

**"No-one was listening.
Trapped by the building,
the system, myself."**

**A storylines project by children and
young people in alternative education.**



Putting children's rights at the heart of education

Contents

Introduction	3
Storylines film project	4
Different lives, but common themes	5
Our approach	7
From the Commissioner	8
Our thanks	9

“It is not sufficient for an education system to be effective for the majority of children, it must address the needs of every single child and support them to their fullest potential.”

Nicola Killean, Children and Young People’s Commissioner

Introduction

One of the office's strategic priority issues is education, as laid out in our [Strategic Plan 2024-28](#) which was fully informed by the views and experiences of children and young people.

Our report, '[This is our lives, it matters a lot](#)' was centred on the views of children and young people's experiences of education. Having listened to children and young people's views for over a year, we made a series of robust recommendations for

improvement of the education system to the Scottish Government and education authorities.

We were clear in our report that 'children in situations of vulnerability should be recognised and provided with education and support that meets their needs'. Children are the most important stakeholders in the education system and their meaningful participation should be embedded in reform processes.



Storylines film project

In our report we committed to work with groups of children and young people in alternative forms of education and/or attending school part-time. They have important experiences and views that can help shape education reform. One of the ways we did this was to create a creative participative project.

We built relationships to engage and support three distinct groups of children and young people. The aim was to support them to explore their shared experiences of the education system, as well as their ideas and solutions for what changes would help realise their rights to education.

We worked with three separate groups of children and young people:

- One group who have long-term health conditions
- One group who attend a specialist service as they cannot attend school for a prolonged period due to physical or mental health
- One group who are at risk of exclusion from mainstream education, or who may find school a challenge

The groups all used film, using different creative approaches across digital collage, animation, and reportage. Each film made was deliberately anonymous to protect children's privacy and to create safe spaces for sharing experiences. One group's experiences were expressed in a scripted animation.

[▶ Watch the films here](#)



Catching up on everything I missed or couldn't focus on.

Different lives, but common themes

Some children attended mainstream schools but had periods of time off for health reasons, while others were learning in alternative school for some or all of their week.

Each group explored the challenges they felt being in mainstream school and despite their varying personal circumstances and geographies, there were some strong common themes.

Positives – what does work

Across all groups was a shared understanding and positivity about what had helped them engage in learning both in mainstream and alternative education.

All of the groups talked about **trusted relationships with staff** being key.

"The teachers here understand you more than what an actual schoolteacher would. Because a schoolteacher obviously has, I'd say like 30 pupils to focus on so it's obviously hard."

"It's more than just being heard. You want to feel understood because you know that people are listening and you have their attention, and they're able to hear you."

"Sometimes I feel safe, or I feel like there's people who care about me. At my school they were trying to get pillows or like a comfy chair because I find it difficult to sit in them. My guidance teacher was listening, and she contacted the council and it felt really good."

They valued **individualised support** to learn in ways that suited their needs.

"We need more time to process, more time for tasks and more staff who are properly trained and available to support us throughout the day."

It's not so strict work, like columns of things to do. It's different every week as well.

"The one-to-ones where each teacher is able to understand you more and therefore they could communicate to each other and understand from there what the person's like."

They valued the **flexibility to learn in different ways** and spaces.

"If there are 143 ways to cook an egg, surely there are infinite ways to learn, and we can't be expected to do it all the same way."

"Small groups. Chill. Really slow."

"Small classes and kind, safe spaces, learning in different environments, outside."

Challenges – what doesn't work

All groups talked about the **school environments and structure making it difficult to learn**. That included the expected learning, the structure of the school day and classes, as well as school buildings themselves.

"The teacher is going too fast. I'm trying to keep up but with the constant pain and all the noise, it's too much to process at once. I feel myself falling behind and there nothing I can do about it."

"The school itself, it's chaotic and unpredictable."

"I went into classes and everyone knew much more than me and I just couldn't focus as well."

