Listening, acting and changing
UK policy with children:
learning from European examples and theories
of children's agency

Cath Larkins

Abstract: Recent developments suggest increasing European receptiveness to children's involvement in policymaking, which has some resonance with practice in the UK. Individually and collectively, children are sometimes involved, usually at earlier stages of the policy cycle, but inclusiveness of marginalised children and resulting impact are often lacking. Exploring examples provides ways of questioning which children are being listened to, when, how and with what results in terms of action and change. Using relational accounts of agency can give insight into the relationships between people and environments that may be facilitative of children's collective and individual influence.

Note on the author: Cath Larkins is Professor of Childhood Studies, and Co Director, The Centre for Children and Young People's Participation, at the University of Central Lancashire. CLarkins@uclan.ac.uk

Despite children's right to influence decisions that affect them, their participation in policymaking is notable by its absence (Berkley & Lister 2020). The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, citing Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), has consistently underlined the importance of children's involvement in decision making,[1] including in responding to the COVID–19 pandemic.[2] Yet, as highlighted in the UK Children's Commissioners report to the UN Committee (2020: 10):

> *Children's right to be heard and involved in decision-making processes across all jurisdictions is being denied without comprehensive implementation in law and practice.*

The lack of inclusion of children's perspectives was visible, for example, in the House of Commons (2020) debate on safe practice for reopening schools during the pandemic. The involvement of teachers and trade unions was rightly promoted, but there was no discussion of the need to include children themselves. Rather than valuing children's knowledge of school cultures and environments, during the debate children were portrayed through the dominant tropes of incompetence, being at risk or risky (to teacher health). Discourse such as this, together with myths of childhood innocence, have long worked to undermine the political agency of children (Jenkins 1998). Here, David Archard's (2020: 10) commentary is strikingly relevant. He asks, if there is to be an age of suffrage which excludes children, 'how else might we allow children as a group a say in those matters that adults get to decide as citizens?'

This article responds to this question by reflecting on examples of children's individual and collective involvement in different stages of the policy cycle at a European level. Of course, the UK does not need to look to other parts of Europe, for there are longstanding examples of children's involvement in policymaking within the UK. These include, in 2009, the Welsh Assembly Children and Young People's Committee survey of 2,700 children about their priority concerns, which was followed by visits to schools and community groups to conduct consultations to develop a play policy in response to children's recommendations.[3] Similarly, in 2017, in Scotland, representatives of the Children's Parliament and Scottish Youth Parliament spoke to the full Scottish Cabinet, regarding the need for equal protection from violence, and ending physical punishment of children and young people. This was then debated and legislation was enacted.[4] Exploring children's

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[1] See for example UN CRC General Comment 12 https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2fC%2fGC%2f12&Lang=en

[2] https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=INT/CRC/STA/9095&Lang=en

[3] https://senedd.wales/Laid%20Documents/CR-LD8301%20-%20Children%20and%20Young%20People%20Committee%20Provision%20of%20Safe%20Places%20to%20Play%20and%20Hang%20Out–23112010–203585/cr-ld8301-e-English.pdf)

[4] https://www.gov.scot/publications/actions-agreed-cabinet-meeting-children-young-people–28-february-2017/pages/0/

participation within European policy processes is useful, however, as there are institutional commitments that might be learned from. Looking at European policymaking may also help debunk other myths perpetuated to justify children's exclusion from policy processes: that policy is too complicated, distant or irrelevant.

The rest of this article outlines the European context and two contrasting European examples of children's participation in different stages of the policy cycle related to children's rights. These examples are explored to question when and how children were listened to and whether this resulted in action and change. Lessons from these examples are then strengthened by reflection on theories of children's agency.

Children's participation in Europe

The EU has expressed commitment to children's participation in two Communications (2006, 2011) and the 2009 Treaty of Union. Children were not included in developing these, but subsequently, children have been more directly included in EU policymaking, particularly on issues of children's rights and youth policy. Across Europe, research indicates that at local and national levels, children have also participated in public decision-making on issues as diverse as asylum, child protection, community improvement, disaster management, employment, environment, media and transport (Crowley & Larkins 2018).

