

Article

Exploring COP28 UAE Resolutions: Child Participation and Protection: A Case Study from England and Wales

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Abstract

This study examines the implementation of COP28UAE's commitment to child participation in climate and biodiversity strategies by Safeguarding Children Partnerships (SCPs) in England and Wales. Employing a mixed methods approach, a document review of the strategic plans of SCPs (N=140) revealed that none had identified the impact of climate change as a child protection priority; online survey responses suggested an awareness of COP28UAE resolutions, but their implementation was seen as the responsibility of other agencies. The hypothesis suggested is that eco-distress affects children's mental health and that participation in climate change debates provides them with agency and coping strategies. In addition, applying procedural justice principles and involving children's participation enhances institutional legitimacy. However, SCPs are yet to adopt the impacts of climate change as child protection risk factors and face challenges in balancing immediate risks to children with future climate threats. In doing so, SCPs potentially miss opportunities to legitimize themselves by not fully embracing child participation.

Keywords: Climate change; safeguarding; children; COP28; youth participation; procedural justice; public safety

1. INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989) acknowledges the rights of children to be heard and participate in decisions that have an impact on them (Mustafa et al., 2021; Rahman et al., 2023; Sanz-Caballero, 2013). The negative consequences of climate change on children's health, well-being, and future prospects have been recognized by international organizations advocating for their welfare. It is widely agreed that not only is it their human right, but it is also essential for their mental and physical well-being and for improving our collective response to climate change threats and dealing with its consequences to ensure that children's voices are heard and considered in the decision-making processes. The importance of children in addressing climate change was a key focus of the Conference of Parties (COP28UAE) held in Dubai, United Arab Emirates in December 2023. Thirty-eight

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countries, including the United Kingdom, committed to working "collaboratively and expeditiously" to ensure the "full, equitable, and inclusive participation of youth in the planning and implementation of climate and biodiversity plans and strategies at all levels."(COP28UAE, 2024).

Given the increasing recognition that climate change is reshaping patterns of vulnerability, demand and risk across public-safety systems, understanding how statutory child-protection agencies anticipate climate-related harm is directly relevant to wider community resilience and national safeguarding capacity.

The current understanding of the extent to which Safeguarding Children Partnerships (SCPs) in England and Wales are incorporating issues regarding the impact of climate change and the resolutions from COP28UAE into their strategic priorities is limited. This study aims to address this knowledge gap through a mixed-methods approach that combines a document review of each of the 140 partnerships' strategic plans and an online survey. It is hypothesized that SCPs in England and Wales do not effectively incorporate resolutions from COP28UAE into their strategic priorities. This research offers a perspective for SCPs and other agencies tasked with child protection to fulfil the COP28UAE resolution by comprehensively integrating children's perspectives into their strategic frameworks concerning climate change. Such integration not only facilitates children in navigating their 'ecodistress' and apprehensions concerning the planet's future, but also provides agencies with an opportunity to apply procedural justice, a concept predicated upon giving voice to service users alongside principles of fairness, transparency, and impartiality (Greenberg & Colquitt, 2005). Child protection institutions embracing procedural justice may engender trust and confidence, thereby being perceived as motivated by young people's best interests and consequently gaining their compliance and acknowledgment of their authority and potential over the remainder of their lives. Thus, the involvement of children in this capacity engenders a mutually beneficial outcome, affording children agency while concurrently increasing the legitimacy of the SCP institutions.

2. CONSEQUENCES OF CLIMATE CHANGE FOR CHILDREN

Climate change is characterized by fluctuations and alterations in Earth's climate systems, primarily caused by human activities. This has resulted in the accumulation of greenhouse gases, leading to increases in Earth's temperature, rising sea levels, and an increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events (Sanson et al., 2019; Sheffield & Landrigan, 2011). While the consequences of climate change affect all individuals to a greater or lesser degree, children are disproportionately affected because of their less-developed immune systems, limited ability to cope with heat, metabolic functions, and lack of agency due to their dependence on adults (Akresh, 2016; Brodie & Silberholz, 2021; Burke et al., 2018; Mustafa et al., 2021). Children already have a higher mortality rate than adults (Sanz-Caballero, 2013), and the World Health Organization has identified that currently 88% of climate-related diseases are experienced by children (Mustafa et al., 2021; Sheffield & Landrigan, 2011).

