



Building Brighter Futures:

Amplifying Children's Voice



NATIONAL
CHILDREN'S
BUREAU



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How NCB is Building Brighter Futures

For over 60 years, the National Children's Bureau (NCB) has brought experts and organisations together and aligned the latest learning and evidence with the voices of lived experience with one clear mission: to build a better childhood for every child.

Our work has contributed to major improvements in the lives of families across the UK, whether through the creation and coordination of specialist membership groups that pool resources and ideas to focus systemic change in areas such as bereavement, bullying and wellbeing, or in the development and delivery of legislation and public policy to protect and support all children and young people, including disabled children and children with special educational needs.

You can explore our journey and our impact over the past 60 years [here](#).

But there is still so much to do, with children today facing challenges of an unprecedented variety and scale,

including discrimination, stretched public services and an explosion in the numbers experiencing mental health issues and life below the poverty line.

In February 2024, we launched our new five-year strategy, [United for a Better Childhood: Building Brighter Futures](#), which sets out how we aim to go further and do better so that every child can thrive.

This series of reports digs a little deeper into key areas of our work – including voice, inclusive education and systems change – setting out NCB's unique evidence and experience and suggesting some of the ways that we can move closer to achieving our vision.

→ *Our impact over 60 years has been built on a readiness to learn and evolve and [United for a Better Childhood: Building Brighter Futures](#) sets out how we plan to push further and do better over the next five years.*



Children and young people are the experts on their own lives. They know when the support and services they receive is of a good quality, when they are being properly listened to, and when the adults in their lives are making decisions with them, and not just for them.

And yet, far too much decision-making around children's services and support is based on the views of the adults around children – whether parents and carers, teachers, social workers, doctors or youth workers – rather than on the views of the children and young people themselves.

The voice of children is at the heart of all our work at NCB across England and Northern Ireland, and we are always listening carefully and working together to ensure, wherever possible, collaborative decisions are made that put children first.

"Our participation work is guided by Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which states that: "every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously."



The current reality: Many children feel excluded

There are mechanisms in place to allow the voice of children and young people to be heard in relation to the services and support they receive. For example, children in care, those receiving health services, or those in the youth justice system, can all access an advocate if they feel their views are not being taken seriously or if they want to make a complaint.

While advocacy can often be a lifeline for children and young people in the most difficult circumstances, generally these services are provided when things go wrong. This is crucial, but it cannot provide the proactive and positive role children and young people should play in designing the services and allocating the resources that affect them.

Children and young people often report feeling that they are not listened to or not properly included in decision-making in everyday life:

- ▶ **13% of children gave low scores for 'feeling listened to at school'** in the Good Childhood Report 2022 (The Children's Society, 2022).
- ▶ **One in seven children in care** surveyed by the Bright Spots

research programme reported 'hardly ever' or 'never' being involved in decision-making about their care (Coram Voice, 2022).

- ▶ Research by the Children's Commissioner's Office in 2019 found that **29% of local authorities surveyed did not know who provided advocacy for children in receipt of health services in their area.** This was even though local authorities themselves have a statutory duty to provide these services (Children's Commissioner, 2019).
- ▶ A survey commissioned by the Children's Charities Coalition in January 2024, found that **62% of UK children think that politicians don't understand the issues that affect children and young people** today and almost three quarters felt that their voices weren't listened to by politicians.
- ▶ The Big Ambition, a survey carried out by the Children's Commissioner for England, reported **55% of children with social workers believed their thoughts about the future were listened to**, compared to **71% for children without a social worker.** (Children's Commissioner, 2024).

“There's so much that can be done to support young people in the decision to participate and during participation. There is no excuse in my opinion. We are the professionals. We had the lived experience. Regardless of the risks, there is incredible benefit for young people and from the vast knowledge of experience we have in the systems. We risk so much by not taking part in research. We miss out on so much, the opportunity to learn indefinitely through a different lens.”

Evie Poingdestre, a member of the Young Researchers' Advisory Panel (YRAP), sharing her views in a podcast by NCB family member Research in Practice that explored how young people's participation in services and research can be protective at an individual level and for young people more widely. You can listen to the podcast and read a transcript [here](#).

Through its work with children and young people, Research in Practice endeavours to ensure that the voice of lived experience is represented and in so doing directly impacts the learning of practitioners and their practice.

The challenges in ensuring that children's voices are properly heard in decision-making that directly affects them is also mirrored nationally in decision-making about children's social policy.

Children face barriers in holding politicians and decision-makers to account when things go wrong – they cannot vote as adults can. Children rarely get to be heard in the day-to-day decision-making in departments across Whitehall and beyond.