The increasing focus on children's participation is evident in a number of European recommendations, declarations, resolutions, advocacy, activism and practice tools. The foundational Council of Europe (2012) *Recommendation on children's participation* (which remains applicable in the UK)[5] is repeatedly used in advocacy and activism by international non-governmental organisations and children. For example, in 2019, Unicef, Eurochild and others, supported the Romanian presidency of the EU to work with children to create the *Bucharest Declaration*[6] on children's participation. This was referenced in a motion to the European Parliament, and subsequent resolution[7] to this effect:

> *47. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to develop and implement the Bucharest Declaration on child participation[(17)]; ...*
> *48. Calls on the Member States to strengthen the participation of children in their legislation and encourages the Member States and the Commission to create meaningful mechanisms for child participation (European Parliament 2018)*

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[5] Post Brexit, the UK remains a member of the Council of Europe which is comprised of 47 member states
[6] https://www.unicef.org/romania/bucharest-eu-childrens-declaration
[7] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA–9–2019–0066_EN.html

The Council of Europe published *Listen-Act-Change*, a handbook on Children's Participation (Crowley *et al.* 2021). In January 2022, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe passed a new recommendation[8] and resolution.[9] These encourage all member states (including the UK) to consider lowering the voting age to 16 and to adopt participatory approaches. The resolution also makes the following commitment:

> *8. The Assembly undertakes to put child participation in practice in its own work as follows:*
> *8.1 consult children, who have diverse backgrounds and thus are representative of our societies, in the preparation of the Assembly reports that concern them, in an appropriate way … give children a voice in the debate of Assembly reports that concern them… and provide children with feedback on how their contributions were used and what impact they may have had*

Children themselves have also applied pressure for their inclusion in decision making through campaigns and other collaborations such as the Fridays for Futures climate strikes, and the #CovidUnder19 research. There are, then, growing expectations that steps must be made towards creating facilitative conditions and enabling environments for meaningful children's participation.

Institutional commitments are not, however, sufficient to ensure impactful and inclusive children's participation in policymaking. The recent RAND mapping study of mechanisms of children's political participation in the UK and EU (Janta *et al.* 2021) show that: children's participation at local, national and European levels tends to be at the start of policymaking cycles; children are rarely involved in policy implementation, monitoring and evaluation stages; and very few mechanisms show evidence of the impact of children on policymaking (Janta *et al.* 2021: v). Whilst efforts are being made to promote inclusive practice, existing mechanisms (which tended to be permanent or semi-permanent structures such as children's councils) also show a tendency to exclude some of the most marginal-ised children, and young people including young Roma, migrant children and those who identify as LGBTQI (Janta *et al.* 2021). Of any collective children's participation process, at all stages of the policy cycle, it therefore remains important to learn from the title of the Council of Europe Handbook *Listen-Act-Change*. Namely, to ask: who was listened to, what action was taken, and what did this change?

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[8] https://pace.coe.int/pdf/108818d9460d4e5898ffd741f2fcd95ad772ccd8cf9fe591c9c6cec94f8fed32/recom-mendation%202218.pdf
[9] https://pace.coe.int/pdf/2c18064469cf2ee4d28e9f7fec256fb179b4c3fbbf50e9fa18a1269c52251b1f/resolu-tion%202414.pdf

Listening, Acting and Changing

Reflecting on two contrasting examples of children's participation in the field of children's rights (see Examples 1 and 2) illustrates some of the challenges in answering these questions. In doing so, we take the policy cycle as a variable process, which is nominally comprised of elements such as '1. agenda setting or problem identification; 2. analysis of the policy issue(s); 3. formulation of policy responses; 4. the decision to adopt a specific policy response; 5. implementation of the chosen policy; and 6. evaluation of the policy' (Howard 2005: 6). The first example is the more common practice of children's inclusion in problem identification, in this case informing the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, with some elements of recommending policy responses. The second represents a rarer example of children's participation in a later stage of the policy cycle, namely evaluating implementation of the Council of Europe Children's Rights Strategy.

Example 1

In September and October 2020, a consortium of international child rights NGOs came together to support children to respond to the EU consultation on the development of **the European Commission's proposal for an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child**.[10] This policy initiative aims 'to better protect all children, to help them fulfil their rights and to place them right at the centre of EU policy-making' and is underpinned by funding streams.[11] The consortium, working with an advisory group of children already participating in their organisations, led consultations with around 10,000 children (*c.*82% in the EU, *c.*15% in other European countries and *c.*3% in the rest of the world). This involved an online survey in more than 20 languages, and face to face or online focus groups with children (some of which targeted the inclusion of children in marginalised and vulnerable situations). Their views were collated in a report called *Our Europe, Our Rights, Our Future*.[12] The traces of children's perspectives can be seen in the subsequent Communication from the European Commission: children are directly quoted and the findings of the report of children's views are referenced.