Climate-induced extreme weather events and ongoing climatic fluctuations have numerous diverse and often interrelated effects on children's health, development, opportunities, and general wellbeing (Brodie & Silberholz, 2021). According to Currie and Deschênes (2016), these effects are anticipated to be extensive, geographically varied, and reinforced by the current economic and social disparities. The consequences for children exposed to extreme weather and climate change can be classified as immediate, long-term, direct, or indirect (Helldén et al., 2021; Weeda et al., 2024). Sanson et al. (2019, 2022) proposed a four-level bioecological model for identifying these effects. First, the direct impact level involves immediate fatalities and injuries, such as drowning, crushing, burns, starvation, and dehydration (Akresh, 2016; Sanson et al., 2022). Children are also susceptible to indirect impacts such as exposure to water and vector-borne diseases (Ebi & Paulson, 2007; Sheffield & Landrigan, 2011). Malnutrition and diarrheal diseases can also affect their growth and ability to learn because of short-term contamination or restricted food supply (Sheffield & Landrigan, 2011). Increased inhalation of toxins and air pollutants can cause respiratory issues because children breathe faster than adults. Young children are less resilient to extreme heat, as they cannot regulate their temperature as easily as older children and adults (Royal College of Pediatrics and Child Health, 2023).

At the second level, the microsystem, children may experience the death or absence of their parents and disruptions to school, sleep, and routine stabilizing activities, leading to developmental delays and emotional distress (Akresh, 2016; Sheffield & Landrigan, 2011). At the third level, mesosystem, societal, and local services may become overloaded or inadequate in their capacity or capabilities, leading to a sustained lack of food or housing and a breakdown in law and order. Increases in family and community-related conflicts, violence, and criminality associated with heat and stress (Akresh, 2016; Lydon et al., 2024) can also occur.

Finally, at the exosystem level, the destruction of community infrastructure, lack of resources, and overburdening of education, health, and law enforcement services can lead to social unrest. Displacement and separation due to war, conflict, evacuation, or forced migration leads to ongoing developmental impacts, disruptions to schooling, and healthcare provision. Children may also become potential victims of trafficking and organized abuse (Lydon et al., 2024; Sanz-Caballero, 2013). The model at each level identifies increasing psychological effects on children that arise from their exposure to trauma, feelings of grief, fear, uncertainty, and frustration, with their inability to exert control over the situation in terms of decision-making or having their voices heard at various levels, including the family, community, and society.

2.1 Children and Climate Change in England and Wales

As outlined above, children worldwide are disproportionately affected by climate change compared with adults, although their experiences and resilience in dealing with these impacts may vary depending on their geographic location. For instance, children in the Global South will experience climate change differently than those in the Global North (Sanson et al., 2022). This study is situated in the Global North and focuses on the situation of children in England and Wales. In a position statement on the impact of climate change on children in the United

Kingdom, the Royal College of Pediatrics and Child Health (2023) identified a number of UK related climate change health impacts on children. These include respiratory problems due to air pollution; heat-related deaths; food insecurity resulting from the UK's dependence on imported supplies; and an increased risk of violence, physical, and sexual abuse as a result of being displaced or separated due to extreme weather events where families are forced to leave their homes. Children and young people in England and Wales have heightened awareness of climate change due to direct exposure to events, their own observations, and through media, peers, and education, which has led to 70% of young people being concerned about the world they will inherit (Save the Children, 2022). In the 2023 Oxford University Press Survey of 5000 children, 'climate change' was chosen as the Children's Word of the Year (CBBC Newsround, 2024). This heightened awareness has led to anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbance in young people in the UK, with 73% reporting that climate change has an impact on mental health (Skopeliti & Gecsoyler, 2023). The distress caused by concerns about the state of the planet, future opportunities, and lack of agency for a situation over which they have no control but will bear most of its consequences, is leading to a condition of eco-distress or climate anxiety experienced by British children (Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, 2023 ; Singh et al., 2022).

