

# AMPLIFY!

How to maximise young people's voices through your secondary school council.

July 2021



# Foreword (1):

## By Jaqueline Argent, 18, member of the Children's Commissioner for Wales' Advisory Panel

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The school council is an incredibly important part of a student's school life. It is the body that facilitates student voice and ensures that students are actively involved in decision making. This report aims to encourage more students to participate as well as improve the quality of participation. Hopefully in the coming years we will see more representative school councils enacting positive changes within their institutions.

The research does show that school councils can have a lack of diversity. This needs to change and hopefully this report will be the start of this. In order for school councils to do their job and improve the experience of students, they must be representative of the multitude of identities, cultures and experiences that form the student body!

The Young Person's Advisory Panel has worked closely with Sally's team to shape this project. I have been involved in this project from the beginning, from coming up with the aims to the writing of the report. I also helped to deliver workshops to other Advisory Panel members. Throughout this project, I was given multiple opportunities to give input and always felt listened to. I have been able to develop my own skills, while also making a difference for future generations. This has been fantastic opportunity and I am glad to have been involved in it!

# Foreword (2)

## By Professor Sally Holland, Children's Commissioner for Wales

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All the consultation work for this report took place before the pandemic. Publication was planned for the end of March 2020 but, given the unfolding emergency, this was delayed. The subsequent year has been a very difficult time for all education settings, who have faced continual disruptions. As I write this, in the last half of the summer term 2021, settings are still operating with restrictions in place. But despite this, the education profession is working relentlessly to support children and young people to be happy, safe and well, to play and socialise, and to learn, progress and get qualifications after this challenging year.

This is now a good time to consider how to boost young people's participation in taking this work forward next year. Across Wales, education settings are considering how they can best listen to learners and put their priorities at the heart of planning and delivery. Some schools have well developed participation approaches to do this, and by law all schools have a great mechanism - their school council. In Wales, this law was brought in as part of a commitment to the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

My first [Right Way Education Survey in 2018](#) showed that 42% of young people in secondary schools felt they could take part in decisions in school. This figure was far lower than the numbers of children and young people who felt able to participate in decisions in other settings, such as primary schools (72%) and special education schools (74%).

My team, which includes the young people on my Advisory Panel, decided it was important to investigate this further to find out what might make participation in secondary settings more effective. In 2019/20 we researched this issue, consulting with young people and professionals about how participation works in their schools and what challenges there are in ensuring young people can really take part in decision making.

The young people on my Advisory Panel have been essential to this work. As a diverse group, they experience their education in different types of settings, and have had a range of experiences of participation. Some young people on my panel are really proud of their effective school councils and the benefits these bring to their school; and some examples of schools that have developed participation methods that are really valued by young people are published as case studies in this report.

With their varied experiences, the young people on my Panel have given strategic direction to my team: sharing decision making about the aims of the project; developing consultation methods and questions; and advising us how participation could be more effective. The young people's knowledge about what happens in schools and their insight into what young people need and value means that this work is far stronger. And this is the point: young people are the experts in their own lives.

Schools that can effectively engage young people's experience and expertise in decision making will be happier, safer places where young people have stronger opportunities to develop their talents and skills to the full. With new legislation about to be implemented, settings are developing new approaches to curriculum, assessment and supporting additional learning needs. Now is an important moment to maximise opportunities for young people to take part. This will mean new approaches are informed by the young people whose lives they will affect.

# Background information

## The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

Children's human rights are protected by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Participation is a Guiding Principle of the UNCRC. Article 12, the right to have a say in decisions that affect you, is a clear articulation of this principle. Participatory rights are also expressed in Articles 13 and 17 around access to understandable information and in Articles 14; 15; 31 around rights to cultural participation. The right of children to participate in decisions is a cross-cutting right that must be experienced in order for children to experience the full 42 rights under the UNCRC. These include children's rights to equality and non-discrimination, to safety and protection from harm, and to be provided with the resources that they need to develop.

