

THE RIGHT WAY FORWARD

A RIGHTS-BASED PERSPECTIVE TO IMPROVING
THE LIVES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE
IN NORTHERN IRELAND.



WRITTEN BY CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE,
FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE.

The Right Way Forward

A rights-based perspective to improving the lives of children and young people in Northern Ireland. Written by children and young people, for children and young people.

We are members of the Northern Ireland (NI) Commissioner for Children and Young People's Youth Panel, known as the NYP for short. The Youth Panel role is to support the Commissioner and his staff in their day-to-day work. The Youth Panel is made up of young people who share their experiences and thoughts with the Commissioner and his staff and help NICCY make decisions about issues that affect children and young people.

Panel members chose which issues they are most interested in working on based on NICCY's priorities, and we worked in teams to write the chapters of this report. We also meet with other children and young people to let them know about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and listen to their views and experiences. This report represents our views on how well government and public bodies are doing at keeping their promises to children and young people on a number of key issues. The UNCRC is a minimum standard that children and young people should expect. Our report shows what the UNCRC says about each issue and also any further explanations the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child have given in their General Comments, which expand on how rights can be properly delivered. [You can read more about the General Comments and optional protocols here.](#)

After more than 30 years we still don't see all children being able to enjoy their rights fully, so we think it is time for the next step to make this happen. We believe the **Right Way Forward** is to incorporate the UNCRC into domestic law in NINI. We hope you will join us on this journey.

NICCY Youth Panel



Commissioner's Foreword

As the Children's Commissioner, I am extremely proud of my Youth Panel and how they support me, my staff, and the work that we do to promote, protect, and uphold the rights of children and young people across NI. I am delighted that, in supporting our journey toward incorporation and to celebrate **World Children's Day on 20th November**, the Panel have decided to share their thoughts, opinions, and ideas through this publication – "*The Right Way Forward*" report.

World Children's Day is an important moment each year to reflect on the progress we have made, and to renew our commitment to the full realisation of children's rights under the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)**. It is a day to celebrate children and young people, to listen to what matters most to them, and to take meaningful action to ensure their rights are respected in law, policy, and everyday life.



At NICCY, we felt it was vital to give our **Youth Panel** the stage this World Children's Day – to speak directly, in their own words, about the issues that affect their lives and futures. Over the past two years, we have spoken with children and young people right across NINI – through our **Libraries Tour**, the **Big Rights Bus Tour** held during last year's World Children's Day, and through meeting children and young people in Communities, Schools and Youth Groups. These conversations have given us invaluable insights into how children view their rights, what challenges they face, and what changes they want to see.

We are continuing to gather this information, and I will be using it to inform a comprehensive **Report on Children's Rights, to be published next year. As part of this process, our Youth Panel** have analysed what we have heard and prioritised the issues that, in their eyes, need our full and direct attention *now*.

Their message is clear – **children deserve better**. Every child and young person in NI should grow up feeling safe, supported, and heard. And the single most impactful step the NI Executive can take to make this a reality is the **full and direct incorporation of the UNCRC into law**. This would not only strengthen the protection of children's rights but also

demonstrate a clear, long-term commitment to placing children at the heart of decision-making.

I commend the Youth Panel for all their hard work in putting this report together. I know they have spent many, many hours discussing, researching, and writing it. I wholeheartedly support their comments and their calls for action on the issues they have explored.

The Youth Panel – alongside all young people, especially those most vulnerable – deserve to be listened to. Their voices deserve to be heard, and they deserve to have a meaningful role in the decisions that shape their lives.

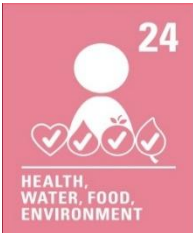
As Commissioner, I will continue to support them on this journey, and together we will keep working to ensure that NI becomes a place where every child's rights are fully realised and respected.



Children’s Right to Health

All children and young people have a right to the best possible healthcare throughout their lives. When children are not healthy it can impact other rights such as education, play and having a say in decisions that affect them. NICCY Youth Panel have considered what needs to be improved so all children and young people can enjoy their right to health including access to reliable information, properly funded services, prevention from harmful products and participation in their own healthcare pathways.

What does the UNCRC say?



Children have the right to the best health care possible, clean water to drink, healthy food and a clean and safe environment to live in. All adults and children should have information about how to stay safe and healthy.



Every child has the right to be alive. Governments must make sure that children survive and develop in the best possible way.



Every child with a disability should enjoy the best possible life in society. Governments should remove all obstacles for children with disabilities to become independent and to participate actively in the community.

What other rights might be impacted?



Physical Health

What else does the UNCRC Committee say about children's right to health?

You can read more about children's right to health in [General Comment 15](#)

How do young people feel our right to health is being met in NI?

Do you think children in your community can get the health support they need?

“There are many resources for young people to get health support, but these are often not effective. Young people in rural areas can struggle to access health support independently. Many young people feel embarrassed or scared to reach out for support. Young people also may not be aware of some services in place.”