2.2 'Eco-distress', Children's Voices and COP28UAE

Eco-distress, eco-anxiety, climate distress, and solastalgia are terms used to describe negative emotions such as helplessness, fear, frustration, and anxiety associated with the impact of climate change on the environment (Sanson et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2022). According to the Royal College of Adolescent Psychiatrists in the UK, over 60% of its members treated a young person distressed by climate change in 2020 (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2022). Childhood and adolescence are crucial stages in an individual's brain development and emotional regulation. These developmental stages can be optimized through stable, consistent, and predictable environments (Singh et al., 2022). Many children in the UK and around the world are aware of the severity of climate issues, but express feelings of powerlessness and frustration, which manifest as anxiety and depression, potentially impacting their current and future mental health (Burke et al., 2018; Currie & Deschênes, 2016; Sanson et al., 2019).

The lack of voice and inability to be heard is a particular concern for many children, and has accelerated levels of youth activism in the UK and across the globe, as children find protest a means and outlet to hear their feelings. School strikes, demonstrations, and litigation have been an avenue where children have funnelled their stress regarding the impact of climate change on their generation and vented their lack of agency to do anything about it (Burke et al., 2018). One solution to the lack of voice and powerlessness is to provide meaningful participatory opportunities and avenues for engagement to relieve anxiety and provide a sense of agency (Sanson et al., 2019). Trott, (2021) found that empowering children through education and providing opportunities for their own agency in making behavioural changes in afterschool programs led to improvements in their mental health, eased anxiety and created a sense of well-

being. In addition, children's ability to actively participate in climate change learning and activities promotes positive intergenerational and local community changes.

Promoting the inclusion and participation of children is a fundamental principle of the COP28UAE (Loss and Damage and Challenges of Human Mobility and Displacement Working Group, 2023). The COP28UAE philosophy was committed to placing young people at the centre of the climate debate and providing them with opportunities to participate in various activities. COP28UAE dedicated a full day of proceedings to their participation, including a Youth Stocktake, an analysis of youth involvement in climate diplomacy, and setting a blueprint for youth participation in future COP events and activities (COP28UAE, 2023). Allowing children and young people to have a voice and some level of influence in the climate change debate can serve as a coping mechanism for managing their stress and emotions related to their perceived lack of agency in a situation where the problem seems so vast that they feel powerless to make any change or have their voices heard by agencies and institutions that hold the power and responsibility to protect them and bring about change (Burke et al., 2018; Sanson et al., 2022). Moreover, in doing so, institutions have the advantage of devising improved solutions by incorporating children's ideas and problem-solving perspectives. Additionally, promoting their voices supports human rights and procedural justice mechanisms that may legitimise the institutions responsible for child protection (Sanz-Caballero, 2013; Trimmel et al., 2024).

2.3 Climate Change, Human Rights and Procedural Justice within Child Protection Agencies

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) established essential human rights for children. While the Convention was not established with the impact of climate change, its consequences infringe on many children's rights stipulated within the Convention, including the right to life and health, education, housing, and family life (Bernuz Beneitez & Dumortier, 2018; Mustafa et al., 2021; Rahman et al., 2023; Sanz-Caballero, 2013). This research focuses on children's rights under Article 12, in which children are entitled to express their views freely on all matters affecting them and participate in judicial and administrative matters. When reflecting on climate change Sanz-Caballero, (2013) comments "Children are right-holders and governments have obligations on their behalf. One of them is to make channels available for them to be informed and participate in climate change mitigation, adaption, and relocation policies" (p.8). Therefore, it can be argued that children have the right to participate in the climate change debate not only because it is a necessary factor for addressing their own mental health challenges engendered by climate change concerns but also because their voice and participation in the climate crisis debate is also their legal human right under UN conventions. However, there is also a reason that agencies with primary responsibility for child protection may wish to accommodate children's voices and encourage their participation in climate change, which relates to the concept of procedural justice.