This means all children and young people need equitable opportunities to express their views. Without this, adults and professionals will not know whether children feel safe and will not know how effective services are in providing children with what they need to be healthy and to learn.

### Focus of this project: why secondary schools?

It is of equal importance that all children and young people experience their right to participation in all aspects of their lives and education. This report focuses on how young people experience this in secondary schools and how this could be improved. This is because the Commissioner's 2018 survey<sup>1</sup> of almost 7000 respondents showed that children in primary and special educational schools felt significantly more able to participate in decision making at their school than young people in secondary schools. Qualitative results of that survey indicated that there were particular challenges and barriers in secondary schools, which did not seem to affect other settings to the same extent.

The research carried out for this report has included other settings, such as primary and SEN settings, but these are referenced in this report largely to show comparative data. Schools that work with children aged 3-16 and 3-18 were also included in the data gathering but, when broken down by age, responses from 3-16/18 settings were broadly consistent with children of the same age in primary and secondary settings.

It is also the case that many children in Wales are not registered in formal school settings. Participation in informal education settings was not included in the remit for this research but the Children's Commissioner is focusing on experiences outside of formal education in other ongoing areas of work. These include enabling opportunities for participation through the Commissioner's [Community Ambassadors scheme](#), the Commissioner's [work](#) to ensure that all children experiencing home education are enabled to participate in decision making and the Commissioner's engagement with

<sup>1</sup> p.31 [Annual-Report-2018-19.pdf \(childcomwales.org.uk\)](#)

Education Other Than At School (EOTAS) through her programme of participatory work and her case work service.

Suggestions about how to improve are focused for secondary schools but other settings may also find these relevant and helpful.

# THE FINDINGS

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## How did we find evidence?

All the consultation for this work was completed between April 2019 and February 2020. It reflects the experiences and views of young people and adults before the pandemic.

The Commissioner's team researched young people's experiences of participation in schools between April 2019 — February 2020. This primary research was split into two phases:

### Phase One

- The Right Way Education Survey 2019  
Completed by 7404 children and young people and 360 teachers across 98 different school settings

### Phase Two

- A survey of School Governors  
Completed by 135 Governors
- A fact-finding survey for secondary school councils  
Completed by 24 secondary school councils
- Face-to-face consultation workshops in schools  
With 109 young people in 8 schools, across 5 local authority areas of Wales
- Two debates with young people about the effectiveness of school councils (in north and south Wales), with representatives from 21 secondary schools
- Face-to-face consultation workshops in community groups  
With 40 young people in 5 different community settings in 4 local authority areas of Wales
- Case study interviews, visits or reports about participation in 7 different settings, in 6 local authority areas
- Consultation and meetings with professionals including: Schools Effectiveness Division of Welsh Government; the All Wales Participation Workers Network; a discussion group with secondary teachers; each of the four consortia; the ADEW Governor Support Group and Estyn.

## Explanation of Research Approach and Analysis

### Phase One

The Right Way Education Survey 2019 received 7764 survey respondents altogether (although not all respondents completed every question): the sample comprised of 360 teachers and 7404 pupils. Responses were received from 98 different schools. Of these, 77% were primary schools, 18% were Secondary schools, 3% were SEN settings, and 2% were 3-16 or 3-18 settings. These percentages represent: 75 primary schools; 16 secondary schools; 3 x 3-16/18 schools; 2 x Special Education Needs settings.

A larger majority of the sample were from English speaking schools (86% of teachers compared with 9% Welsh and 5% bilingual), with almost a third of the teaching sample from Cardiff local authority (31%). Pupil participant numbers also declined with age (with fewer participants from the age of 15 upwards (ranging between 0-2% of sample); with most of the sample between the ages of 7-14. Of pupils' respondents, 6% identified as having a disability, and 7% preferred not to say whether they had a disability or not. Less than 1% identified as Trans (this represents 31 individual respondents) and 3% preferred not to state their gender.

Responses were organised and analysed according to the following: school setting (Primary school, Secondary School, SEN school or 3-16/18 school); gender; disability status; school language medium; age. Quantitative and qualitative data were analysed using cross-tabulation to examine the relationship between social groups/settings and experiences of participation.