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[10] https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/rights-child/eu-strategy-rights-child-and-european-child-guarantee_en

[11] European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) (https://ec.europa.eu/esf/home.jsp?langId=en), and Next Generation EU (https://europa.eu/next-generation-eu/index_en)

[12] https://www.unicef.org/eu/media/1276/file/Report "Our Europe, Our Rights, Our Future".pdf

Example 2
In 2019, on the eve of its 70th anniversary, **The Council of Europe conducted a mid-term review of its Children's Rights Strategy**.[13] This mid-term review required the 47 Council of Europe member states to monitor and report on their own progress towards achieving the goals of the strategy. The Council of Europe commissioned a consultation, with 54 children in four countries, to gather their perspectives on recent progress and further steps required, and an additional report focused on violence against children. The review was accompanied by a European conference,[14] attended by participants from parliaments, ministries, agencies, children's ombudspersons, NGOs and academia from 39 countries. This included 13 children who, as panellists in workshops on key themes, presented their own views and the perspectives gathered from their research and participation activities with other under 18-year olds in their home countries. These individual children applied to attend, and were selected according to individual characteristics (e.g. nationality) but also according to their commitment to representing the views of other children, and to feeding back to their 'constituents' from grassroots organisations across Europe. In the subsequent report on the implementation of the strategy in the period 2020–21, the findings of consultations with children are named and traces of children's perspectives can be seen in some of the proposed actions.

The proportion of children listened to through these activities was small compared to the population of children in Europe, even in Example 1. A few experienced children had advisory roles in both projects, making decisions about methods and outputs. Numbers are important because, in the absence of voting rights, participation in activities like these are one of the few mechanisms whereby children have any direct engagement in policymaking (Berkley & Lister 2020). But, these examples remain useful as, in contrast to existing trends (Janta *et al.* 2021), they included disabled children, migrant/refugee children, Roma minors, care experienced children, LGBTQ+ children, and children living in poverty.

The question of how these children were listened to is therefore important. Example 1 used an online survey, which the report acknowledges favoured older children and those who have digital access. Examples 1 and 2 also used in-depth focus groups with children in community locations. In Example 2, children represented the findings from their own research at a conference, sitting alongside and questioning adult policy actors (ministers, administrators, and service providers). These examples therefore involve an element of direct dialogue between individual children and decision makers as well as representation through children and adults speaking and writing on behalf of children they have consulted with.

In both examples action was taken, to the extent that there were policy commitments in line with children's reported concerns in relation to some aspects of discrimination,

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[13] https://rm.coe.int/mid-term-evaluation-report-en/168098b162
[14] https://www.coe.int/en/web/children/strengthening-the-rights-of-the-child-as-the-key-to-a-future-proof-europe

respect, and participation. For example, in EU Strategy[15] the *Our Europe* report is quoted as saying 'too many children do not feel considered enough in decision-making'. The strategy then states: 'This is why, the EU needs to promote and improve the inclusive and systemic participation of children at the local, national and EU levels.' However, in both examples, not all of the children's recommendations are written into policy. In Example 2, children raised concerns about the impact of racism, but there is not clear reference to this in the subsequent actions regarding equality.[16] In Example 1, in the strategy section on Education, the *Our Europe* report is not mentioned, even though the report indicated that '*children would like to see very significant changes in every aspect of their school lives*'.

A further lesson from these examples is that children were building the capacity of adults. Participation is promoted in part to increase children's civic competences. But, the EU Commission's foreword in the *Our Europe* report makes it explicit that they too are learning from experience when experimenting in different forms of participatory process. Children's presence and feedback in spaces of policymaking can help adults gain relevant attitudes and skills. These are needed so that they can more competently create future conditions that enable participatory policymaking with children.

Whether children's involvement resulted in change in the Communication and the mid-term report is debateable. Children do not express their views to policymakers in closed systems. Various adult policy actors were also active on all of the issues raised in the examples mentioned. In Example 1, the commitment to creating an online platform to support children's participation could be read as a response to the *Our Europe* recommendation, to the *Bucharest Declaration*, or to suggestions in policy papers written by adults. The commitment may also be an expression of wider EU Commission interest in online approaches to policymaking, which is longstanding (Janssen & Helbig 2018). Embedded evaluation is therefore necessary, to trace whether changes in policy are the result of taking children's view into account, or simply the result of taking children's views into account when these coincide with the views of adult stakeholders.