When organizations are perceived as fair, impartial, transparent, and provide opportunities for public participation, they are more likely to be viewed as legitimate and act in the public's best interests, thereby garnering public support for their decisions (Greenberg & Colquitt, 2005). Procedural justice is most commonly observed in child protection settings, where children and parents engage in decision making regarding their future in judicial proceedings, placements, and family group conferencing (Venables & Healy, 2019). Expanding procedural justice strategically within child protection and climate change means that agencies ensure that processes and procedures are fair, transparent, and inclusive, empowering children to engage in discussions and actions related to climate change (Hügel & Davies, 2020). As advocated during the COP28, adherence to procedural justice theory suggests that when children perceive decision-making processes as just and respectful, they are more likely to trust the organization and believe that their voices are heard and valued. This trust in agencies may persist into adulthood (Bernuz Beneitez & Dumortier, 2018). Conversely, when children perceive that their concerns are not being addressed or that they lack inclusion or representativeness, they are more likely to be skeptical of agencies' intentions, less trusting, and more resistant to authority over them, potentially impacting their institutional compliance in later life (Bernuz Beneitez & Dumortier, 2018; Singh et al., 2022; Trimmel et al., 2024).

However, children are exposed to more immediate and significant risks than are those associated with climate change. In 2023, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported that over 403,000 children in the UK were considered in need and nearly 51,000 children were on protection plans, whose risk of harm was being managed by agencies within local Safeguarding Partnerships (Gov.UK, 2023). These local partnerships, which are responsible for child protection in England and Wales, are currently responsible for protecting children from neglect and physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. The question arises as to how these partnerships can most effectively manage present demands alongside the COP28UAE recommendations for the active participation of children and the strategic need to protect them from unquantified future risks. The hypothesis considered in this study is that procedural justice in child protection organisations can significantly contribute to supporting children's rights and participation in climate change responses while simultaneously enhancing the legitimacy of these agencies in the eyes of children. However, in order for Safeguarding Partnerships to meet the current level of demand for protection means they may not meet the COP28UAE recommendations and are therefore missing an opportunity to execute procedural justice and importantly address climate change issues for children.

2.4 Context for Current Study – Child Protection in England and Wales

Child protection in England and Wales is governed at the regional level by SCPs, which are believed to be 140 in total (SAFEcic, 2024) across the two countries. These partnerships are organized to cover geographical areas that mostly align with those of Local Authorities. It is the collective responsibility of the organizations that are members of these partnerships to safeguard

and promote the welfare of all children within their community. The partnerships are critical in fostering collaboration, accountability, and the best interests of children throughout the UK. Each partnership is expected to ensure that its services are tailored to the unique needs and demographics of the local area it serves (Working Together, 2023).

The local coordination of safeguarding measures is overseen by three key partners, as mandated by the Children Act 2004 (amended by the Children and Social Work Act 2017): the local authority or authorities, the clinical commissioning group for the area, and the Chief Officer of Police for the area. Although some partnerships consist of a single local authority, others involve multiple authorities. These SCPs were designed to promote and protect the welfare of children in local areas. Their principal responsibilities include the following.

- Strategic Leadership: Coordinating efforts and establishing local safeguarding policies.
- Monitoring and Evaluation: Assessing the efficacy of safeguarding practices and incorporating lessons learned.
- Training and Development: Providing professional training for effective safeguarding.
- Public Awareness: Raising awareness and engaging the community on safeguarding risks towards children.
- Information Sharing: Facilitating the exchange of information among agencies.
- Accountability and Reporting: Publishing annual reports, business plans, and holding agencies responsible for safeguarding practices.

The guidelines outlined in "Working Together" (2023) and the "Children's Act" (2004) stress the necessity of collaboration between partners and prioritizing the welfare of vulnerable children in need of aid and defence. These guidelines also emphasize the importance of recognizing and being mindful of various factors, such as economic and social conditions and ethnicity, which can affect the lives of children and families (see "Working Together," 2023, pp. 7-8).

A central aspect of the SCP's mission and child protection-related legislation is ensuring that the "children's wishes and feelings are sought, heard, and addressed" (Working Together, 2023, p. 11). This principle aligns with the concept of procedural justice and ensures that children's voices are considered.