Settings taking part in this survey also received their own personalised report that presented the responses of their pupils in comparison to national averages. This has enabled schools to understand the experiences of pupils and to set targets about how to ensure pupils experience their rights using the Children's Commissioners for schools, The Right Way: a children's rights approach to education in Wales.

### Phase Two

To further research some of the findings of The Right Way Education Survey 2019 the Commissioner's team developed additional surveys for **School Governors** and **School Councils**, respondent numbers are shown on page 7. The team also developed a range of **participatory activities** for young people from **school and community settings**, ensuring children and young people with **protected characteristics** could share their views. Details of the numbers of groups and survey respondents are also included on page 7. Settings participating in this work were:

Community based:

- A faith group setting;
- A youth group for Gypsy-Traveller young people;
- Two youth groups for BAME young people;
- A youth group of disabled young people;

School-based:

- Welsh language and English language secondary settings;
- A school-based LGBT group;
- Single sex setting — boys;



- Single sex setting — girls;
- A Pupil Referral Unit;
- Mainstream settings including young people with Additional Learning Needs.

Information from this second phase of work was analysed alongside The Right Way Education Survey 2019 and **professional consultation** (details on page 7) to provide our full evidence base.

**What does the evidence tell us?** [This infographic](#) shows **key findings from The Right Way Education Survey 2019**. This shows us how pupils experience their rights in different education settings and gave us the basis for the second phase of research.

## Summary of Findings about Participation

An analysis of the full evidence gathered for this report reveals the following key findings:

1. School councils are valued and are seen as important across school settings
2. Young people in secondary schools find school councils less valuable than children and young people in other school settings
3. Young people in secondary schools feel less able to participate than children and young people in other settings
4. Effective participation supports and enables young people's wellbeing
5. Young people with protected characteristics don't always feel they have equal opportunities to participate
6. Young people that are less academically or socially confident don't have equal opportunities to participate
7. Many young people feel that their school council does not link to a wider structure of participation and operates in isolation from the rest of the school community
8. Pupils are not always chosen for the school council in a way that is perceived as fair nor in a way that is in line with regulations
9. Many governing bodies are not regularly sharing decision making with school councils and not all secondary school governing bodies follow regulations around Associate Pupil Governors
10. Young people in secondary schools feel less able to take part in decision making about their learning than those in other settings

## Discussion of Key Findings

This section takes each of the numbered findings in turn and presents the evidence informing each one. It also presents six case studies of participation, each of which has been valued by young people and which shows how practice at a school or local authority level has prevented or overcome some of the challenges identified.

### Key Finding 1. School councils are valued and are seen as important across school settings

- In all settings children and young people view school councils as an important way that children and young people can participate in decision-making. The Right Way Education Survey 2019 shows that **only 8% of children and young people that are a member of a school council (across all settings) say they do *not* have the chance to make decisions.** Comments on this survey reflect this too: school councils are frequently mentioned by children and young people as a key factor allowing shared participation.
- Young people taking part in this research describe **many changes** that school councils have made in Wales, these include:
  - Changing the school uniform
  - Raising awareness of children's rights
  - Making sure water fountains were installed
  - Changing the school canteen menu
  - Developing the range of activities and sports on offer
  - Changing the organisation of the school day and timings of breaks
  - Initiating community activities such as intergenerational groups

- Teachers from all settings, including secondary, completing The Right Way Education survey 2019 also describe the school council as valuable and note the positive ways that councils have contributed to schools and their wider communities.

