THE SHOOGLE LAB

CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE'S Commissioner Scotland

Working 'thegither' so that every child is heard in education

By Professor Laura Lundy

Introduction from the Commissioner



Children asked me to make education a priority area for my work. On the publication of 'This is our lives, it matters a lot', the culmination of a year of listening to children and young people's experiences, I made a series of recommendations for improvement to the Scottish Government and key decision-makers. I also made the commitment to create child-friendly collaborative spaces for key decision-makers to come together with children and young people to make progress. 'The Shoogle lab: shaking up education' is that commitment brought to life.

There have now been four Shoogle Lab sessions since December 2025. Drawing on all the work that has been done, I asked Professor Laura Lundy to work with our Young Advisors to write the following piece on the theme of coordination across organisations. It sets out why coordination makes sense, who should coordinate with each other and suggests discussion topics for working out the how to do that well – and that was the aim of our Shoogle Lab session in June 2026.

Nicola Killean
Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland

Coordination

Professor Laura Lundy



Children's rights advocates frequently lament the 'implementation gap' – the difference between rights on paper and rights in practice. The right to be heard, in Article 12 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), is a prime example of this. Children have a right to have their views given due weight in all matters affecting them – except that doesn't happen in education and elsewhere as often, as well, or as inclusively as it should.

A lot has been written about how to deliver more effective implementation of children's human rights, not least incorporating them into domestic law as Scotland has done. But, of course that's not enough. Law tells decision-makers that they have to do it but not usually how to do it. Moreover, one of the most important ways of implementing children's human rights is also one of the most neglected in practice. That is cooperation between the duty-bearers whose obligation it is to secure children's rights in policy and practice – in Scots, 'working thegither'.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has written guidance on children's rights implementation generally. In General Comment no. 5, they outline what they describe as general measures of implementation. One of these is coordination, where they say:

> "In examining States parties' reports the Committee has almost invariably found it necessary to encourage further coordination of government to ensure effective implementation: coordination among central government departments, among different provinces and regions, between central and other levels of government and between Government and civil society. The purpose of coordination is to ensure respect for all of the Convention's principles and standards for all children within the State jurisdiction;."
> (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2003, para. 37)

Why?

The reasons to cooperate should be fairly obvious. There is a slew of adages that make sensible points about the value of working together (many hands make light work, two heads are better than one, and so on). But in the case of children's rights, and the right to be heard specifically, there are two strong arguments in support of cooperation between and among education stakeholders; coherence, and cost-effectiveness.

Coherence

> **"Know organisations around you, know if goals linked similarly."**
>
> Young Advisor

There is a plethora of approaches and guides to implementing meaningful child participation, all of which can be helpful. However, what can be unhelpful in this array of material is a lack of consistency, with the result that children, educators and others have to navigate different definitions, models, tools and understandings. That lack of coherence can undermine success, resulting in confusion and information overwhelm. It can also create what I call a chill-factor, with those whose job it is to secure the right to be heard intimidated into inaction. When stakeholders work together to shape and adopt common understandings, it enables communication across the system, a common buy-in, peer support and ultimately more coherent implementation.

Cost-effectiveness

> **"It would help time-consuming wise. They work in the same field. It must save money. It helps cut costs a bit. It's cheaper if you work together."**
>
> Young Advisor

Meaningful child participation requires time and resource, neither of which is ever sufficiently abundant among any education stakeholders. It is common sense that working together to share the work and pool resources should reduce the individual burden on organisations and enable more

to be achieved overall. Pulling out another adage, there is no point in reinventing the wheel. Equally, there are other areas where everyone agrees more needs to be done, particularly in ensuring the inclusion of children who are seldom heard or furthest from the enjoyment of their rights. Working together to ensure that these children are heard in education is an imperative and the pooling of resources and expertise is critical to implementation.

The Commissioner's Young Advisors had an additional reason to support coordination, linking coordination to young people's trust. From their perspective, education bodies have a collective responsibility for education running efficiently and most effectively for children and young people. They should be able to work together to ensure children's right to be heard.

Who?

