individuals in understanding the impact of their engagement and the value of their opinions.

To facilitate this, it is essential to use appropriate platforms for sharing feedback and ensure clear communication about what participation involves. Young people should understand how their involvement will be utilised, receive feedback, how results may impact them and know their right to withdraw from the process at any time. Closing the feedback loop with young participants is key to ensuring that the entire experience feels inclusive and worthwhile from start to finish.

“I enjoy building my confidence and self-esteem and helping others through my Youth Achievement Award, and increasing my leadership skills. They’re also great for my CV; they show employers that I’m keen.” — Young person who completed a Youth Scotland Youth Award



Celebrating successes in youth participation

At Youth Scotland, listening to and incorporating young people's views is at the heart of our programmes. Here are some recent examples of our youth participation in action:

- In partnership with Greenspace Scotland, this programme equipped young people with the skills and confidence to collaborate in improving their neighbourhood's environmental quality, biodiversity and vibrancy.
 - Youth Scotland engaged a diverse group of young individuals to shape SBP's youth advocacy strategy and create a communications plan aimed at raising awareness about rewilding.
 - From 2018 to 2020, this partnership with Audit Scotland empowered young voices to share their perspectives on public services affecting Scotland's communities. Additionally, Youth Scotland provided youth engagement training for Audit Scotland's staff.
- In late 2023, we successfully joined the **Scottish Government's CYP Participation framework** alongside eight other providers. We've also been contracted by Skills Development Scotland to consult young people on designing their 'Profiling Achievements' project, which will take place throughout 2024-25. With the enshrinement of the UNCRC in Scots law in January 2024, we have seen an increase in interest in involving young people in decision-making—a development we gladly welcome.
- established in 2021, the YIN aims to amplify the voices of young islanders and their communities. It has successfully built a presence in all six local authorities with island communities, empowering young people to contribute to and shape the National Islands Plan, ensuring their priorities are considered. The YIN addresses important issues like island depopulation, transportation, housing and offers a platform for lesser-heard voices to engage.
 - this annual event is designed by young people, for young people. Each year, we recruit a Reach Advisory Group of individuals aged 14-25 who collaborate to co-design and deliver an event celebrating the power of grassroots youth work, attended by around 150 young people and youth workers from disadvantaged communities across Scotland.
 - funded by Spirit of 2012, this programme supported teams of young people to create youth-led social action events benefiting their communities. The teams pitched their ideas in a 'Dragons' Den' style format for funding up to £800 to turn their visions into reality.



Young grantmakers: leading the way

Participatory grantmaking and youth-led funding initiatives have gained momentum over the last five years, with key funders like the National Lottery Community Fund, Corra Foundation, and Creative Scotland recognising the value of youth-led decision-making panels.

Youth Scotland has been approached by funders to support this vital work, leveraging our expertise in youth participation to recruit, train, and facilitate young grantmaker panels. Our young people take on the responsibility of designing, developing, promoting, and assessing funding schemes. Some notable initiatives include:

- **Corra Way Forward for Families Partnership:** Corra engaged us to train young people from two of our member groups in Young Grantmakers training, enabling them to make recommendations for the Way Forward for Families fund, aimed at supporting projects for young people and families affected by drug and alcohol misuse. Decisions on this fund were announced in 2024 and on the back of this success, we are recruiting and training more Young Grantmakers in 2025.
- **Corra UNCRC:** In 2023, Corra commissioned us to facilitate a panel of young people to review applications for the UNCRC fund. Previous participants in our Young Grantmakers programme were invited to join, receiving refresher training and support to familiarise themselves with the UNCRC. The fund aimed to assist public bodies innovating

to meet the UNCRC's objectives, with the youth panel providing recommendations to the Scottish Government's decision-makers.

- Creative Scotland selected Youth Scotland in 2023 to manage a programme of youth-led arts funding. We recruited and trained a panel of young grantmakers who designed the programme and made funding decisions, distributing £65,000 to support young people's creative development.
- **Corra Henry Duncan Grants:** In 2022, Youth Scotland was commissioned to train and facilitate a youth panel for Corra Foundation's Henry Duncan Grants, which aimed to allocate £900,000 to improve the lives of young people across Scotland, with over 60 applicants competing for funding.
- In 2021-22, we partnered with the National Lottery Community Fund to design and deliver a participatory grant-making pilot project in Glasgow. This initiative aimed to empower young people to identify and fund initiatives addressing anti-social behaviour in their local communities. Youth Scotland's role included recruiting participants aged 13-25, providing training on the grant-making process, and managing the grants awarded to successful applicants, totalling £40,000 distributed among ten projects.



In conclusion, this report has underscored the importance of youth participation as a cornerstone of effective youth work. Through various initiatives, such as the Young Islanders Network and participatory grantmaking programs, we know that involving young people in decision-making processes is not merely beneficial – it is transformative. By recognising young individuals as equal partners, we empower them to be active contributors to society, helping them to develop skills, confidence and a sense of belonging.

The difference made when young people are given a seat at the table is profound. Their engagement leads to richer discussions, innovative solutions and policies that align with the needs and aspirations of young people. Furthermore, as highlighted in the findings, participation is a powerful catalyst for systemic change, paving the way for a future where the voices of young people are integral to decision-making processes at every level.

As we continue to champion youth participation, we can foster environments that not only respect the rights and voices of young people but also promote a more inclusive and equitable society. The insights from this report are not just a call to action – they are a roadmap for the continuing journey of supporting young people to shape their futures and their communities around them.

“ I think everything that was decided did come from the young people, they were the decision makers in the process. And I think that is credit to the whole programme, because they felt comfortable enough and confident enough that they could put forward their opinion and have these discussions. I think overall it was definitely entirely young person led, they felt the ownership.”

— Youth worker, Glas-glow Up (Young Grantmakers) project



1. The Lundy Model | EU Children's Participation Platform <https://eu-for-children.europa.eu/about/lundy-model>
2. <https://www.qub.ac.uk/Research/case-studies/childrens-participation-lundy-model.html>
3. Institutionalising Participatory and Deliberative Democracy Working Group: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/report-institutionalising-participatory-deliberative-democracy-working-group>
4. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60f1a21f8fa8f50c6ef85052/DCMS_youth_social_action_REA_-_Alma_Economics_final_report_accessible_.pdf
5. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/best-start-bright-futures-tackling-child-poverty-delivery-plan-2022-26>

“They asked follow up questions that make you actually think about the decisions you were making. It was really good. I feel as if I’m part of the team and I’ve got a crucial part in the decision-making.”

— Youth Scotland, Glas-glow Up (Young Grantmakers) project



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