

Dr Maggie Atkinson, Children's Commissioner for England: Speech at the South East Participation Conference



Welcome to the children and young people first and foremost, as this event celebrates the work being done around the fact that you have a voice, and a right to be heard. As the day goes on, do get to know each other. Given you have come from all over the South East and today, you might just make some new friends from your part of England.

Thank you for the work of [Creative Partnerships](#). They will make sure that as well as listening to and learning from each other, you will do that in a creative fun and memorable way.

To the other adults in the room next, a huge thank you on the children and young people's behalf if you are here to support them as chaperones, workers in services for them, or their advocates. On my behalf as Children's Commissioner, a huge thank you too because I know how hard you work, what passion you bring to this work of ensuring children and young people are listened to, so that somebody takes the trouble to bring their voices to light. And thanks also to all the people who have worked with us, with the blessing of their employing organisations across the South East of England, to explore how we can make greater efforts to reach out to, and include the voices of, children and young people as young citizens. More about why that's so important in a minute. Today is about celebrating and deciding what to do next with all that rich development and learning, so thank you!

The adults in the room will I hope forgive me now if I tend to address the children and people first and foremost. Let's hope the adults can keep up.

My job as Children's Commissioner for England is to make sure that, in as many ways and places as possible, those who make decisions about their lives listen to the views and voices of children and young people, and having listened, will act on what they hear. That includes when what has to happen is not what the children or young people necessarily want, by the way! The fact that the adults have shown they have listened matters. Then, it matters just as much that their decision-making after hearing what they hear, is explained to the children and young people who have given their views.

By law, I have to challenge decision-makers in local government and others in local areas, right across all of central government, plus charities and other community organisations. I make a space at their tables so that children and young people can sit with them whilst discussions are taking place, not afterwards when the decisions are already made and can't be changed by their views.

The international treaty that drives my work is the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), which we signed when John Major was Prime Minister in 1990. The convention is a collection of the big, important promises we adults are making to every child in our society. They are about your entitlement to:

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- an education
- to be kept safe
- to be able to get help when you need it
- to get medical treatment and an education.

They are also about how everybody should be supporting families to do the best they can for their children, and if families can't do the right things for their children the convention outlines the rights of children who have to be looked after by others.

Right at the centre of the convention are some really big ideas, which I see as promises about what you are entitled to expect from us.

The first is that, whoever you are, whether your life is easy or hard, whether your families can take care of you or not, whether you are well or ill, able bodied or disabled, in school or out, and even if you commit a crime, you must be seen as a child first, and you all have these rights.

A second promise is that we adults must do all that we do for and with you, in your best interests. Those may or may not be the same as our interests as adults.

A third promise is that you all have the right to grow, to develop and to achieve all you can.

And a fourth promise, maybe the most important one out of all of them, and the focus of today, is that in every decision we make about your life, you have the right to have your opinions listened to, and taken seriously, by the adults working on what needs to happen. That means everywhere: in school or out of it, in your community, and in the services you use. That is a tall order for adults to deliver, a real challenge.

The young people I meet and talk to tell me when we talk about these rights, that they absolutely don't mean it's about putting children in charge, or ignoring the rights of either other children and young people, or the adults all around them. They tell me that they understand that they can't have their own rights if they take away, or just don't have any respect for, the rights of others. They say that if they want to enjoy the rights I just spoke about, they have to make sure everybody else gets their rights at the same time. That's at school, in their friendship groups and the activities they do in their spare time, in their families, in the communities where they live, and when their elderly neighbours find them scary or hard to understand, and those feelings are mutual. This is a tall order for children and young people, one that calls on you to be citizens. I hope you're up for it!

What's today about then?

It's a chance to celebrate what is being done to give a voice, and the space to use it, to the South East's children and young people, especially to some of those who might struggle to be heard otherwise. For the adults who do this work with you, or who do it close to where you live, it's a chance to carry on learning from each other. For my staff and me, it's a chance to capture the celebration and the learning, so that we can tell other people working with children and young people, or making decisions about their services elsewhere in England, what has been done. If we can capture it all, then we can challenge them to do something similar for their children and young people.

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That's what today is for. If you thought you were coming for a bit of a chat, it's for that too, but it's about much more as well.

I hope you have a terrific day. I can stay with you for parts of it, and I shall be back to close the event and to enjoy seeing and hearing what you have learned and what you will take away from it.

Thank you again, and enjoy!