



**To/
Councillor Elliot King
Cabinet Member for Children
Services**

BY EMAIL

cc: Cabinet Members

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Scrutiny

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Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Member for Children Services following the meeting of the Committee on 16 March 2021. It is about delivery of the Council's Children & Young People's Rights Scheme. A response is required by 13 May 2021.

Dear Councillor King,

Scrutiny Programme Committee – 16 March

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 16 March 2021, in which we considered progress with the implementation of the Children & Young People's (CYP) Rights Scheme.

Since adoption and launch of the Scheme by Cabinet in 2014, representing a formal public commitment to Children's Rights, the Committee has been reviewing progress each year, supported by the production of an annual report. The Committee however, last reviewed it in November 2018, with the pandemic delaying ability to review further until now. This scrutiny ensures monitoring and challenge to work undertaken, compliance with the Council's duty to have due regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the way the CYP Rights Scheme is being implemented and embedded across the Council, and assessing its impact on children and young people.

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The Committee was provided with a progress report reflecting on period September 2018 – March 2020, as well as a ‘bridging’ report looking back at last year and impact of the pandemic. We recognised the part played by former Cabinet Member, Councillor Sam Pritchard, who oversaw this work during most of the reporting period discussed. The ‘bridging’ report covered lessons learned over the last year, in which we also noted the restructuring and remodelling of children’s rights work, and included a proposed draft of Children and Young People’s Rights Scheme 2021-23 that will be consulted upon later this year.

We are grateful to the lead officers, particularly our Children’s Rights Coordinator, Katie Spendiff, for their contribution to the session, who in addition to the written material provided spoke in detail about the progress, achievements, and impact made, as well as current issues and challenges. The Committee was very impressed with the passion that officers displayed when talking about this work.

This letter reflects on what we learnt from the discussion, shares comments and views of the Committee on how well the Rights Scheme is being put into action and the embedding of Children’s Rights across the Council, and highlights any outstanding issues / actions for your response - main issues summarised below.

The Committee was particularly interested in how children’s rights have been protected over the last year. We heard about work carried out and efforts to ensure continued interaction with children and young people, who have been greatly affected by pandemic. Officers were proud of the way in which Council services were quickly adapted and tailored during the pandemic to continue to provide information, advice, and support services to children and young people, making greater use of digital tools / social media to improve accessibility to services. Swansea’s Play Service continued to support children’s right to play and relax. We also asked about how rights coming out of the school environment are having a wider impact across all aspects of life, including relationship with the work of the Council and services. We noted many examples of engagement practice during lockdown, including a first in terms of young people’s involvement in interview panels, participating in both the recruitment of Head of Child and Family Services and the Director of Education.

The Committee asked whether there were specific areas of concern, or that need focus on, as we come out of lockdown and focus on recovery. We noted that children and young people have been able to share their experiences through consultation exercises, which has helped to map the issues and challenges, and informed actions taken by the Council and schools. The major concern has been that for those who may be traditionally disadvantaged, the pandemic has exacerbated inequalities, and worsened the well-being and mental health of children and young people with enforced restrictions on rights. Reaching the most vulnerable is an ongoing challenge.

Digital inclusion is also still an issue for many. One of gaps in engagement and involvement identified was around bringing children and young people closer to decision-makers, particular direct dialogue with the most senior councillors and officers. We noted efforts would be made in the coming year to explore and co-produce appropriate ways to increase the accessibility of decision-makers to children and young people and the opportunities for meaningful engagement in the decisions that affect them. We also must build on the fact that 16 and 17 year olds can now vote in local elections and need to improve understanding of the work of the Council, local democracy and politics at an earlier age so they can make informed choices, and value their involvement and input across the Council.

We also heard how the experience has informed thinking about how we can best engage in the future, and make sure the CYP Rights Scheme remains fit for the purpose. We were pleased to hear that work done on reviewing and refreshing the CYP Rights Scheme and current development of a new draft as an accessible 'plan on a page' that has received praise from the Children's Commissioner for Wales who has held it up as an example of good practice to share with others. We were told that the new draft is better aligned with national principles for a rights based approach to children that will help embed a whole-Council approach and will be supported by an action plan that can evidence of tangible outcomes, with better ability to benchmark and measure / monitor performance. We welcome this and understand there will be consultation on the draft during 2021.

We were told that a review and restructure of the Council's Life Stages Team, which has remit for the co-ordination of children's rights, along with the re-launch of Swansea's Children's Rights Network, has refined focus on partnership, rights-based policy and involvement of stakeholders, to support inclusive rights based practice moving forward. This should also better enable the voice of children and young people to be heard. We noted that in response to survey feedback and engagement work with children, young people and practitioners, a 'Right of the Month' approach is to be trialled as a council wide mechanism for engaging children and young people in matters that affect them. Resources and consultations will focus on a particular right and resources circulated through social media, the Children's Rights Network and to individual schools for use.

We talked about one of the features of our Rights Scheme and commitment to extend existing good rights-based practice, by rolling out a city-wide commitment to UNICEF's Rights Respecting Schools Award. We acknowledged that significant progress has been made since 2014 in engaging and supporting schools through this journey, with the participation of 98% of schools, and 20% achieving Gold status. We noted that further work, which has been delivered in partnership with UNICEF, has been affected by the pandemic; however, it is expected there will be a new way of working on children's rights, with the development of the new curriculum and understanding that ESYTN inspections will cover this aspect of individual school

performance within their review framework. Committee members felt that schools should be encouraged to reflect their commitment to embedding children's rights and being 'rights respecting' in any school prospectuses and communications, if not already doing so. It would be good to have a UNCRC champion in every school.

In conclusion, the Committee commends the excellent annual report and work carried out over the last year, and welcomes the planned improvements and actions to address identified issues and challenges.

Your Response

We hope that you find the contents of this letter useful and would welcome any comments on anything within, however would ask you to provide a formal response to the following issue:

We look to forward to the next progress report and demonstrating how children's rights have been embedded across the Council. As part of your plans, you particularly mentioned an ambition to ensure all departments challenge themselves and consider how children and young people can be involved, for example in the process of recruitment and developing policies, and where they are involved ensuring that they are given feedback to show young people that their views are valued in that process. There should be a mechanism in place to ensure this happens on a regular basis across the Council that is more than a tick-box exercise. Can you share with us your thinking as to how this might be achieved?

Please provide the response to this and any other comments about our letter by 13 May. We will then include both letters in the agenda of the next available Committee meeting.

Yours sincerely,



COUNCILLOR PETER BLACK

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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