Traceability would also enable greater accountability. In Example 1, the EU Commission created an accessible version of the strategy, to be distributed to those children involved. In Example 2, the children involved in the conference cocreated a summary of the event and distributed it to other children they represented. But, in these feedback documents, the links between children's contributions and subsequent changes in the Communication and Recommendations are not clearly drawn. Here the Scottish dialogue between members of the children and young people's parliament and the cabinet may serve as an example: a list

[15] https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/rights-child/eu-strategy-rights-child-and-european-child-guarantee_en

[16] This has subsequently (February 2022) been rectified in the draft new *Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022–2027)* published after further consultation with children, see page 23. https://rm.coe.int/council-of-europe-strategy-for-the-rights-of-the-child-2022-2027-child/1680a5ef27

of actions is published after each meeting, detailing what the Scottish government promises to deliver in response to each of the concerns raised.[17] Systematically providing this detailed information could enable children to more effectively hold policymakers to account.

Participatory implementation requires inclusion in budgeting and monitoring. The EU Strategy provides for children to be included in decision-making at the implementation stage and there are other examples of children's engagement in participatory budgeting which may serve as an example for how to take this forward.[18] For example, in Spain, children aged 8–16 years helped evaluate and allocate €50 000 towards improvements in schools. Importantly, in some of these examples, the link between children's priorities and changes implemented at community level, can be clearly drawn. Involving children in assessing the likely impact of any policy change, before implementation, would also be beneficial.

Synthesising lessons with theories of children's agency

These European examples do not have all the answers, but they are instructive. They indicate some of the ways children's participation across all stages of the policy cycle might be taken forward where there is institutional commitment. They show that it is possible for policymaking to be inclusive of marginalised children and that their contributions can result in actions by policymakers. Where there is traceability or budget is put into the hands of children, it may be possible to account for the changes that result from children's inclusion. The need remains to examine how and when any individual participatory process is inclusive and results in actions that change policy design or implementation.

To examine how and when children's participation can influence change a theoretically grounded understanding of children's agency is useful. Agency is something children express, rather than something they have (Oswell 2016). It is 'better thought of as a quality of acts that happen within heterogeneous assemblages' (Gallagher 2019). In policymaking, it is useful to identify the resources, relationships, conditions and opportunities that children act with and through when they seek influence. These might include the facilitative factors contained in a summary of the RAND mapping report (Janta *et al.* 2021: 4), which was cocreated with children. They highlighted:

- Web platforms reporting children's ideas to governments
- Children taking the lead
- Setting up movements like Fridays for Future
- Groups of children connecting and working together…

[17] https://www.gov.scot/publications/annual-cabinet-meeting-with-children-and-young-people-fifth-meeting-16-march–2021/
[18] https://youthpb.eu/

- Encourage [disadvantaged children] and reserve space for them in all structures
- Publish accessible documents on all topics children care about…
- Create national laws and plans that make sure children's ideas are included …
- Encourage local, national and international decision-makers to use their political power to take children's ideas into account…
- Encourage children's participation over the long term – and pay for it.[19]

There is repeated emphasis on laws, plans, political power and resources in this list. Without these there is a risk that responsibility for participatory policymaking will, in a neoliberal style, be placed on the shoulders of children rather than on adult policy actors. To resist this over-responsibilisation, the Council of Europe *Recommendations* (2012 and 2022) and UNCRC Article 12 could be used to lever institutional commitments. This is not to undermine the power of children's participation but rather to acknowledge that children have expertise, but less access to money, status and the other resources which might enable implementation of some of their goals (Gallagher 2019).

Focusing on political agency, Häkli & Kallio (2018: 18) identify that beyond the institutional arrangements of any given polis, the intersections of relational spaces are also important: 'personal experiences, public debates, social norms, institutional regulations, legal orders, and beyond'. So, children's experience of inclusion and influence in policy-making is not dictated simply by the mechanisms to encourage, enable or oblige children's views to be taken into account. Inclusion and impact are also related to the personal experiences, attitudes and connections of the adults and children in those spaces; the salience of the children's issues in the context of wider political pressures; and the extent to which freedom of expression is enabled and protected. In the examples given, inclusion was built through personal experiences, attitudes and connections in grassroots engage-ment with children. Often this involved organisations who provide support as well as opportunities for involvement in policymaking, and children reaching out to their peers. Inclusion was built on trust and cooperation between experienced children who already had involvement in participation activities, pro-participation policy actors, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), academics and other allies. These collabora-tions are necessary because, although the salience of children's participation has increased through some positive media responses to children's activism, in some situations, social norms and risks of reprisals mean that some children hesitate to name contentious issues in public.

