

CPG on Children and Young People

Wednesday 4th March 2026

13:00 – 14:30pm

Scottish Parliament Election

Chair: Fulton MacGregor MSP

Present

MSPs

Fulton MacGregor MSP

Davy Russell MSP

Invited guests

Jay Stuart, Youth Voice Network

Catherine Heggie, Electoral Commission

Laura Holmes, Electoral Commission

Non-MSP Group Members

Meg Thomas, Forces Children Scotland

Vikki Carpenter, CLD Standards Council

Marie Clare Tully, Columbia1400

Tim Abrams, Govan Law Centre

Sarah Rogers, Families Outside

Leah Duncan- Karrim, One Parent Families Scotland

Arran Goodfellow, Parenting Across Scotland

Brian Magee, COSCA

Una MacFadyen, NHS Scotland

David McCrae, Mellow Parenting

Marianne Tyler, Alliance Scotland

Kevin Kane, Shared Parenting Scotland

John Forsyth, Shared Parenting Scotland

David Ashford

Millie Greenwood, Family Fund

Nancy Greig, Parenting Infant Foundation

Fatou Drammeh, UNICEF

Joan Mowat, Strathclyde University

Parisa Shirazi, Children in Scotland

Abbey Stone, Children in Scotland

Sarah Paterson, Youthlink Scotland

Welcome from the Chair

Everyone was welcomed to the meeting of the Cross Party Group on Children and Young People. It was noted that the meeting brought together national and local perspectives on how Scotland could move from reacting to crisis to preventing harm before it began.

As attendees looked ahead to the upcoming election for the Scottish Parliament, it was highlighted that the event created a vital space to explore what was truly at stake, especially for young people. The group heard that the decisions made in this election would shape education, jobs, climate policy, housing, and the future opportunities available to the next generation. For young voters, this was described as more than just another political moment; it was a chance to influence the direction of Scotland at a time that would define their future.

The speakers Catherine Heggie and Laura Holmes from the Electoral Commission along with Jay Stuart from the Youth Voice Network for Scotland were introduced and the group was informed they would be talking about all of the important work they were doing to encourage young people in Scotland to get involved in the election and realise that their vote matters.

It was explained that there would be an opportunity for different member organisations to present briefly on the manifestos or key policy calls they had created ahead of the election.

To support accurate minute taking, attendees were informed that the meeting was being recorded for note taking purposes only and would not be shared elsewhere. Everyone was thanked for their co-operation with this.

Presentations

Speakers:

Laura Holmes and Catherine Heggie, Scotland Team at the Electoral Commission

Catherine Heggie

Catherine introduced herself as the Senior Officer for Communications and Engagement in the Scotland team at the Electoral Commission and noted that their colleague, Laura Holmes, was also in attendance. They shared slides and provided an overview of the Commission's role as a UK wide body responsible for regulating political finance, maintaining the register of political parties, and overseeing elections and referendums to ensure they are free, fair and well run.

They outlined that 129 MSPs would be elected to the Scottish Parliament, with voters selecting both a constituency and a regional representative under the Additional Member System. They confirmed that anyone aged 16 or over on polling day, living in Scotland and registered to vote, would be eligible to participate, including 16 and 17 year olds, foreign nationals and new Scots. Boundary changes affecting some constituencies were also highlighted.

Key election dates were shared, including the voter registration deadline of 20 April, and deadlines for postal and proxy vote applications on 21 and 28 April. Polling day would take place on Thursday 7 May, with the count following on 8 May.

She emphasised the Commission's work to support voters, particularly young people, to understand their rights and feel confident about voting. They noted the importance of early voting experiences in establishing lifelong voting habits. The Commission provided impartial education resources for schools and youth groups, developed with input from youth voice partners such as Children in Scotland.

A range of resources was available, including lesson plans, activities on mis and disinformation, assembly slides, social media graphics, and materials to support young people in designing their own voter registration campaigns. Election specific resources had also been launched. A YouTube playlist with short informational videos was highlighted.

She confirmed that all slides and links to resources would be shared with attendees. They then handed over to their colleague Laura to outline plans for Welcome to Your Vote Week.

Laura Holmes

Laura provided a final update, introducing *Welcome to Your Vote Week*, an annual awareness raising initiative promoting democratic education for young people. Schools, colleges, youth groups and youth workers were encouraged to start conversations about democracy during the week, which would run from Monday 9 March to Sunday 15 March. The theme for the year was *Why Voting Matters*, focusing on helping young people understand the impact of voting and how their voices can be heard.