“Waiting lists are a big issue for young people in NI and it's difficult to have to wait for a test or treatment that could really impact your life.”

“Family wealth can cause inequality in healthcare for children whose families can't afford to take them to private health care.”

What are the biggest challenges for young people's physical health?

“Children and young people often don't have the knowledge of medical terms. We need more time with doctors and other medical practitioners to help them understand what is happening with them, what to expect next, and how they can take part in decisions about their own healthcare pathways. This is especially important for young people with learning disability or neurodiversity.”

“We need better healthcare information that is easy to find in places we use, both online and offline.”

“Relationship and sexuality education is really inconsistent across schools. When we don't get information in school or youth groups, we look for it online which can lead to unreliable or malicious sources.”

“Young people should be involved in ideas on how to reset the health service in NI - we can help with innovative ideas to help target services better and tackle issues such as waiting lists.”

“We don’t think it is fair that some children’s health is at a disadvantage because of what their families can afford to spend on nutritious food, leisure and health care.”

“Vapes, smoking and drug use are things we see regularly. More needs to be done to stop vape companies targeting young people through flavours and colours available.”

“Better support for young women on period dignity is needed. School should allow access to toilets and also allow flexibility in school uniforms so that young women can feel comfortable when they have their period. It is positive that schools have free period products, but these should be more easily accessible, so pupils don’t need to ask for them.”

Elodie’s Story



You can read more about Elodie’s experience in her blog [Living on a waiting list](#)

What do we want to happen?

- The Public Health Agency should work with children and young people to develop accessible information on staying healthy and targeted information on particular issues facing young people.
- Take action on vaping among young people to make sure vapes are less available, flavours are not targeted at younger tastes and that it's clear that vaping does pose a risk to health.
- Make sure children with long term health conditions can have a flexible approach to education so they don't fall behind.
- Review how health services can be made more accessible to children and young people.
- Use the Children's Services Co-operation Act (NI) 2015 to make the best use of facilities already used by children and young people and talk to them about their ideas.
- Make sure all children and young people across NI can access the same services, when they need them.

You can find out more about NICCYs work on health, [here](#)

Mental Health

What else does the UNCRC Committee say about children's right to mental health?

The UNCRC Committee has spoken about the importance of high-quality mental health care and provisions as part of wider conversations about the health of children and young people, most notably in [General Comments 15 \(2013\)](#) and General Comment [4 \(2003\)](#).

Do children and young people feel their right to mental health care is being met?

“Children and young people do not feel like they get the necessary mental health support for their rights regarding mental health to be upheld. Concerns are numerous, but most notably, the experiences we have shared and heard indicate that there is not a wide enough range of mental health facilities at school to support students in times of crisis regarding their mental health. Additionally, resources that can help children with their mental health are too difficult to come across, and a persisting stigma around mental health helps contribute to this issue.”

“Waiting times, of course, massively play into the issue of access to mental health support, a challenge that is exacerbated in rural areas. Additionally, children and young people, while acknowledging the need for safeguarding measures to protect those at risk of harming themselves or others, feel that these boundaries can, for children in a mental health crisis, disincentivize seeking support. As such, more emphasis should be placed on using schools to educate young people, especially as they approach adulthood, on how to spot and support friends throughout periods of poor mental health, while still understanding when adults need to be involved.”

“Another key concern of children and young people is that not enough is being done to reflect on the unique challenges that neurodivergent children can face as regards to their mental health. Some children with diagnoses of learning disability and mental ill-health cannot access appropriate services”

What do we want to happen?

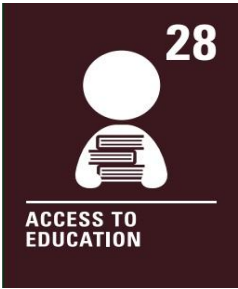
- A more deliberate strategy on how to secure consistent and quality counselling services for schools across NI is needed in order to ensure that mental health support does not become a “postcode lottery” for children and young people.
- A greater incorporation of mental health is also badly needed in the curriculum of schools, as this will better equip teachers and students alike to support their students and peers throughout their mental health struggles. This, of course, has to be part of a wider effort for greater awareness and dispelling of misconceptions.
- For the sake of children’s mental health, and, indeed, all children’s rights issues in NI, we implore the leaders of NI to incorporate the UNCRC and ensure that no child or young person is left devoid of options to fight injustice and the abuse of their basic rights as a child.
- Children’s mental health is one of the most pressing issues in NI today, and more needs to be done to address it, especially in terms of education and waiting lists. Only by allocating resources to this root cause of so many societal issues will we be one step further toward making NI a better, rights-respecting place for children and young people to live. As with all rights-based issues, the incorporation of the UNCRC would prove massively beneficial.