As the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has observed above, coordination has to work across the system, involving all stakeholders. Every public body in education is required to involve children in decision-making, whether that is at the level of policy or practice, or both. Given the wider number of education organisations in this space, it is common sense for them to come together to share and co-create resources (cost-effectiveness), agree an approach and learn (cohesion). Of course, in the spirit of the UNCRC and letter of the law, that cooperation should also involve children and young people. How children's rights are implemented in practice is a matter affecting children and therefore requires their engagement.

How?

The goal is cooperation. Who could argue with that? However, it is easy said but it seems not so easily done. Everyone tells public bodies that they should do it but few set out what this could look like in reality.

To help, I have set out some topics to guide discussions. These attempt to bring concrete actions to the lofty, but inevitably somewhat loose, ambition to 'coordinate.'

Discussion topics – four Cs

The topics are collaboration, coordination, communication and collective accountability.

Collaboration

> "[Education] Bodies don't really know each other."
>
> Young Advisor

Planning the overall vision and relationships between organisations

Cooperating requires a concrete plan for working together and that requires an agreed mechanism for collaboration. That will mean taking a decision about who will be involved, how often they will meet, how they will agree actions and how the collaboration will be organised and sustained. A core focus of the collaboration should also be to agree the things that can be developed in partnership. This could be a joint framework for children's voice in education or training programmes or an agreed toolkit that can be used across the sector or...?

Coordination

> "Don't know what they are doing in the same space – struggle or do the same work."
>
> Young Advisor

Planning independent activity

Not everything that needs to be done can or should be done in collaboration. Each public body has its own remit, plans, and strategies and these will often require independent involvement of children. However, creating a shared space means that organisations can share what they are doing as it may be the case that there is learning – or at the very least useful information – that can be used by others. It can also help address the challenge of consultation fatigue – where the same children are bombarded with requests to participate and may choose to disengage. And finally, it is important that whatever is developed by individual organisations aligns via a shared framework and goals which is agreed in collaboration (as set out above).

Communication

Sharing and promoting good practice

> "[They] Should "steal" [share] good practice. That would benefit children and young people across Scotland."
>
> Young Advisor

Effective cooperation requires good communication. That could take the form of sharing good practice or learning from mistakes. Having a shared communications strategy or platform for pupil voice in Scotland would in itself promote and support the wider education sector in its journey towards better implementation of Article 12.

Collective accountability

> "It is the fact that you sit in meetings with them and they blame each other for things they cannot do."
>
> Young Advisor

Being accountable to children and to each other

This "C" was added after discussions with the Commissioner's Young Advisors. They emphasised the need for all education bodies to be accountable, not just individually but as a group. This stems, in part, from a concern that it is easy to pass the buck to someone else and a desire to ensure that all education duty-bearers take collective responsibility, holding each other to account as well as being accountable to children.

What next?

The Shoogle Lab in June 2026 drew on the enthusiasm and commitments shared at previous sessions. The Commissioner reflects on the learning from the day overleaf. It was a time for us to roll up our slevees and plan a way forward – thegither. Cooperation and coordination requires leadership and indeed, accountability to children and each other.

In my first blog, Why we must really listen to children in education, I argued that the case was undeniable – why on earth would you not involve children when the benefits are so clear? Likewise, the case for working together to make that happen is equally strong. It is in everyone's interests that education stakeholders and rights-holders work together to learn, to share, and to create a common vision for meaningful child participation in education in Scotland.

The potential here is enormous.

If Scotland's education bodies get this right, they will not only provide a unique model that demonstrates how to implement children's rights to participation across the education system, but they have the potential to create a dynamic learning framework. They will learn from children, share that learning with each other, and all the while shape practice and policy to deliver on children's rights more generally. Grace, one of the Young Advisors, borrowed from her business studies revision to suggest that education bodies should operate children's participation as a "Joint Venture". This evolved into the idea that the Shoogle Lab is a "Joint Adventure". Here's to that adventure thegither.