They shared experiences of **not feeling listened to** or feeling misunderstood in school.

"It wasn't that I didn't want to go to school, it's that I couldn't. I kept getting told there was no reason not to go. It was all in my head."

"When I'm not listened to, it feels very bad. It feels like I'm being kind of hidden, like pushed under a rug."

"They just leave me when I need help. Thought there was something wrong with me."

They talked about the **impact of school staff not knowing enough about them** or their circumstances, while recognising that teachers are under pressure and some have little time.

"Schools, they just don't understand. Because they've got too many people that they don't get to know the students really."

"I'd say the school could get more people to focus on people who have struggles and stuff early on in school and then actually be able to understand the person more, and therefore it would be easier to get them back into a classroom, and to understand, and be able to help them with that."

"Some teachers misunderstand you, and you also get told off for not doing your work if some teachers are not understanding you properly."

Our approach

Just as there are 143 ways to cook an egg, we know there are many participative ways to take a rights-based approach to engaging with children and young people. We worked flexibly with practitioners and the adults who supported the groups to ensure that the children felt able to work with us on difficult topics.

"All of the staff from the Commissioner's office just rolled up their sleeves, built relationships with our staff and kids and that is what got the best out of everyone. The young people valued someone actually listening to what went wrong and asking those hard questions, and feeling it was ok to talk about it. Working in different ways meant we were able to widen the net to include some young people who would never pluck up the courage to come to any type of group effort."

Jenny McNeil, ASN Adviser, Falkirk Council

Each group worked in a different practical and creative way to explore their views supported by a mix of Commissioner's team, their own support staff, and creative practitioners. Using creative arts-based approaches meant that views could be expressed in safe ways and spaces.

"For many children and young people with health conditions and or disabilities, communicating their experiences through formal discussion can be difficult. Creative approaches help remove this barrier. Art and film allow young people to express complex feelings and experiences in ways that do not rely only on words."

Rhianne Forrest, Officer, Children's Health Scotland

We worked with each group in the way that worked best for them, and adapted the project based on changing circumstances. We worked in partnership with the adults supporting the young people.

"It is vital that policy makers keep working closely with youth workers and trusted adults to empower all children and young people to be properly consulted and heard and not just those children and young people who are hand selected, within mainstream settings, for their convenient and conforming behaviours."

Emma Easton, Education Manager,
Spartans Community Foundation

From the Commissioner

Children and young people who experience difficulties with education have significant insights to share in what can be done to make things better for them, and other children in the future.

There are currently a number of major changes happening in Scottish education, and there are opportunities for learning from the experiences of children and young people, including those further from their rights, and for them have a stronger role in driving decision making.

We have been working closely with global participation expert, Professor Laura Lundy and in a [recent piece](#) for us she wrote: "Scotland is uniquely placed to become the global leader in listening to children in education. It can establish itself as the best place in the world for children to be included in educational decision-making." This project is one example of how, with positive partnerships, that can be done meaningfully with children and young people further from their rights.



I have consistently called for children's participation to be systematically embedded within education. There should be a robust analysis of the resources and infrastructure required to deliver an inclusive education system across Scotland. These films are powerful resources for decision-makers to understand the challenges children can face, what more can be done to support them, and how to engage more children in education decision-making long-term. Children's education rights must be respected, protected and fulfilled.

Nicola Killean

Children and Young People's
Commissioner Scotland





Our thanks

A huge thank you to all the children and young people who worked so thoughtfully and creatively with us on this project. Your experiences matter and you've brought those to life brilliantly, along with your ideas for change.





Bridgeside House
99 McDonald Road
Edinburgh EH7 4NS

Tel: 0131 346 5350
Young Persons' Freephone: 0800 019 1179
Email: administration@cypcs.org.uk
cypcs.org.uk

 @cypcs  @cypcs  /cypcs

If you would like this document in
another format, please let us know.