You can find out more about NICCY’s work on mental health [here](#)

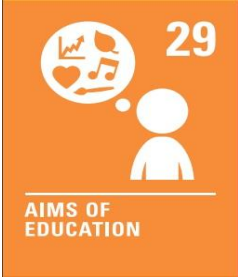
Children’s Right to Education

The UNCRC includes children’s right to access good quality education, and also that education should help children and young people develop all their skills, talents and abilities. The NICCY Youth Panel have explored barriers to education and what needs to happen in the reform of education in NI to make sure it is fully accessible for all.

What does the UNCRC say?



Every child has the right to an education. Primary education should be free. Secondary and higher education should be available to every child. Children should be encouraged to go to school to the highest level possible. Discipline in schools should respect children’s rights and never use violence.



Children’s education should help them fully develop their personalities, talents and abilities. It should teach them to understand their own rights, and to respect other people’s rights, cultures and differences. It should help them to live peacefully and protect the environment.

What other rights might be impacted?



What else does the UNCRC Committee say about children’s rights to education?

[General Comment 1](#) on the aims of education sets out how children should be supported to realise their full potential.

How do young people feel their right to education is being met?

“Education in NI is greatly varied on a number of areas so children can have a very different experience depending on the school they go to - bullying, religion, too many different types of schools giving their own version of education. Special needs education is also handled differently for different schools. All children should have a good school experience that supports their needs.”

“Up to date information on mental health and RSE is needed. Schools should be more adaptable to meet the needs of pupils.”

“Families need better financial support beyond transport and school meals. Sometimes these are not even covered adequately. School uniforms are still very expensive and the cost of these and PE uniforms can be a barrier to participation. All children and young people should be able to go to school without worrying about extra costs for certain subjects and school trips.”

“More flexibility in subjects would be good to make sure children and young people can make the most of their talents, interests and skills.”

“Respect and equality is hard to regulate among students but staff should also respect the kids and make sure there is no casual use of offensive language and be mindful of the power imbalance between pupils and teachers.”

“Young people need to be involved with the conversations, and there are a lot of areas that need addressed to properly support young people in NI.”

“The UNCRC should be implemented in all schools. Children should know their rights and teachers should make sure they respect children’s rights.”

“Education is an area that is consistently underfunded and not considered, especially SEN schools. Education isn’t as flexible or inclusive as it should be, better support for disabled/SEN kids, young carers as well as more options for those who don’t want to or struggle with the subjects/exams recommended.”

Alyson's story

“Ever since a young age, I struggled with attending school because I had autism that went undiagnosed. Having unaccommodated Special Educational Needs made things very difficult for me, yet there was always one excuse or another that I couldn't get referred for support, that my behaviour was too good, or that my academic performance was too good. My choice of secondary school was made purely on the fact that they had a class for students with SEN in year 8 that I was in, with no thought provided of what would happen afterwards, and hoped that I would get support as they would surely know I needed it after being in that class. The support I received in year 8 was incredibly basic, always with the excuse that I didn't have a diagnosis of anything. Being referred on from one service, mental health referring to autism, autism referring to mental health, and back and forth, meant that the support I needed just wasn't being provided.

At the start of year 9 going into a mainstream class, I really began to struggle, and the same excuse was once again used, that despite me obviously needing support, I couldn't access it due to not having a diagnosis. Halfway through year 9, the COVID pandemic started and everyone had to stay at home. But this was not new to me, as I had been at home from school for months due to a lack of support for mental health and undiagnosed autism. I was never fully able to return to school due to the lack of support. This resulted in me leaving school at 16 with no qualifications.

When I started college in September 2023, it felt like a breath of fresh air, my first time in full time education since 2019. However because I opted to study a full time GCSE course, as I always had ambitions of attending university, I struggled as I hadn't been in education so long and instead had to switch to a part time class, where I eventually gained my level 2 essential skills qualification in literacy. I then once again started to study for my GCSEs in September 2024 and successfully obtained them in the May 2025 exam series, however I also struggled for a while to be accommodated as once again my lack of diagnosis stood in the way of receiving appropriate support at times.

I now study law at the Open University, and so far I have had a wonderful experience. My experiences still make me angry to this day and have only made me more motivated to

continue my work on Children's rights issues, as I know I am far from the only person who has these experiences. Our waiting list crisis must be tackled, as someone who spent 5 years on a waiting list for an autism assessment and years on mental health assessment lists being passed from service to service. Our education system must move past its “one size fits all” mentality and move towards a needs basis rather than a diagnosis based approach to supporting students with SEN, as the need exists before diagnosis too, you don't just magically only require support immediately after diagnosis.

We must also ensure that what has been described as a crisis in school attendance numbers is handled compassionately, and that it is acknowledged that the overwhelming majority of school absence isn't necessarily by choice, but because of being in situations like mine. I didn't choose to not attend school, I always wanted to pursue higher education at university level, and I always performed well academically, and this was used as a reason to not provide me with support, instead of acknowledging my potential it was weaponized against me. In order to have young people attending school, we need to ensure they have the accurate support for them to attend and to thrive and have the best opportunities in our education system, regardless of need, mental health or whatever diagnosis they have or haven't received, and ensuring that our support for mental health improves alongside the waiting lists, it is only then that our school absence rates will improve.”