NCB works hard, both nationally and locally, across England and Northern Ireland to redress this imbalance and to champion the voice of children and young people in decision-making at every level.

Amplifying the voice of children, young people and their families is a key goal in our strategy to Build Brighter Futures. We want to give children a greater voice at the table, so that even if we are not in the room, decisions that affect children are never taken without them.



→ *Children are the experts on their own lives and must be brought on board and involved in the major decisions that affect them.*

Children's voice in politics

The experience of childhood is constantly changing, and so it is crucial that politicians are supported to understand childhoods today and that they are regularly exposed to the unfiltered real experiences of the children they represent.

NCB's work and what we have learned

NCB coordinates the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Children (APPGC) that brings together parliamentarians from all political parties and across both Houses of Parliament to champion the needs of children and give children and young people a chance to share their stories and experiences directly with those in decision-making positions.

Recent areas of focus for the APPGC have included the Independent Review of Children's Social Care; including children in decision-making in Integrated Care Systems; examining the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people; and working to ensure that spending decisions made by government take proper account of the needs of children and young people.

At every event, and in all its work, the views of children and young people themselves play a crucial role. For example, in the APPGC's work on the Independent Review of Children's Social Care, children and young people shared



→ Young people presenting to delegates at the Conservative Party Conference in 2023.

their own life stories about being in care, their strong relationships with their wider families and the importance of access to independent advocacy (APPG for Children, 2017; APPG for Children, 2018).

These messages were clearly heard as they were examined by the Independent Review itself (Independent Review of Children's Social Care, 2022). The government has subsequently made important commitments around access to family-finding services and a new 'opt out' model of advocacy to

strengthen children's voices in the decision-making processes around the care and support they receive. (Department for Education, 2023).

The work of the APPGC demonstrates the importance not only of ensuring that politicians and officials are aware of the current challenges and experiences of young people, but also that hearing about these challenges directly from children themselves can be incredibly powerful. Following one APPGC event, a senior Treasury official wrote to the children and young people who had shared their views and experiences and said:

"What also shone through in particular for us was how many of you do not feel listened to and do not feel like you have a voice in the policy process. We hope this event went some way to show how valued your input and experiences are."

Interactions like these demonstrate the importance of ensuring that political processes and decisions are informed directly by children and young people. For our political system to work effectively and serve everyone, it must include the voice of children and young people.

As we look to the future, we need to be more ambitious. Children need to see and experience a democracy that works for them, and adults need to be

reminded that their political decisions as voters should be made with the best interests of children in mind and not in narrower self-interest.

- ▶ We could establish a regular "Prime Minister's Questions for Children" where children and young people themselves get to ask direct questions of the government.
- ▶ And we could create a cross-government strategy that is owned by cabinet ministers but children and young people help decide whether it is working or not.

If we can make children and young people more visible in our democracy, and ensure their voices are heard, there could be much to gain from an inclusive national debate and better-informed decision-making.



→ Young people presented alongside MP Helen Hayes and former chair of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care at the Labour Party Conference 2023.

Children's voice in policy

It is not enough, however, for children and young people's voice to be heard by our politicians. Behind the scenes, in government departments, civil servants are making recommendations and implementing changes that often have far-reaching impacts on children's lives. The policy process is complex, often protracted, and not especially accessible for children and young people.

NCB's work and what we have learned

NCB has worked, with success, to open up the policy process and make it more inclusive of children and young people through our work running the FLARE (Friendship, Learning, Achieve, Reach and Empower) advisory group for the Department for Education (DfE).

FLARE provides DfE with advice on national policy decisions related to disabled children and young people and children and young people with special educational needs. The group is diverse and made up of children from across the country, of different ages, and with different lived experiences.

One of the key successes of the group has been around improvements in the ways in which DfE consults directly with children and young people around proposed policy changes, making consultation exercises more flexible and allowing participation in a variety of ways.

Recent consultations that have been co-designed by FLARE have had notable success. A consultation exploring the impacts of COVID-19, for example, included the views of over 600 children (Council for Disabled Children, 2021) and provided important insights into how disabled children and young people and children and young people with special educational needs had fared during the pandemic. Another recent consultation on proposed government reforms of SEND support provided a range of important recommendations to help improve the proposals and make them work effectively for children and young people (Council for Disabled Children, 2022).