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[19] 'Children's participation in government decisions across the European Union' (https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/accessible_version_of_child_participation_report_final_10.02.2021_v0.3.pdf), extracts from pages 2–5.

A generational account of children's agency (Leonard 2016) is beneficial because it draws attention to these moments of collaboration and resistance in which children exercise power with and over adults and vice versa (inter-generagency). It also draws attention to the complex and intersecting dynamics of power within everyday relationships between children (intra-generagency). For example, where standing groups of children are seen as representatives of other children. This may afford some children greater experience and legitimacy in the space of policymaking which can strengthen their relationships and inter-generagency with adults (Kiili & Larkins 2016). However, consciously or not, children in these positions can also use their intra-generagency power to ignore or misrepresent other children (ibid).

And so, it is useful to focus on Archard's (2020) question of whether children are involved as individuals or as a collective. A generation sensitive critical realist approach drawing on the work of Margaret Archer and critique from childhood studies (Larkins 2019) suggests that in policymaking processes children are present as both individuals and as part of collectives. As individuals, children participating in policymaking engage in internal dialogue, reflecting on their personal goals and wishes. Some children choose personal social roles. For example, in Examples 1 and 2, children took on roles as conference presenters, researchers, survey respondents or advisory board members. This enabled them to be involved in analysis of policy issues, recommending policy responses and evaluating implementation.

In any moment, children are also members of multiple collectivities, framed by the conditions that they experience. For example, dominant notions of childhood provide a generational frame. Children may also belong to collectivities framed by racism, poverty or sexism. In these collectivities, they engage in primary agency, that is simply getting by or getting through conditions in which they have no organised collective influence (Larkins 2019). Occasionally, however, activism and participatory policymaking may provide opportunity for children to move towards corporate collective agency. This form of intergenerational agency involves children sitting alongside adults to set agendas and direct the use of resources in pursuit of these agendas in ways that affect the contexts in which they and others live. The experience of corporate agency remains rare for children, as it does for many adults. However thinking about children's political agency in this way can provide a way to ground theoretically calls for children's greater influence across the policy cycle. For example, in contrast to the unquestioned focus on sustainable development goals in many aspects of policymaking which affect children (Nolan 2021), promoting corporate agency would involve reflecting with children on their own goals for just and sustainable futures. This would be followed by collaborating with them to identify routes to achieving these goals (including the diverse strands of human rights or policy levers they might mobilise); working with them to access and direct the resources needed to pursue their chosen improvements in global conditions; and putting monitoring of implementation directly into their hands.

Conclusion

Returning to Archard's question of 'how else might we allow children as a group a say in those matters that adults get to decide as citizens?', the examples presented suggest that both collaborative relationships and receptive environments are key. Collaborative relationships between children, their adult allies and organisational supporters can enable a diversity of children to engage individually and collectively in all stages of the policy cycle. These processes are more effective where policymakers develop receptive attitudes and make institutional commitments – strategies, recommendations, laws and available finance. Relationship building between policymakers and communities or child-led groups, and delivering on promises, increases marginalised children's confidence that their views might actually be taken into account to improve policy. The perceived relevance of policy-making also increases when the starting point is children's everyday concerns and these are connected into diverse policy opportunities, not just on children and youth policy. Once some collectivities of children have prioritised issues of concern, investing in multiple child-led processes to investigate the views of further children on these issues and enabling their involvement in participatory budgeting can enhance the diversity of perspectives represented.

To ensure that these diverse child-led processes result in impact on policymaking, monitoring and collective action are needed, as some adults and institutions respond only to the issues that coincide with their existing priorities. Monitoring can start by exploring what concerns are not heard, what actions are not taken, whose corporate agency is driving the agenda and holding resources. This requires a shift in attitudes and practice towards traceable accountability, to identify who, adult or child, individually or collectively, is present or represented, in what roles and in which stages of the policy cycle. This requires forensic examination of which adults are withholding or redirecting what resources, and for what reason. This rigorous accountability might then reveal the intersecting inter- and intra- generational power relationships that privilege the political and economic interests of some people (children and adults) over others. Children and their adult allies could then critically reflect on this information, to decide on and take further collective action on outstanding concerns. Rather than children having a say and adults deciding, listening, acting and changing UK policy with children therefore requires shared, sustained and repeated cycles of collective reflection and action. These long-term processes would enable a diversity of collectivities of children and adults to move closer to moments of corporate agency as *together* they gain access to resources, organise, decide, learn, revise policy design and improve implementation.

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