What do we want to happen?

- Make sure all schools have a consistent approach to respecting children's rights in the school community.
- Pupils should not feel the burden of finance when it comes to their education. Every child should have equal access to high quality education, sports and cultural activities through school. Government should do more to reduce the cost of education to families.
- Pupils should have the opportunity to participate in decisions about their education across all schools consistently. They should be asked about how they want to learn and about uniforms.

You can find out more about NICCYs work on education [here](#)

Children’s Right to a Healthy Environment

NICCY Youth Panel have been exploring how climate change and environmental break down can impact their rights under the UNCRC. This is a key issue impacting children and young people across the planet, but many solutions can be found locally. The Youth Panel held the ‘Hear Our Voices’ Event in Greenmount Campus in March. You can [see what happened here.](#)

What does the UNCRC Say?



Children have the right to the best health care possible, clean water to drink, healthy food and a clean and safe environment to live in. All adults and children should have information about how to stay safe and healthy.



Every child has the right to be alive. Governments must make sure that children survive and develop in the best possible way.

What other rights might be impacted and how?



What else does the UNCRC Committee say about children’s rights to a healthy environment?

[General Comment 26](#) was developed with over 16 thousand children from 121 countries. It outlines what governments should do to protect children and young people from the impact of climate change and environmental degradation.

How do young people feel their right to a healthy environment is being met?

“A clean and healthy environment is important for children’s development and both physical and mental health. Pollution can lead to respiratory diseases and other illnesses. Polluted water can prevent access to safe drinking water and can also impact food production. In relation to mental health children need access to green spaces which have a positive impact on their wellbeing. The current climate crisis can have a negative impact on children and young people’s emotions as they feel they can do very little to change things.”

“Children and young people should be at the heart of decision making about climate mitigation and environmental protection as they will live with the consequences for longer than those in power.”

“All children should have opportunities to experience green spaces regularly and have opportunities to take part in rewilding and protection of animal habitats”

“We need access to reliable information about what is happening to our planet. There is so much false information going round, especially on social media such as TikTok and Instagram. Schools should teach reliable information so that everyone can hear non-biased opinions. They should also teach children about the environment at a younger age”

“Article 12 is important because children and young people can share different ideas on how to take action. From a young age children should feel like they can come up with ideas and be listened to by people who can make change”

#What do we want to happen?

- Children and young people need reliable, accurate, unbiased information. This should be done through schools and also have somewhere online where facts can be checked.
- The Government should include children's voices in decisions on climate action and protecting the environment.
- Make sure children's rights are a priority in all decisions relating to climate mitigation, sustainable development and protecting our planet.

You can find out more about NICCY's work on climate and environmental justice [here](#)

Children’s Right to Adequate Standard of Living

With nearly one in four children and young people in NI living in poverty the Youth Panel wanted to explore some of the reasons behind this and how children and families can be better protected by the safety net of social security. They explored how living in poverty can impact education, health and social opportunities.

What does the UNCRC Say?



Children have the right to food, clothing and a safe place to live so they can develop in the best possible way. The government should help families and children who cannot afford this.

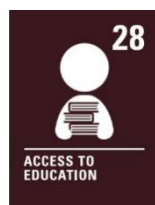


Governments should provide money or other support to help children from poor families.



Parents are the main people responsible for bringing up a child. When the child does not have any parents, another adult will have this responsibility and they are called a “guardian”. Parents and guardians should always consider what is best for that child. Governments should help them. Where a child has both parents, both of them should be responsible for bringing up the child.

What other rights might be impacted?



What else does the UNCRC Committee say about children’s rights to an adequate standard of living?

There is no particular general comment on poverty but the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child regularly outlines how poverty should be dealt with as a human rights issue.

How do children and young people feel their right to an adequate standard of living is being met?

“The Joseph Rowntree Foundation provided a practical account of the realities of child poverty in NI in 2022. 24% of children in NI live in poverty. That NI has the lowest levels in the UK is nothing to be proud of when you contrast this with significantly lower levels in Scandinavian countries. Denmark has a level of 9%. 3 years on with continued rising food and energy costs, major pressure on social and rental housing, the picture can only be painted with greyer tones.”

“There is a high dependence on social security in NI. Food insecurity is high, where even if food can be afforded, nutritious healthful foods may not be. Coping with the cost of life seems to be a bit like being in open water, some are on luxurious yachts, some are on boats, others are surfing, others may have all the means to swim but many need armbands to keep afloat but as the Executive arguably stops mending punctured life rafts, some of these people are descending into depths that they need properly rescued from. There are numerous sharks in that water like covid, health issues, disability, redundancies, family breakdown, and higher living costs. They can affect everyone.”