All SCPs are required to publish details of their future priorities, as well as annual reports on work undertaken in the previous year (Working Together, 2023). In a study conducted that examined data contained in SCP's reports and plans (Osthwaite and Briggs, 2022), it was found that the most frequent priority listed for SCPs was 'child neglect' followed by 'emotional or mental well-being of children. This study also identified that the majority of the priorities or activities of SCPs were largely driven by previous case reviews or audits conducted in the jurisdiction of SCPs.

In England and Wales, SCPs are heavily influenced by national priorities established through legislation, government guidance, and funding allocation. These priorities serve to shape the

framework of SCPs and guide their strategies. Additionally, they emphasize the importance of learning from national inquiries and serious case reviews to continually improve safeguarding outcomes.

These governance mechanisms and the level of demand placed on SCPs can be better understood by considering the fact that there are 403090 children in England and Wales who are classified as "Children in Need," with a total of 342.7 per 10,000 children. The responsibility to safeguard these children legally falls upon SCPs. Children 'in need' are a legally designated group of individuals, as defined by the Children Act of 1989. These individuals have been determined to require assistance and protection owing to the presence of risks that may negatively impact their development or health. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) reports that there are over 50,000 (43.2 children per 10,000 children) on Child Protection Plans. These plans are an agreed series of multiagency actions that are taken to protect the child from identified risks to their health and/or development and to promote their welfare (Gov.UK, 2023b). The agencies within the SCPs received 640430 referrals and conducted 655540 assessments regarding children at risk of neglect and abuse in 2022-2023 (Gov.UK, 2023).

This level of demand for child protection services leads to pressure on professionals who are managing increasing caseloads of vulnerable children. Following a number of high-profile deaths of children who were known to SCPs, a governmental review concluded "current arrangements for this difficult work are not consistently supportive or sophisticated enough to ensure the very best practice. There is a need for a clearer and sharper focus on protecting children from significant harm across England's diverse geographical and social communities." (Makele, 2022 p.5). Understanding how SCPs in England and Wales are balancing risks presented to children in the present by recognising and mitigating the future risks related to climate change acknowledged by COP28UAE is the focus of this study. The hypothesis is that SCPs in England and Wales have not effectively accessed the voices of children in relation to climate change concerns or incorporated resolutions from the COP28UAE into their strategic priorities.

3. METHOD

To examine the hypothesis that SCPs have not adequately prioritized the impact of climate change as a child safeguarding concern, a mixed methods approach was employed. First, an open-source desk review was conducted for all 140 SCPs in England and Wales. Second, an online survey was sent to designated contact emails for every SCP in England and Wales. Prior to initiating the study, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant organizations' research ethics committee.

The first area of data gathering for this research was a systematic review of the websites and documents of SCPs in England and Wales.

Systematic Review Approach: The review covered all 140 SCPs in England and Wales. It began by accessing each SCP's official website and conducting an open-source search to gather the relevant details.

Document Search: For each SCP, the most recent annual report and their agreed strategic priorities or business plans were sought. These documents are crucial as they outline the SCP's objectives and focus areas.

Keyword Search: Once located, a keyword search was performed within these documents using specific terms related to climate change:

- Climate
- Weather
- COP (referring to Conference of the Parties, e.g. COP28UAE)
- Migration
- Displacement
- Crisis (in context)
- Emergency (in context)

Comprehensive Website Search: Following the document review, a similar keyword search was conducted across the entire SCP website. This step ensures thoroughness and checks whether any relevant mentions are overlooked during the initial document search.

Data Recording and Analysis: Findings from keyword searches were meticulously recorded in Excel format.

Coding System: The use of a color-coded system (red, amber, and green) helped categorize the extent of relevance found for each SCP regarding climate change, weather, COP discussions, migration, displacement, crises, and emergencies. This coding indicated:

- Red: No relevant documents were found.
- Amber: Partial relevance or references.
- Green: Comprehensive coverage or significant mentions related to research topics.

This methodology ensured a comprehensive and structured approach to review how SCPs address or integrate considerations related to climate change into their safeguarding practices and strategic planning. It provided a systematic way to assess and document SCPs' responses to these increasingly critical and interconnected challenges.

The second area of the methodology was an online survey. This was performed using the 'Gorilla' survey facility. The questions were formulated based on the desired outcomes of COP28UAE and the data contained in the literature review.