## **Key Finding 2: Young people in secondary schools find school councils less valuable than children and young people in other school settings**

- School councils are viewed by young people as an important factor in helping them experience their rights but secondary school pupils feel less positive than those in primary or SEN schools. **Only 33% of pupils in secondary schools feel that school councils discuss issues that are important to them**, compared with 85% in primary and 100% in SEN schools. Primary school and SEN teachers completing The Right Way Education Survey 2019 also view the potential of school councils to create changes and give pupils a voice as greater than teachers in secondary settings, this mirrors the pupils' responses though with less extreme a difference.
- Young people **do not always have ownership of school council proceedings**. In over half of the 24 school councils completing our School Council Survey, pupils decide what the school council does and discusses, but in 7 of 24 schools this is decided by teachers. A number of teachers in The Right Way Education Survey 2019 also advocate giving pupils greater amount of control over school council proceedings:

*"The agenda should be set by the learners themselves."* (Secondary Teacher, The Right Way Education Survey 2019)

- As expected, those on school councils / pupil voice groups were more likely to report having a say over school spending but this is perhaps not as high as it could be for respondents on pupil voice / school council groups: 22% overall said they did not have a say over spending and a further 33% were unsure if they had a say over this. This raises the question of **how much decision making capability school councils have over school policies and budget**.
- Teachers and young people feel that there is **not enough time in secondary school** for school councils. Over half of the 24 secondary school councils surveyed in our School Council survey say that teachers did not have enough time to support the school council. A common theme in teacher's qualitative responses to surveys is the need to increase the regularity and duration of meetings.

*"More time to plan, evaluate and appraise the children's role and work needs to be given to all members of the school council."* (Teacher Respondent, The Right Way Education Survey 2019);

*"One teacher trying to fit it into break, lunch and assembly times is not enough."* (Teacher Respondent, The Right Way Education Survey 2019)"

- Teachers in face-to-face consultation also agreed with this, highlighting **constraints to the time that professionals and young people** could give to school councils. These were: the pressures of exams mean that young people in older year groups cannot prioritise taking part in the school council; and teacher workload leading to an inability for link teachers to give sufficient time to the school council. Young people in workshops supported these suggestions:

*"Because in comp the school is more preoccupied in making sure you learn ready for your tests but in primary there is more time to listen to children."* (Workshop Participant, Secondary School)

- Young people in workshops also highlighted the need for school councils in secondary schools to be more enjoyable and interesting:

*"We don't do much in my school council. It's the same thing all the time and it can be boring."*  
(Workshop Participant, BAME Youth Group)

- Participants in face-to-face activities also highlighted frustrations with the inability of school councils to bring about real change,

*"Dyle fed dim cymryd blynyddoedd i dadflocio tai bach."* (Secondary School Debate Participant)  
*"It shouldn't take years to unblock a toilet"*

### Key Finding 3: Young people in secondary schools feel less able to participate than children and young people in other settings

- Fewer young people in secondary schools feel they can participate in decision making in secondary school compared with primary and SEN settings. The Right Way Education Survey 2019 shows **43% of respondents in secondary schools feel they have the chance to take part in decisions** within their schools compared to 74% of primary school respondents and 86% of respondents from SEN settings.
- Primary school qualitative responses to The Right Way Education Survey 2019 are overwhelmingly positive about their ability to participate, many citing pupil groups and ideas boxes. But there are **more negative responses than positive** from secondary school pupils, and some indicate that young people in secondary schools can view participation as ineffective:

*"Regardless of what committee we are in we cannot make any meaningful decisions and despite being a curriculum member of the school committee I was not invited to any meetings."* (Secondary School Respondent to The Right Way Education Survey 2019)

*"Decisions are made by the teachers the majority of the time, not pupils."* (Secondary School Respondent to The Right Way Education Survey 2019)

- Only **23% of pupils in secondary schools feel they have a say over school policies** (compared with 50% in primary schools). However, this was one of the very few answers to which teacher responses showed a discrepancy as teachers in secondary schools are more likely to report consulting with children in the creation of school policies than those in primary settings (46% of secondary teachers report this compared with 28% of primary teachers).
- Only **17% of secondary pupils say they have a say over spending money** within their schools. Again, this is reported as less likely than in primary schools (44%) and SEN settings (40%). In this instance teachers' responses mirror those of pupils, with **only 6% of secondary school teachers** reporting that young people are involved in setting school budgets.
- Participatory work with young people explored why there was this difference between settings. Several suggestions were put forward, the most frequently suggested were:
  - The size of the setting
  - The maturity and understanding of pupils
  - The pressures of exams
  - That teachers in secondary schools care less than in primary schools
  - That pupils don't want to participate as they get older