“There is also the social stigma of poverty impacting young people in a world where we are being told by TikTok and Instagram what clothes we should wear, and the holidays we should be taking there are some of us who may not have enough money for housing, food, electricity and heat.”

“The UNCRC has a crucial role in safeguarding children from poverty in so many ways. The rights codified within it are universally undermined when a child lives in poverty and over 30 years on from the foundation of the UNCRC, it is clear that child poverty in our own developed nation has not been eradicated but remains, reducing standards of living as well as reducing the likelihood of positive health, education, later employment outcomes and at worst, endangering development and survival. Article 27 guarantees the right to a standard of living that allows for physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. This Article reads more like a pipe dream for 24% of children in NI in 2025 and not a guarantee.”

“The NI Audit Office compiled a report on Child Poverty in March 2024. Its contents make for a difficult read. There has been no sustained improvement in child poverty levels since 2016, despite the publication of the NI Executive’s Child Poverty Strategy at that time. This strategy clearly outlined the deep rooted scale and impact of the

problem of child poverty but the action taken to tackle it seems ad hoc and disjointed, with no clear poverty reduction targets set and no specific pathways or interventions to address or prevent poverty. Social security perhaps may be more accurately renamed as social insecurity. Rising prices of food and energy, along with unprecedented pressure on housing in Belfast and beyond coexist in a mutually incompatible context of pressure on welfare, funding for schools and health care.”

What do we want to happen?

- Government needs to treat poverty as a children’s rights issue. The UNCRC should be incorporated into domestic law here in NI to safeguard children’s right to a decent standard of living.
- Ring-fenced budgets should be available to address social inclusion strategies. We need sustained and positive actions.
- The NI Executive should consider this as a long-term plan but also as part of a bigger picture for better local economy when children have grown into adults benefitting from improved health, educational and job outcomes.

You can find out more about NICCY’s work on child poverty [here](#)

Children's Rights in Action (General Measures)

What are General Measures?

The UNCRC Committee checks how each country is doing at keeping the promises governments have made to children and young people. One of the key areas they explore is how governments put legal and administrative measures in place to make sure the UNCRC is upheld. This includes things like laws to make sure children can take action if a right has been breached, teaching people about the UNCRC, Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIAs – this helps government work out if children could be discriminated against by new laws or policies), listening to the views of children and young people and making sure an independent children's commissioner is in place to monitor how well government is doing.

What does the UNCRC say?



Governments must do all they can to make sure that every child in their countries can enjoy all the rights in this Convention.



Children's education should help them fully develop their personalities, talents and abilities. It should teach them to understand their own rights, and to respect other people's rights, cultures and differences. It should help them to live peacefully and protect the environment



Children accused of breaking the law have the right to legal help and fair treatment. There should be lots of solutions to help these children become good members of their communities. Prison should only be the last choice.



If the laws of a country protect children's rights better than this Convention, then those laws should be used.



Governments should actively tell children and adults about this Convention so that everyone knows about children's rights.

What else does the UNCRC Committee say about General Measures and implementation of children's rights?

[General Comment 2](#) is on the role of National Human Rights Institutions, [UNCRC General Comment 5](#) is on General measures of implementation, [General Comment 12](#) is on the right to participation and [General Comment 19](#) is on public budgeting and children's rights.

Do children and young people feel government is doing what they can to implement children's rights?

Rights Education

“I don't think children in my community can access the support necessary, due to the lack of education around the UNCRC, leaving children not understanding their rights, and ensuring they can access the proper education setting for them”

“There is a serious lack of adequate education around the UNCRC, including in 'Rights respecting schools. Education can vary greatly, depending on the school and the individuals teaching/in positions of power”

“Young people within my community often lack knowledge regarding their rights and therefore are unaware of when their rights are breached in regard to education and what bodies are available to support them in their pursuit of education. Commonly SEN children are the victims of this”

“One of the main issues for young people to access this right is that the school settings are no longer appropriate, not meeting the young people's needs”

“Another issue for young people in their right to develop the goals of education is a lack of resources to explore their talents and abilities due to poverty or lack of school funds.”

Participation of children and young people

“In all aspects of life young people should not have to persuade adults why they should be heard because it is in fact a right. The views and opinions of young people can provide a unique perspective when it comes to problem solving, especially when the problem affects modern day young people. If there was collaboration between us and decision/policy makers, we will be successful in initiating change to benefit young people and adults alike.”

“Participation impacts everyone's rights. More participation is necessary in institutions and services, so money spent on resources isn't wasted”

“It's only issues the adults present that are addressed, as opposed to what YP know about specific issues that affect them. The institution remains in its control, as opposed to being more transparent and collaborative about issues affecting YP”

“Just like Martin Luther King I have a dream... A dream for young people to work alongside adults, a dream to ensure impactful change, a dream that brings the voices of young people into the light.”