The questions were clear and unambiguous and allowed for additional text to be included for participants to provide additional details within their responses. The survey opened with an introductory question on whether the SCP regarded climate change as a significant concern for child protection in their region, followed by supplementary questions focused on minimizing the adverse consequences of climate change, responding to the COP28 objective concerning youth participation, incorporating youth in the formulation of strategic priorities, and determining whether climate change was perceived as a threat to children in that area. The survey concluded

with a question about whether the SCP prioritises immediate demands over long-term climate change risks and any additional remarks on the matter. It was deemed crucial to comprehend this as a particular aspect, as financial resources and capabilities may only enable SCPs to concentrate on present or near-future risks. When feasible, the questions replicated the terminology used within the COP28UAE resolutions.

The survey ran for a period of three weeks, with the time scales, nature, and importance of the research explained in the introductory email. The email addresses used were obtained during Stage 1 – the open source search—as each SCP has a contact point on their website, usually taking the form of an administrative email address or a contact email for a specific person. Two further email reminders were sent to the participants to invite them to participate in the survey. The survey should take the participant approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. The survey results would be completely anonymous as the data collected did not require the participant to enter any identifying data. Any identifying data included in the responses was to be removed to ensure complete anonymity of those responding to the survey.

Thematic analysis was conducted when the survey data were gathered, which involved identifying and analyzing themes within the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis involved manual coding of responses aligned with the theoretical framework of procedural justice. Statements were exported to Microsoft Excel for organizing and defining themes. This process ensured a comprehensive exploration of the identified themes.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Desk Review: Open Source

The annual reports for each SCP were published on the website and the majority were from the 2022/2023 timeframe. The priorities for each SCP came in different forms with the majority describing them as either ‘Business Plan’; ‘Strategic Plan’; ‘Priorities’ or ‘Delivery Plan.’ These predominantly looked at periods dating from 2023 through 2025 or 2026, so they tended to cover a 2-3 to year forward period.

Among the 140 SCPs analysed, all were coded as red with not a single one incorporating or addressing climate change. There was no mention of or allusion to the COP28UAE resolutions, plans, or terminology that would guarantee the comprehensive, fair, and inclusive participation of young people in the formulation and execution of climate and biodiversity strategies at all levels in any of these crucial documents. The results showed that 0 keywords were found related to this research topic in any annual reports, strategic priorities, business plans, or on the SCP websites. Only one SCP mentioned ‘climate change’ as part of their ‘young people’s plan,’ but more information could not be obtained on this topic.

When an SCP was hosted on a Council/Local Authority website, however, during the full website search, there were 15 local authorities coded as amber and referred to climate-related

risks and actions in general, but none pertained specifically to the risk or protection of children and none featured directly in the SCP information.

4.2 Online Survey Results

The survey was disseminated via email, accompanied by a comprehensive explanation of the study and a request for participation in the survey. Unfortunately, out of the 140 recipients, only six individuals responded, translating to a response rate of 4.3%. Despite the limited response rate, the survey responses were subjected to thematic analysis, which yielded key themes.

4.2.1 Perception of Climate Change as a Child Protection Threat.

The majority of respondents did not consider climate change to be a strategic child protection threat. Some reasons cited for this sentiment include the absence of prioritization in current strategic plans (S1), uncertainty regarding what constitutes a strategic child protection threat (S2), the belief that climate change does not align with the conventional definition of child protection (S3), and a tendency to prioritize immediate, present issues over long-term threats (S5).

4.2.2 Mitigation Efforts

Limited mitigation measures are currently being implemented to address the effects of climate change on children's well-being, and no definitive SCP strategies or actions have been established (S1). The majority of respondents reported that they were not currently engaged in any mitigation initiatives (S2, S3, S4, S5, S6).

4.2.3 Familiarity with COP28 Joint Statement

Respondents exhibited a moderate level of familiarity with the COP28 Joint Statement on Climate, Nature, and People, with four indicating that they possessed some level of familiarity (S1, S2, S4, S5) and two reporting very high levels of familiarity (S3, S6).