*"When you're younger your requests are smaller and cheaper."* (Workshop Participant, Secondary School)

*"When they're younger they don't see the bigger problems."* (Workshop Participant, Secondary School)

*"We're not cute anymore."* (Workshop Participant, Secondary School)

*"Become more self-aware about what people think and you don't want to get involved."* (Workshop Participant, Secondary School)

# Case study: A range of ways to enable ownership of decision making

**Cowbridge Comprehensive School** in the Vale of Glamorgan (over 1500 pupils on roll), has an active school council that links into wider participation opportunities across the school.

## School council

The school council meets termly as a whole body. In addition to this the school council is further divided into student-led committees and year councils, whose role it is to communicate the work of the council to the rest of the school. Committees are delegated responsibilities from the school council, who liaise with staff leaders. These committees include a healthy eating committee, eco committee, LGBT committee, and children's rights committee. The school council's ideas are considered by the leadership of the school on a weekly basis in meetings between the head boy and girl and the headteacher.

## Other participation opportunities

As well as the committees, project groups are formed to plan and oversee awareness days and fundraising events and these groups can initiate ideas and make decisions with the support of staff. Throughout the year, awareness days for causes such as mental health, sepsis, and autism are initiated and led through student planning. Assemblies, student led lessons, and wellbeing sessions are a part of awareness raising days. Pupils have opportunities to develop leadership skills through running the leavers committee, supporting year 6 pupils during transition days, and taking an active role in the Medics Debating group. Other opportunities for students include the school's TV station Cowbridge Comprehensive Television (CCTV) and the Print school magazine.

## Impact

Young people in Cowbridge report benefitting from the changes made through student participation and the school council in particular. They note the development of various skills through being a part of the school council, such as leadership, resilience, and organisational skills and describe the positive experiences of making change within and outside of the classroom. The wider community has also benefitted from pupil-led activities such as the Senior Citizens Concerts and the regular volunteering of pupils as part of 'Dementia Friendly Cowbridge'.

**"Proactive projects promote a caring ethos throughout the school for both staff and pupils."** (Teacher, Cowbridge)

**"We have both learnt a lot about ourselves and leadership as it has been a great platform for us to expand our horizons."** (Young person, Cowbridge)

## Key Finding 4: Effective participation supports and enables young people's wellbeing

- Young people in workshops describe the impact of taking part in an effective school council or other pupil voice group as overwhelmingly positive, identifying the following benefits:
  - Feeling proud to represent others
  - Feeling proud to make change
  - Feeling part of a team
  - Feeling happy
  - Feeling listened to
  - Feeling encouraged to take part again
  - Feeling a sense of belonging

*"It felt good, all of us coming together to...make our voice heard."* (Workshop participant, Secondary School)

*"It feels great to make a change that positively affects a large group of people."* (Workshop Participant, Secondary School)

- Discussion groups with teachers also highlight the value of participation for the wellbeing and confidence of individual pupils. Teachers describe individual young people that have grown in confidence by taking part in school councils and the pride of young people in making changes to their school.
- In addition to highlighting how taking part supported their wellbeing young people in face-to-face workshops also described how it feels when they are not included or not listened to, and identified the following:
  - Feeling annoyed
  - Feeling angry
  - Feeling ignored
  - Feeling disrespected
  - Feeling that they or their opinions don't matter
  - Feeling discouraged to take part again
  - Feeling left out

*"You just stop trying."* (Workshop Participant, Secondary School)

*"You just don't want to be involved anymore."* (Workshop Participant, Secondary School)