Reflection: weaving ‘thegither’

Commissioner Nicola Killean

We embarked on the “Joint Adventure” when we brought the Young Advisors, education leaders and Professor Laura Lundy back together in June. The purpose of the session was to explore coordination as one of the key missing links in the implementation of children's right to participation within education.

The Young Advisors planned the concept of weaving something ‘thegither’ physically as we moved through the day. Everyone involved contributed to a giant woven tapestry, bringing their own ideas about how they could work together to weave with others. The different parts of the weave represented the diversity of children and young people and educators and organisations, who all need to be bound together to improve outcomes for children.

We ended the day with a beautiful, but unfinished weave, and an unfinished conversation on coordination.

It became apparent that one of the most significant conversations needed to deliver children’s rights must happen between different educational organisations. Crucially, it is a conversation that often does not take place with all the right organisations and people, including children, in the room. It needs to be done properly, to address the opportunities and the barriers coordination and then for the right actions to be taken.

This work needs time, but the time must start now.



Scotland has a unique opportunity right now, a new Parliament is in action, a new Cabinet Secretary in place and new organisations are building their structures.

Scottish Government is responding to the Additional Support for Learning: review led by Janie McManus, exploring a national staged intervention model and roadmap for Additional Support Needs (ASN) provision.

Public service reform has taken centre stage, moving beyond recommendations to direction and an urgency to work across boundaries, workforce, intelligence, and action. But this must not be at the expense of any regression in children's rights. The Scottish Government has a legal obligation to use the maximum resources necessary to deliver children's rights. For the education system to work effectively with other services, it must first work as a more connected and coordinated system itself.

What is clear to me through the Shoogle Lab work is that the leaders involved are individual champions for participation. What children need now is for them to become system leaders for coordinated participation that informs and drives change.

This is a critical moment for education leaders to align and centre the shared prioritisation of children's participation, particularly with those who are further from their rights. Opportunities are there for creating greater emphasis in the National Improvement Framework, new and existing organisation governance structures, business plans, learner committees, and existing local authority work.

Actions and change might take longer to progress, but the thinking, 'thegither' needs to happen now. The Scottish Government is critical to this, and I'm pleased that the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic has now met with our Young Advisors to talk about what more can be done.

Our evidence is clear on the "why?". It's now time for leaders to answer the "how?" to ensure that children and young people, including those further from their rights, shape changes in education and are involved in decisions on wider public service reform.

About the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland

Nicola Killean is the Children and Young People's Commissioner for Scotland. She became the Commissioner in August 2023 and has a six-year term. The Commissioner works with her team to promote and protect the rights of children and young people in Scotland. That is:

- everyone under 18, and
- everyone up to 21 who is in care or care experienced

The law that created the Commissioner's role says that the Commissioner must:

- Promote awareness and understanding of children's rights.
- Involve children and young people in the office's work.
- Make sure laws, policies and practice affecting children and young people's lives are fair and respect their rights.
- Promote and carry out research to progress children's rights.
- Share examples of adults working well to fulfil children's rights so others can learn from it.

The Commissioner also has legal powers which we can use in some situations where we are concerned that human rights promises to children and young people are not being kept. We use these powers of investigation and litigation (taking action in court) when we think we can make a bigger change. Our office's role is to hold people in power to account and to take action when children's rights are breached.

Our values of leadership, participation, independence, bravery and respect guide us. They were developed from the office's work with children and young people across Scotland.

The author

Laura Lundy is Honorary Professor of Education Law and Children's Rights at Queen's University, Belfast, Professor of Law at University College Cork and a barrister at law. She is co-Editor in Chief of the International Journal of Children's Rights. Her expertise is in law and human rights with a particular focus on children's right to participate in decision-making and education rights. Her 2007 paper in the British Educational Research Journal, "'Voice' is not enough" is one of the most highly-cited academic papers on children's rights ever. The model of children's participation it proposes (based on four key concepts – Space, Voice, Audience and Influence) is used extensively in scholarship and practice.The "Lundy Model" has been adopted by numerous national governments, including Ireland in its national strategy and framework on child and youth participation, as well as international organisations including the European Commission, Council of Europe, and UNICEF.

CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE'S Commissioner Scotland

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

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