4.2.4 Integration of Children's Voice in Climate Strategies

Children's voices are integrated to a limited extent in most organizations (S1, S2, S4, S5, S6). One organization reported moderate integration (S3).

4.2.5 Youth Participation in Climate Initiatives.

Several methods are employed to foster youth participation, including the representation of young people in decision-making bodies (S1, S4, S5), the organization of youth-focused outreach and engagement events (S2, S3, S5, S6), and collaboration with youth-led organizations (S2).

4.2.6 Measuring the Effectiveness of Youth Participation.

The metrics that were used included the quantity of youth participants (S1, S2, S4), the quality of youth contributions (S1, S3, S5, S6), the impact on the processes of decision-making (S1), and the changes that occurred in youth knowledge or attitudes (S1).

4.2.7 Prioritization of Current Harm versus Long-term Climate Risks.

All participants placed a greater emphasis on current harm and requirements than on long-term climate risks (S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6). This was justified by the critical pressure on frontline services (S1) and the fact that organizational roles primarily focused on addressing immediate harm (S2, S3, S6).

There were some quantitative comments of note:

'At the moment yes, as pressure on front line services are critical at present' (1)

'Safeguarding Partnerships always prioritise harm and need for both children and adults because that is their role. We are not involved as an organisation in any long term climate change risk' (2)

'No, climate change does not fit the definition for child protection' (3)

'We are only really able to focus on current threats with the resources we have' (6)

According to the responses regarding the specific issue of youth engagement, all respondents reported that they were familiar with the COP28UAE objective of encouraging youth participation and believed that young people's perspectives were incorporated into their local authorities broader climate action plans. However, additional remarks indicated that this area was not considered a primary concern for child protection or a remit of the SCP.

'It is xx County Council and District and Boroughs who explore climate change risks. The Safeguarding Partnership are not currently involved in this.' (2)

'Climate change is a core part of local curriculum's, policies and strategies, with clear local targets set.' (3)

Thus, according to the survey findings, child protection agencies are not placing high priority on climate change as a strategic threat, opting instead to concentrate on immediate and existing concerns. This suggests minimal proactive action by SCPs is being taken to mitigate the effects of climate change on children. While awareness of global climate initiatives, such as the COP28UAE resolutions, was found to vary, the incorporation of children's voices into climate strategies was generally insufficient. Agencies employ various tactics to encourage youth participation in climate initiatives; however, the success of these efforts is primarily evaluated

based on participation numbers and the quality of contributions. Evidently, immediate harm and needs are given greater weight than long-term climate risks in the priorities of SCPs.

5. DISCUSSION

Based on the results, it can be inferred that climate change and related strategies, including youth participation and feedback as well as climate change education, are acknowledged at the local authority level but are not regarded as specific child safeguarding issues by SCP agencies. Consequently, the question arises as to who is responsible for addressing the specific impacts of climate change on children, identifying the safeguarding risks to them, and implementing their active participation in decision making, if not with the designated child protection agencies. Although the UK government has a 'Sustainability and climate change: a strategy for the education and children's services systems' that is overseen by the Ministry of Education (Gov.UK, 2023b), it does not specifically reference the resolutions of COP28UAE, which was published contemporaneously in December 2023. The strategy outlines the government's commitments up to 2030 and emphasizes the importance of child participation without providing specific mechanisms for implementation. The strategic mission of the strategy includes increasing children's education and awareness of climate change, supporting the development of green jobs and skills, encouraging children to spend more time in nature, and encouraging them to support local environmental improvements. The strategy also calls for educational buildings and activities to work towards net zero. While this strategy is aimed at Education and Children's social care services, it does not address risks to children, such as increased exposure to violence, trafficking, mental and physical health issues, dislocation, interrupted education, and economic stress, as discussed previously in this paper.

In addition to state agencies in the United Kingdom, the third sector plays a valuable role in safeguarding children by providing support, hotlines, education, and fundraising. Among the country's largest national charities, all acknowledged the importance of climate change for children. Barnardo's, for example, aligns with the UNCRC's call for children's involvement in major decision-making processes (Banardos, 2023); however, its activities related to climate change appear to be limited to recycling and utilizing renewable energy sources. Save the Children UK serves as a platform for sharing the global consequences of climate change and promoting activism and change (Save the Children UK, 2024). Other prominent charities, such as The Children's Society and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, advocate for child involvement, education, prevention programs, and fundraising, although these efforts are not necessarily targeted specifically to address climate change (NSPCC, 2024; The Children's Society, 2024).