She highlighted that there was still time to sign up and take part. Suggested activities included running voter registration drives, holding a vote on an issue relevant to young people, delivering one of the Commission's lesson plans, or using the games available on their website to make learning more engaging.

She noted a paid evaluation opportunity, where groups taking part could provide formal feedback and receive a £50 voucher for their school, youth group or organisation. This feedback would help improve Welcome to Your Vote Week in future years.

The group was informed of an upcoming research event taking place the following Tuesday from 11am to 12pm. This session would present findings from the Commission's youth tracker survey, which explored young people's experiences of registering to vote, their views on politics, their engagement levels and their awareness of ongoing elections.

She concluded by directing attendees to useful links and invited any further questions. They then handed back to the Chair, noting that if time was limited, the next speaker would be Jay Stuart from Children in Scotland, who would provide an overview of their partnership work with the Commission and their role in supporting the development of resources for young voters.

[Click here to view slides](#)

Jay Stuart

Jay introduced themselves as a 19 year old second year student at Dundee University and a former member of the Youth Voice Network, which operates under Children in Scotland and works on behalf of the Electoral Commission.

They explained that the Youth Voice Network is made up of young people aged 12 - 18 from across Scotland who aim to share information about voting and democracy with their peers. The group meets monthly, both online and in person, and has worked on topics including local democracy, mis- and disinformation, and supporting young people to research political parties and policies. They have contributed to Electoral Commission research, helped shape questions for the Scottish context, and supported improvements to the accessibility of the Commission's website and resources.

They described several educational resources created by the group, including a Snakes and Ladders game on local democracy, which was being updated for the upcoming parliamentary election, and a *Making Our Voices Heard* briefing on how young people can participate in democracy. Additional activities and resources for secondary schools were also being published, with links to be shared after the meeting.

They highlighted key messages they hoped organisations would help communicate to young people, including who is eligible to vote, how to register, and practical information such as what to do if personal details change, how to find polling locations, and how to apply for a postal vote. They also emphasised the importance of helping young people understand why voting matters, and how those not yet old enough to vote can still engage in democratic processes.

They concluded by sharing the Youth Voice Network's website and email address for anyone wishing to follow their work or ask further questions, and thanked attendees for listening.

[Click here to view slides](#)

Comments from the Chair

Fulton added that the government were currently drafting letters for first-time voters and that the earlier presentations had provided useful ideas to include. They reflected on a recent school visit in their constituency, explaining that they regularly visited both primary and secondary schools, although visits had reduced slightly as Parliament was preparing to dissolve.

He commented that children and young people were consistently well informed and engaged, particularly around their rights, their local area and democracy. They attributed this to the strong work being carried out by organisations represented in the Cross Party Group and across Scotland more widely.

He shared a brief story from a visit to a primary in Moodiesburn, where pupils were aware that an election was approaching. They emphasised that when visiting

schools as an MSP, they did so in a noncampaigning capacity and simply answered pupils' questions about their role and responsibilities.

Member manifestos

Members were then invited to share their manifestos one at a time and to highlight key policy calls:

Marianne Tyler, Alliance Scotland

Marianne introduced herself as the lead for the Children and Young People Programme at the Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland. They explained that the Alliance is a national health and social care charity focused on improving wellbeing by bringing together lived experience, the third sector and health and social care organisations to influence policy and practice.

She highlighted the launch of their manifesto, *A Collective Voice*, which calls for Scotland to become a human rights leader, deliver fairer finances, renew social care, strengthen prevention and ensure highquality public services. They outlined key asks for political parties ahead of the election.

She focused specifically on strengthening the implementation of Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC), noting that 2026 marks 20 years since its introduction. They emphasised the need for clearer evidence of consistent implementation, particularly for disabled children, those with longterm conditions and those experiencing poverty. She called for a cross policy framework grounded in children's rights, supported by robust data and reporting.

She encouraged attendees to read the manifesto and consider how its priorities align with their own work, and how to collectively press the next Scottish Government to turn commitments into action.

[Click here to view manifesto](#)

Arran Goodfellow, Parenting Across Scotland, along with Nancy Greig, Parent Infant Foundation

Arran Goodfellow

Arran introduced herself as the Policy Engagement Officer at Parenting Across Scotland and provided a brief overview of their manifesto for 2026 and beyond. They explained that their calls were developed using the views of parents and carers, member organisations, partners and evidence from projects such as Open Kindergarten.

She outlined the key questions guiding their work: how families should be defined in 2026 and beyond, what good whole family support should look like, and how expectations for a good childhood can be raised.