These successes are all part of the DfE's Making Participation Work funding awarded to the Council for Disabled Children and Kids to ensure that disabled children and young people and children and young people with special educational needs can properly participate in decision-making that



→ Members of the NCB's Policy and Communications team with young people at Parliament for the *It's Our Care Day of Action* in June 2022.

affects their lives. The programme demonstrates how, with some extra capacity and resource, the policy-making process can be effectively opened up so that all children and young people can participate effectively.

In December 2023, on behalf of DfE, NCB launched a new Children and Young People's Advisory Board to provide valuable input on the government's implementation of its children's social care strategy 'Stable Homes, Built on Love'. Made up of groups of children and young people aged 11–17 and 18–25 with direct experience of children's social care in England, the advisory board brings together those with lived experiences to play a part in ongoing reforms at national and local levels.

The Children and Young People's Advisory Board will initially run until



→ Members of FLARE collect *The Children's Achievement Award* at the *Children & Young People Now Awards 2023*.

March 2025, and aims to recruit a wide range of 'experts by experience', including those who have had a social worker, as well as those who are looked after or care leavers.



→ We are committed to ensuring disabled children and young people and children and young people with special educational needs can properly participate in decision-making that affects their lives.

Children's voice in evidence

NCB has long championed the need for evidence-informed policies when it comes to making decisions about putting in place robust and effective support and services for children and young people.

The reality of evidence-informed policy-making is often messy, however. Who gets to choose the research questions? How is the evidence gathered? How are findings interpreted and communicated? These are all questions where people's priorities and even biases can be introduced to the process of evidence-informed policy-making.

At NCB, we recognise the crucial role that children and young people themselves must play in steering, gathering, interpreting and communicating the research and evidence that underpins the services and support that directly affect them. By being actively engaged in the evidence gathering process, they hold researchers to account, ensure work is relevant, provide important insights to interpret findings, and can powerfully communicate the findings of research in ways that adult researchers probably could not.

NCB's work and what we have learned

Living Assessments is a major project funded by the Wellcome Trust to

explore the impact that social care assessments have on children and families.

Assessments are usually the first children's social care process that children and families engage in. A good assessment can be transformative. It can secure the right help, at the right time and enable children and families to thrive. A poor assessment, on the other hand, can be harmful; families might be turned away and not receive any help or the wrong intervention could be put in place that does not properly meet the needs of the child and their family.

The Living Assessments project has three expert-by-experience groups – one for parents, one for disabled children and young people and children and young people with special educational needs, and a third for young people leaving care – that have helped guide the project from its outset.

All of these experts-by-experience have undergone assessments themselves and now contribute to the ongoing research in several ways. They have helped draft questions for interviews, interpret the

findings from a systematic review, given guidance on how language is appraised, decided what engagement methods should be used, and helped with the communication and dissemination of findings.

The project has played a significant role in changing policy and public narratives. The Independent Review of Children's Social Care cited Living Assessments' 'Supporting and strengthening families through early help – A rapid review of evidence' (2021) five times as it made the case for more spending on early help, enabled by assessments that were more collaborative and gave families and children more of a say in what support they went on to receive.



→ A young person is interviewed at the launch of the Public Engagement Award which uses creative methods to disseminate the findings of Living Assessments.



The change we need

Embedding children and young people's voice across all levels of decision-making that affect their lives is crucial.



NCB recommends:

- ▶ Children and young people are involved in decision-making on all levels – individual, service and strategic – and be equipped with the skills to take an active role.
- ▶ Dedicated spaces for children and young people are made in our political life through regular events like Prime Minister's Questions for children and young people.
- ▶ Government is run in a way that explicitly acknowledges the needs of children and young people. They should be represented at cabinet-level and efforts to improve their lives should be coordinated across government rather than within individual departmental silos.
- ▶ A cultural change in children's policy development: moving away from engaging children and young people in a tokenistic way at the end of the policy-making process, to engaging them meaningfully as expert partners from the start and throughout. For instance, through 'check and challenge' committees of children, young people and the parents and carers of babies, representing diverse communities and needs that shadow the development and implementation of government policy, ensuring the work is always informed by the experts themselves.
- ▶ The needs and best interests of babies, children and young people are cemented into major policy decisions and development across government, through mandatory Children's Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessments
- ▶ Local authorities and Integrated Care Systems ensure that there is a strong and meaningful way for children and young people to participate in strategic decision-making. Local authorities often already do this for children in care and care leavers through Children in Care Councils and practices like this should be extended to all decision-making concerning support and services for children and young people.
- ▶ Research projects, evaluations of service delivery and other activities to build the evidence base of what works to support children and young people always have a role for children and young people with lived experience of the issues in the design, implementation and dissemination of research.



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research
in practice



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Design and typeset by Effusion