

CABINET STATEMENT

Written Statement: Children's rights in Wales

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We have made significant progress in Wales in upholding children's rights, particularly in relation to two specific recommendations made by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child Concluding Observations Report in 2016 – introducing legislation to remove the defence of reasonable punishment and reducing the voting age for young people.

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Children (Abolition of Defence of Reasonable Punishment) (Wales) Act 2020,

I am delighted the Children (Abolition of Defence of Reasonable Punishment) (Wales) Act 2020 has been signed into Welsh law. We should be proud our nation has taken forward this important reform to ensure children are protected from physical punishment. This is a right afforded to every child, in accordance with article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

When the Act comes into force on 21 March 2022 the defence of reasonable punishment will no longer be available within Wales. This will mean that physical punishment of children is prohibited.

We are promoting positive parenting, including positive alternatives to physical punishment, through our Parenting – Give it Time campaign; guidance for parenting practitioners and through programmes like Flying Start and Families First. It is our aim that the change in the law, combined with an awareness-raising campaign and support for parents, will reduce both the use and tolerance of the physical punishment of children in Wales.

The Senedd and Elections (Wales) Act 2020

Giving young people a voice in our democracy encourages life-long voting habits and engagement. The Senedd and Elections (Wales) Act 2020 extends the right to vote in Senedd elections to 16 and 17-year-olds and qualifying foreign citizens.

To enable 16 and 17-year-olds to vote in local government elections, the Welsh Government has introduced the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Bill.

Passing the legislation is only a first step to giving young people their rights to say what they think should happen about decisions which affect them. We are working to improve political literacy and inspire young people to engage in democratic debate and understand why they should register to vote.

This anniversary takes place during unprecedented times. Our children and young people have faced – and will continue to face – challenges as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Children's rights remain at the heart of the work of the Welsh Government. This is one of the reasons, together with the Children's Commissioner for Wales, Children in Wales and the Youth Parliament, I launched the *Coronavirus and Me* survey in May. This was a UK first and recognised by UNICEF as an example to be followed by countries across the globe.

It gave children and young people the opportunity to tell us about their experiences, feelings and worries about the pandemic. More than 23,700 children and young people took part. You can view the initial findings here <https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/coronavirus-and-me-results/>.

The results have already informed Welsh Government decisions. The majority of children said they were worried about missing out on their education. We have listened to and acted on this feedback, providing all pupils with the opportunity to check in, catch up and prepare for summer and September.

Supporting the emotional and mental wellbeing of children and young people is a priority for us. As part of our whole school approach to emotional and mental wellbeing, we have announced a range of support for learners. We are also developing teacher training modules on child development, mental health and neurodiversity to ensure teachers are able to spot the early signs of problems in the classroom and know how and when to refer to specialist services if and when required.

We continue to invest to improve specialist child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) for all those who need it and we are working to improve access for young people, including reducing waiting times and establishing neurodevelopment teams in each health board. Fewer children and young people have are waiting a long time to access specialist CAMHS support.

We know many families rely on free school meals to ensure their child receives a healthy meal every day. The Welsh Government, together with the Welsh Local Government Association, launched a campaign to ensure every pupil entitled to receive free school lunches and free school milk receives them. On 30 May, 37% more children were in receipt of free school meals than on 14 January. The Welsh Government has allocated an additional £40m to ensure all eligible children continue to receive free school meals throughout the summer. We are also ensuring vulnerable individuals and families seeking urgent support and access to food via independent food banks are provided with food.

Children's Rights Scheme

We are changing our approach to reporting progress in relation to children's rights. Our 2014 children's rights scheme set out our intention to report compliance against the due regard duty under section 1 of the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011 every two-and-a-half years – a more ambitious timeline than the five-year reporting cycle required by section 4 of the Measure.

In light of the coronavirus pandemic and the need to focus resources towards the response, we will be reverting to the five-year reporting cycle, which is based on article 44(1)(b) of the UNCRC. This will also allow us to focus on an updated children's rights scheme, which we intend to publish for consultation in due course. We will report compliance against the due regard duty in January 2023, covering the period February 2018 to December 2022.

As the Deputy Minister with responsibility for children I try to do everything in my power to put children and young people at the forefront of the conversation. I hope to arrange an interactive event with young people early in the Spring 2021 to celebrate the achievements of the children's agenda in Wales.

As we look towards restart and recovery the Welsh Government will continue to take every opportunity to reinforce and strengthen our commitment to ensuring children and young people are able to live their lives in a way that allows them to flourish in a safe and nurturing environment. Our commitment to children's rights remains resolute.

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