She presented six main calls, including tackling child poverty, supporting parents and carers to understand and advocate for children's rights under the UNCRC, and ensuring parents and carers are actively involved in policymaking. She highlighted

ongoing work on Open Kindergarten, which has shown strong positive feedback from families and is being considered for national rollout.

She also described new work on "parenting with adults," recognising that parenting responsibilities often continue beyond age 18 for reasons such as disability, mental health, imprisonment or caring for grandchildren. They noted collaboration with MSP Karen Adam on this area.

[Click here to view manifesto](#)

Nancy Greig

Nancy explained that she were speaking on behalf of a coalition of seven charities convened by the Parent Infant Foundation, which includes Parenting Across Scotland, Save the Children, NSPCC, Starcatchers, HomeStart UK and the Mental Health Foundation. They introduced the *Manifesto for Babies* and encouraged attendees to review it online.

She highlighted the core issue: babies rely on sensitive, responsive care to develop healthily, yet an estimated 9,000 babies in Scotland are currently living in fear, confusion or distress due to factors such as parental trauma, mental or physical health difficulties, domestic abuse, insecure housing and poverty. These stressors can disrupt early relationships and healthy development.

She noted that while Scotland has progressive policies, including investment in perinatal and infant mental health, support remains fragmented across government directorates and does not reach all babies who need it. The manifesto therefore sets out five headline recommendations aimed at addressing inequalities that begin before birth and continue throughout life.

[Click here to view manifesto](#)

Lara Balkwill, Rock Trust

Laura introduced herself as the Public Affairs Lead for Scotland's national youth homelessness charity and highlighted the scale of the current housing and homelessness emergency. She noted that over 7,600 young people were recently recorded as experiencing or being at risk of homelessness, describing this as unacceptable. Their manifesto aims to work toward a Scotland where every young person grows up safe, supported and able to thrive.

She outlined four key asks:

- Homes for all young people – including long term funding for youth specific permanent housing models, a national private rented sector access scheme, and support for Shelter Scotland's call to build 15,000 new social homes annually.
- Prevention – investment in school linked support services, continued commitment to the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund, and a legal right to youth work, alongside a national data review to better understand youth homelessness.

- Transitions for care experienced young people – ensuring all care experienced young people have clear transition plans, guaranteed housing and aftercare support up to age 26 and fully implementing care leaver pathway recommendations.
- Brighter futures – expanding career mentoring and skills programmes, delivering well paid apprenticeships and internships, ensuring access to the real living wage regardless of age, and preventing disadvantage for young people in temporary accommodation.

She offered to share the full manifesto document and expressed interest in linking with youth engagement teams to explore voter registration activities.

[Click here to view manifesto](#)

Tim Frew, CEO, YouthLink Scotland

Tim introduced the Youth Work Sector Manifesto for 2026, describing it as the result of extensive work across voluntary and statutory youth work providers, shaped by the views of young people and youth workers. The manifesto is built around three core themes: a right, a space and a future.

He explained that the sector is calling for:

1. A Right – a legal right to youth work for all young people. They noted that similar calls are being made across Europe and that several independent reviews in Scotland have highlighted the need for stronger statutory support. Despite its importance, youth work currently receives only around 1% of education spending.
2. A Space – universal access to safe, free and consistent spaces for youth work, including schools, leisure centres and community venues. They highlighted ongoing challenges with access and proposed a national youth spaces partnership to address this.
3. A Future – sustained and increased investment in youth work. They reported that local authority youth work staffing has fallen by around 50% in the past eight years, with volunteer numbers also significantly reduced. They stressed that investment should be seen as a cross-government responsibility, not solely an education issue.
4. They emphasised that youth work provides belonging, support and opportunities for young people, helping to tackle issues such as social isolation and loneliness.

They encouraged organisations across the sector to engage with the manifesto and take forward the asks most relevant to their work.

[Click here to view manifesto](#)

Kevin Kane, Shared Parenting Scotland

Kevin noted that Shared Parenting Scotland had issued a call to political parties ahead of the Scottish elections, with a fuller publication to follow. They explained

that their focus is on renewing culture, policy and practice around parenting after divorce or separation. They highlighted that a third of children in Scottish schools have parents who do not live together, yet the strengths and resources of parents and wider family networks are often overlooked.

He emphasised that Scottish Government policy and Article 9 of the UNCRC both support the principle that children benefit from the involvement of both parents where it is safe and in the child's best interests. However, he argued that institutional structures, an adversarial family justice system and polarised attitudes make this difficult to achieve.