“We want to see the Lundy Model being adopted by all government departments and public bodies, including schools”

“All this sounds well and good, but how do we implement this, how do we break this concept down? Well, we can implement the Lundy Model, created by Laura Lundy, Professor at Queens University Belfast. Her framework has 4 main components:

Voice – this means young people should be facilitated to express their views in a way that works for them. Verbally it is not the only way for children to express their views, some may wish to write, draw or sign their opinions/ideas.

Space – children must be given safe inclusive opportunities to form and express views. This could be by providing a smaller environment or being with a young person in an area they feel safest in like at school

Audience – views must be listened to by someone who can initiate real change. Often young people don't get the chance to speak to policy makers or organisations which can uplift their views into big discussions, so it is important that we give them that chance.

Influence – their views must be acted upon as appropriate, that means not just a simple head nod. Regardless of whether you are a doctor or politician, you should try to take the views of children on board in your work.

Now we can apply the Lundy Model on three levels:

Individual – engaging with them about their personal care and education

Service – engaging with them to improve your service delivery.

Strategic – actively listen to them to inform your strategic decisions.”

Child Rights Impact Assessments

“Childs Rights Impact Assessments (UNICEF) – supports governments to protect and promote children's rights. This helps children have a voice and it is extremely helpful for children in deprived areas, not only around the world, in the UK, in NI.

- Reduces risk of government funding on stuff we don't need and prevents children from being hurt in that situation.
- Make sure children have a voice in adult dominated decision making – and that it's taken seriously.
- So, children can understand new laws and always have their rights, and rights protected and acknowledged.

In NI no government bodies are required to undertake CRIA (though we need it) although in Section 75 of NI Act 1998 to assess and consult.”

“Using CRIAs for children themselves is a really good tool as it starts conversations about their rights and helps them think through their own opinions and develop their ideas about the issue.”

“Children and young people should get training and a pack on how to use children’s rights. This should include information on what rights are and who is responsible for upholding them. Basic CRIA so that children can make suggestions for improvement. The language should be accessible and easy to understand.”

The role of National Independent Human Rights Institutions

“Everyone must know about children’s rights and NIHRIs like NICCY should help to achieve this through supporting education in schools and child friendly communication on different platforms. They should also make sure parents and all those who work with children and young people should know about children’s rights.”

“National Independent Human Right’s Institutions should be clearly independent from Government and not take on the role of Children’s Ministers or Children’s Champions. Their duties and powers should be written in law so that their role is clear and independent assessment of how Government is doing at promoting and protecting children’s rights is respected.”

“Children’s Commissioners should make sure their office is accessible to all children regardless of language, age, religion or ability. They should have staff who are properly trained to make sure they use appropriate communication for the target audience, including very young children, non-verbal children and children and young people outside formal education.”

“Children’s Commissioners need to make sure everyone knows what they do and how to reach them. Children shouldn’t have to rely on parents or teachers to make contact with the children’s commissioner’s office – they should be able to find out information in a way that suits them. It is important to keep up to date with new technologies and social media platforms that children and young people use and make use of different methods such as gamification of information on how children can advocate for their rights.”

“Children and young people should be able to play an active role in how NIHRIs deliver their work. This involves all aspects of Article 12 as set out in the Lundy model including; access to information, having a say, access to the right audiences and meaningful influence in decisions. It’s important that Commissioners spend time on this aspect of their work to practice what they preach to Government.”

“It is important that Commissioners show governments how to effectively promote participation of children and young people in all decisions that affect them, whether that is in anything from their education or health to local planning decisions on parks and

public space to how diesel emissions affect air quality. Children's voices are important in any decisions and NIHRs should clearly promote this message and monitor to make sure it happens."

The Children's Services Cooperation (NI) Act 2015

"The CSCA is a great opportunity for government to put children's rights in practice because it tells departments to work together in children's best interests and pay attention to the UNCRC. We don't see much evidence of this being used which is a missed opportunity to get it right for children and to save money."

"There are lots of examples in health, education and other aspects of children and young people's lives that we can see are opportunities to work together to make things easier for children and save money. For example, children could receive more basic healthcare and health information through school nurses, special therapies could be carried out in special schools when needed."

Children's Budgeting

Children's budgeting is about looking at how much, and how well, money is being spent by government to help children and young people. It is about examining the resources that national and local government allocate to policies, programmes and services that benefit children and young people, and about whether these adequately reflect their needs. It is about assessing whether children's rights are effectively enabled by a government's budgetary decisions and about looking at whether the policy promises that governments make are backed up with money to make them happen. In order to engage effectively with the government it is also important to understand the budget process and be able to study and analyse it. You can find out more about children's budgeting [here](#).

What do we want to happen?

- Children's rights must be prioritised by Government. Children's budgeting should be implemented across the executive.
- More investment in the education sector and in rights education is needed.
- Talking to children, young people and their carers about what would be best going forward.
- Full and direct incorporation of the UNCRC into domestic law.
- Wider exploration and publicity around the right to education and the right to education on rights through government, schools and public bodies.