When we consider findings from the literature review, it becomes evident that climate change is poised to have significant impacts, including increasing instances of 'eco-distress,' solastalgia, and potential effects on mental health among children. There is growing recognition of the critical importance of incorporating children's voices into discussions and setting priorities, yet these aspects are not currently central to the core business of SCPs. The following question

arises: should climate change be a priority for SCPs? Despite the current resource and funding constraints that challenge SCPs in addressing immediate issues, overlooking future risks associated with climate change could have profound consequences. By integrating climate considerations into their priorities, SCPs can proactively promote resilience against climate-related risks, educate communities about these risks, and develop response strategies that safeguard children's well-being amid environmental changes. Failure to do so could result in increased future demands and challenges that could overwhelm the current safeguarding efforts. Therefore, while the immediate tasks are pressing, SCPs should consider planning for the future to ensure sustainable and effective protection of children in the face of climate change impacts. It is evident that other areas and agencies are working with young people to address climate however this is not under a banner of child protection. SCPs, local authorities and third sector agencies could benefit from a more coordinated approach, recognising that the impacts of climate change for children are a protection issues as well as education and health matters.

While it is evident from the document review that SCPs in England and Wales are not currently implementing the principles of COP28UAE in considering climate change as a child protection issue per se, there are limitations to this study. Although the document review was extensive, it pertained only to England and Wales. The low survey response rate of 4% makes it impossible to draw meaningful conclusions. Furthermore, there are an additional thirty-seven countries that also signed the COP28UAE resolution, and more research is needed to assess the levels of implementation of the resolution across these nations and to identify the best practices for development.

6. CONCLUSION

The notion of procedural justice is well established. The idea of children's protective services fostering children's participation in addressing their climate change concerns and generating confidence in the responsible agencies by doing so is another iteration of this theory. However, while the COP28UAE presented these concepts and resolutions from an internationally recognised but time-limited platform, the implementation of such resolutions in the long term by child protective agencies, who are already grappling with high demand in the present, appears to be challenging within England and Wales. Key opportunities of gaining children's trust and confidence in the state's ability to protect them are being missed where genuine and active participation is not in place. Governance and ownership of the adoption and implementation of COP28UAE principles are crucial to their success. Despite its limitations, this study has identified that there was an awareness of the COP28UAE mission and generic activities are taking place. However, the UK number of specific impacts of climate change for children have not been classified as significant risks of harm nor categorised as child protection issues.

Developments over the past two years including two further rounds of COP (following the completion of the survey) indicate that climate-related stress, disrupted routines, forced mobility, and concerns about future security are increasingly part of the lived experience of children and young people. Yet these emerging pressures remain largely unrecognised within statutory

safeguarding priorities in England and Wales. Strengthening children's participation in these discussions is not simply a matter of aligning with international expectations; it represents a practical and protective response to an evolving source of anxiety and harm. By acknowledging these pressures and creating opportunities for children to express their concerns about the changing environment, safeguarding agencies have the opportunity to enhance trust, demonstrate procedural fairness, and future-proof their practice in an era of growing environmental uncertainty. Recognising climate-related pressures within safeguarding practice is therefore not only a matter of children's rights, but also a core component of long-term public-safety preparedness. This study highlights the need for further research to bridge the knowledge gap between the theory and resolutions of COPs and the practicalities of implementation.

DECLARATIONS

1. Use of AI Tools

During the preparation of this work the authors used GPT-4 (Open AI accessed July 2024) to help categorise the websites and open-source documents of the SCPs. All AI outputs were subsequently reviewed and validated by the authors. Paperpal was used of grammatical and spelling checks.

2. Grant Funding

There was no funding associated with this research.

3. Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interests associated with this research

4. Ethical Approval

Approval was granted by the authors institution ethic committee at the time the research was conducted.

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