He outlined five key calls:

1. A renewed parenting strategy for Scotland – updating the 2012 strategy to provide leadership, coherence and a culture that values parenting in all family forms.
2. An independent commission on the voice and best interests of the child – to clarify how these concepts are understood and applied, drawing on international evidence.
3. Removal of disincentives to shared parenting – addressing policies that disadvantage children who live across two homes, such as one address rules affecting school transport, free school meals, clothing grants and disability payments. They also called for health services to recognise both parents' rights and responsibilities.
4. Reform of family courts and professional practice – tackling delays, lack of transparency and adversarial processes. They noted that key reforms in the Children (Scotland) Act 2020 remain unimplemented, including changes to child welfare reporters and wider access to alternative dispute resolution.
5. Language and culture change – encouraging inclusive terminology that reflects the reality of children living across two households, and ensuring these children are visible in data collection, including the 2031 census.

He concluded by stressing that whole family support must include families where children live in more than one home.

[Click here to view policy calls](#)

Meg Thomas, Forces Children Scotland

Meg explained that, although they did not have a manifesto, a new report commissioned by the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland would be published in mid March. The report focuses on the educational experiences of Forces Children in Scotland, of whom there are more than 13,000. Many of these children move between five and seven times during their school years, often across different curricula, leading to significant disruption in learning.

She outlined that the research explored six themes: culture, curriculum, personalisation, support, assessment and qualifications, and purpose, with an additional cross cutting theme on transitions, separation and loss. They emphasised

that the recommendations are intended not only to support Forces Children but also other groups experiencing disrupted education, such as care experienced young people or those affected by family breakdown.

She described the methodology, noting that they engaged 145 young people across key Forces communities in Moray, Fife, Edinburgh and Argyll and Bute, using interactive activities to gather views. They acknowledged limitations in reaching children in more dispersed locations.

They summarised four emerging recommendations:

- Guarantee proactive support during times of loss, separation and transition
- Embed a whole school, rights based approach that reflects Forces life and is co-created with children
- Ensure children's participation in decisions about their learning journey, including placement in appropriate year groups
- Reform teaching, learning and assessment to better reflect mobility, including adapting approaches that rely on cumulative learning or high-stakes exams

They concluded by noting that the full report would be available shortly.

David McCrae, Mellow Parenting

David introduced himself as the Programme Evaluation Lead at Mellow Parenting and outlined the organisation's vision that every child should grow up in a safe, nurturing family, supported by strong early relationships. They emphasised that early relationships shape brain development and lifelong wellbeing, and that parental mental health, poverty and preventable relationship breakdowns all significantly affect child outcomes. They stressed that prevention should be viewed as essential public infrastructure.

They presented five key policy calls for the next Scottish Government:

1. Make parenting support central to delivering The Promise – by embedding evidence based relational parenting programmes within perinatal, early years and adolescent pathways, and ensuring relational interventions sit alongside statutory support rather than outside it.
2. Invest before crisis – by embedding structured parenting programmes in maternity and perinatal services, ensuring young people receive early relational support, and commissioning preventative group support before care proceedings become necessary.
3. Fund trauma informed relational practice at scale – through commissioning strengths based reflective parenting programmes, investing in trauma informed workforce training, and requiring relational practice standards in commissioning frameworks.
4. Align child poverty strategy with parental wellbeing – pairing income based measures with relational support, recognising parental mental health as a

child poverty issue, and investing in interventions that reduce stress, isolation and shame.

5. Commit to long-term prevention – by supporting national rollout of proven models, investing in evaluation and shared outcome frameworks, and prioritising prevention in public spending decisions.

He concluded by calling for parenting support to be placed at the centre of Scotland's strategy to deliver The Promise, noting that early relationships are foundational to child protection, education and health policy. They shared a link to their website for further information.

[Click here for more information about Mellow Parenting](#)

Close of Meeting

Sarah Paterson explained that this was the final meeting of the Cross Party Group before the upcoming election and confirmed that the group would reconvene after 8 May. She explained that a report covering the work of the Cross Party Group over the 2021–2026 parliamentary term was being prepared and would be circulated once finalised, including to all MSPs.

She invited members to submit suggestions for topics and areas of focus for the next parliamentary term, emphasising that contributions were always welcome and helpful.

She thanked all attendees and contributors for their participation, noting that links to manifestos and resources shared during the meeting were available in the chat. They encouraged members to continue discussions and wished those involved in manifesto launches, lobbying and influencing work the best of luck ahead of the election.

She closed the meeting by thanking everyone for attending.