- Children's rights impact assessments should already be carried out before a new policy, strategy or legislation goes to consultation. NICCY should continue to operate as an Independent Children's Rights Institution, independent from Government.
- Decision making that doesn't involve children and young people should only ever happen when there is a really good reason, such as not being able to keep children safe or when it isn't in their best interests.

You can find out more about NICCY's work on General Measures, and implementing children's rights [here](#)

Children's right to Safety

Children and Young people's physical and emotional safety and wellbeing must be prioritised. The UNCRC sets out the role of government in protecting children who have been separated from their families. This section focuses on online safety and ending violence against women and girls as key areas identified by the Youth Panel.

What does the UNCRC Say?



Governments must stop children being taken out of the country when this is against the law – for example, being kidnapped by someone or held abroad by a parent when the other parent does not agree.



Governments must protect children from violence, abuse and being neglected by anyone who looks after them.



The government should protect children from sexual exploitation (being taken advantage of) and sexual abuse, including by people forcing children to have sex for money, or making sexual pictures or films of them.

What other rights might be impacted?



What else does the UNCRC Committee say about children's rights to safety?

[General Comment 13](#) is on freedom from all forms of violence and [General Comment 25](#) is on children's rights in the digital environment.

How do young people feel their right to protection from harm is being met?

Online Safety

“Eating disorder promoting content is easy to find and there are growing groups of misogynistic male groups.”

“Women are often sexualised for average posts and get harassed constantly through text.”

“Lack of education that surrounds online safety. There is an unregulated, ad hoc and piecemeal approach taken by individual schools. Why is it the case that there is a compulsory syllabus for Maths, the contents of which are unlikely to be used again past GCSE when there is no proper regulated guidance on the safe use of social media which is almost universally used by all?”

“Many of our parents did not grow up in the online world and I know that my own parents feel blindsided by the risks that we are subject to and that there is a lack of parental guidance. Young people are in an online world of Snapchat, TikTok and Instagram that some parents feel overwhelmed and short of simply banning the use of this media, they do not have many more answers to help us.”

“How can we uphold the UNCRC Article 13 of the right to freedom of expression while also upholding the Article 16 right to privacy for young people online? It is a balancing act. Is it possible on the one hand to enjoy the advantages of the online world such as creativity, socialisation, to spread awareness or to advocate for causes along with upholding the right for young people to enjoy privacy, safety from harm and to have control over their own image and words? We have explored the possibility of a virtual online passport in NSPCC Voice of Online Youth, but this would require the input and support of politicians, government departments and social media companies working together. Can we gather up the confetti of our online presence and piece it back together into a robust, safely controlled mass? There are so many benefits to being online but it needs to be a safer place.”

“Another major concern for young people relates to Artificial Intelligence. It is moving faster than a dog chasing a treat. It is simply becoming impossible for my human eye to distinguish what is real and what is fake online. This confusion and uncertainty for us as we may think we are dealing with or talking to a person or organisation who is not what they seem. There is a real risk of sacrificing ourselves to someone or something without really knowing who or what they are. And this may lead further

down the line to a lack of faith in the online world that may create a cynicism in my generation that inevitably spills over into our real lives.”

“NICCY Youth Panel has identified several specific online risks as most harmful to children post-pandemic:

- Sexual risks and exploitation: Increased exposure to sexual content, requests for nude images, and being sent inappropriate photos, with girls particularly at risk. Risks included being pressured to engage in risky behaviour or interact with strangers, sometimes leading to grooming or exploitation. These risks were exacerbated by increased time spent online during and after the pandemic, and disproportionately affected vulnerable groups, including girls and those with pre-existing mental health conditions.
- Algorithms: Teenagers regularly tell us they receive suggested content based on their gender and age. For young women there are frequently targeted with content on appearance and conformity, young men are finding increasing content from a misogynist take on issues.
- Adults lacking skill and literacy: Young people are much more advanced in navigating the online world. They tell us that it is not enough to try and prevent them from accessing it as this will just make it more hidden. Young people need the skills to navigate safely, and parents and carers need the language and skills to talk to their children about what they are experiencing online.
- Cyberbullying: A significant number of children reported experiencing unpleasant or nasty interactions online, often on social media apps.
- Exposure to harmful content: This includes violent content, self-harm, eating disorder promotion, and pornography. Girls were notably more likely to encounter self-harm and eating disorder content.
- Emotional and psychological impacts: Repeated or cumulative exposure to harmful content led to anxiety, low self-esteem, body image issues, and in severe cases, self-harm or disordered eating.”

Ending Violence Against Women and Girls

“In [my school] there were several boys doing upskirting, but nothing was done about it. The girls were embarrassed to make complaints because of what boys would then say about them. Then they started lifting girls skirts up to embarrass them because they thought it was funny. I know this is to do with more than uniform but if there is an easy solution that protects girls while they do the rest of the work to challenge attitudes then why not take it?”

“Girls often get unwanted attention from boy and men. It’s all the time. Nearly every day you get comments or whistles. I just want to be comfortable and feel safe.”

“Because this is a long going problem that never seems to solve and many women and children die or end up severely injured due to the abuse or harassment, they endure left broken, traumatised, suicidal and numb.”

“If society agrees and promotes the message that violence against women and girls must not be tolerated, and if police or teachers in school remind everyone to report if they have been subject to or witnessed women or children being abused, then people will be reassured and frequently reminded they are doing the right thing when reporting it.”

“I would spread the message with women and children who have suffered this, and we would tell their stories. I would then go into secondary schools and spread the word as well as other places. I would then discuss with local nightclubs on the topic and for there to be more surveillance and finally I would arrange a service where women and children can ring and tell us what they have endured then the police would handle the matter and the victim of it would get the right treatment.”

“Going to an all-boys school, I think education and understanding is needed as our only outlet to understanding women and relationships are from the media, a lot of which can be harmful. Toxic masculinity and sexism are quite at large and this can often be seen as the "way it should be", as I think most boys don't understand feminism and see female rights as an attack on their own.”

What do we want to happen?

- Make sure children, young people and their carers are educated with relevant, up to date information on how to keep safe online.
- Easier and more effective ways to report online abuse or misogyny.
- Protect children’s right to access to information by policing the companies allowing online harm to happen and individuals who seek to harm, not restrict potential victims.
- Normalise respect for women and girls at a young age and throughout education and sports.
- Education for children and young people on healthy relationships.
- Properly resource a long term action plan as part of the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy.

You can find out more about NICCY’s work on safeguarding [here](#)

Conclusion

We, the members of the **NICCY Youth Panel**, have written *The Right Way Forward* because we want to see real, lasting change for children and young people across NI. Through our work with the Commissioner, and by listening to other children and young people across NI, we've learned a lot about what is working — and what isn't — when it comes to our rights.

We've heard from young people waiting too long for health or mental health support, from those struggling with school systems that don't always meet their needs, and from others who feel unsafe online or in their communities.

We've spoken with children who want to help tackle climate change, who care deeply about equality, and who want a say in the decisions that shape their futures.

Across every conversation, one message came through loud and clear: **children and young people in NI deserve better.**

We believe the **full and direct incorporation of the UUNCRC** into NI law is the most important step our Government can take. Incorporation would mean that children's rights are not just talked about, but acted on — built into every law, policy, and decision that affects us. It would mean that when something goes wrong, children have real access to justice and can hold decision-makers to account.

From everything we have learned and discussed, here are the key things we believe need to happen now:

- **Health and Mental Health:** Every child and young person should be able to access health and mental health support when they need it — no long waiting lists, no postcode lottery. Services should be co-designed with young people to make sure they meet our needs and are accessible to everyone.
- **Education:** Schools should respect and promote children's rights. Education should be inclusive, flexible, and properly funded, so that all children — including those with special educational needs, disabilities, or who are carers — can thrive.
- **Environment:** Every child has the right to grow up in a clean, safe, and healthy environment. Government should act now to tackle pollution, protect green spaces, and include young people in all decisions about climate and sustainability.
- **Poverty:** Poverty is a key children's rights issue. We want government to take a long-term approach to ending child poverty, with proper funding, measurable targets, and support that ensures every child has a decent standard of living.

- **Safety:** Children must be protected from harm both online and offline. This means better education on online safety and healthy relationships, and stronger action against online abuse, misogyny, and violence against women and girls.
- **Participation and Accountability:** Young people must be involved in decision-making at every level - in schools, communities, and government. The **Lundy Model** of participation should be used across all departments and public bodies. Government should also use **Children's Rights Impact Assessments** for all major decisions to make sure our rights are protected before policies are made.
- **Youth Justice:** Young people should be treated with dignity and understanding within a **child-friendly, trauma-informed justice system**. Those in conflict with the law must be seen first as **potential victims of harm or exploitation**, with a focus on rehabilitation over punishment. The **minimum age of criminal responsibility should be raised to 16**, and all young people should have **equal access to justice**, including those with mental health needs, disabilities, or from rural and minority communities. Justice should also include **education about rights** and clear information on how to seek help or challenge injustice.

We have shared these recommendations because we want NI to become a truly rights-respecting society — one where children's rights are part of everyday life, not an afterthought. This report is not the end of our work. We will continue to speak to children and young people across NI, listen to their experiences, and make sure their voices are heard. We are proud of what we have achieved together, and we are determined to keep pushing for change.

The Right Way Forward is simple — **listen to children, act on what we say, and make our rights real.**

What next?

This report is part of a much bigger piece of work we are doing. We want to keep listening to other children and young people and building upon this report. We want your input.

Help us to tell decision makers what babies, children and young people in NI need. Help us to ensure your voice is heard by the people who make laws and decisions about us.

You can do this by:

Emailing: dearcommish@niccy.org

Following us on Instagram: @nichildcom

Add us on Facebook: NI Commissioner for Children and Young People

[Joining our youth panel](#)



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