- These research findings are reinforced with wider national and international research into the impact of participation and activism on the wellbeing of young people. Research shows that taking positive actions to make changes<sup>2</sup> enhances the wellbeing and mental health of young people, as does belonging to a youth activism group<sup>3</sup>. Social participation and engagement is shown to lead to feelings of identification and belonging, and has also indicated effectiveness

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320346402\\_Exploring\\_the\\_Role\\_of\\_Engagement\\_on\\_Well-Being\\_and\\_Personal\\_Development\\_A\\_Review\\_of\\_Adolescent\\_and\\_Mental\\_Health\\_Activism](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320346402_Exploring_the_Role_of_Engagement_on_Well-Being_and_Personal_Development_A_Review_of_Adolescent_and_Mental_Health_Activism)

<sup>3</sup> <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/jcop.21914>

for improving symptoms of mental health issues and helping recovery<sup>4</sup>. Estyn inspection reports into individual school settings also show that where secondary schools are graded as showing 'Excellent' provision for wellbeing, participation is often noted as a strength of the school. A recent example of this is the 2019 inspection report for Ysgol Dyffryn Aman<sup>5</sup>, which notes the strength of the school council in ensuring pupils feel welcome and included in school.

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<sup>4</sup> Anne C. Montague and Francisco Jose Eiroa-Orosa *Exploring the Role of Engagement on Well-Being and Personal Development: A Review of Adolescent and Mental Health Activism* in *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Positive Psychology 2017*

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/sites/www.estyn.gov.wales/files/documents/Ysgol%20Dyffryn%20Aman%20en.pdf>



# Case Study: Participation to Support Health and Wellbeing

Secondary schools in Wales can participate in the School Health Research Network (SHRN). This network runs a biennial survey which is completed anonymously by all young people in the school. Flintshire Healthy Schools has supported all secondary schools in Flintshire to gain an in-depth understanding of young people's health and wellbeing through the analysis of individual school SHRN reports. In particular [Alun School](#) and [Hawarden High School](#) Councils have carried out extensive analysis of the county and their school reports with their school communities and have implemented actions across health and wellbeing topics at school and authority level. This has led to other Flintshire schools following this approach.

## Empowering young people with skills and understanding

The Healthy Schools team in Flintshire coordinated an event for School Councils called *Understanding Data and Action Planning*. This supported school councils to learn how to interpret their school data and consider how to prioritise areas for development. The Alun School Council helped create a template action plan which other schools could also use utilise when they received their whole school SHRN report.

## Young people as part of the change

Alun School Council and house councils analysed their SHRN report and then worked with staff, governors and parent groups to develop an action plan based on the data. Meeting weekly, the young people spent 2 months on the analysis and action plan, and then set actions to carry out over the next year (June 2018-July 2019).

In Hawarden High School a SHRN pupil working group was created which identified a list of pros and cons from the SHRN report, and then worked with 'House Reps' to select areas to focus on. Similarly to Alun School, they met weekly and spent 2 months on analysis and action plan, and then set actions for a 10-month period, which were supported by staff, governors and outside agencies.

## Collaboration between schools

Members from Alun School Council visited Hawarden High school in January 2019 to share progress and identify shared priorities for collaboration. In June 2019 pupils and staff from both schools presented at the North Wales SHRN Conference on the approach to SHRN in Flintshire.

## Impact

Outcomes of this work identified by the schools have included improved 'morale' for pupils in school and pupils reporting better wellbeing. Staff have also reported raised awareness about areas to celebrate and to focus on in school, and are 'having more sensitive conversations with pupils'. Parents also have raised awareness of health and wellbeing issues.

Claire Sinnot, Learning Advisor, Flintshire County Council, says: *"This has placed pupil voice at the heart of the local authority's health and wellbeing planning. Pupils have been encouraged to take ownership of their school SHRN report and implement a meaningful plan they can take forward."*

Young people have also shared their responses:

*"It has taught me and my peers a lot about health and made us realise the subjects we need to improve on to improve wellbeing. It has definitely made a big impact on the school in a positive way."* Sebastien, Year 10, Alun School

*"It has improved our school because we have ensured resources are available for pupils to learn about drugs, sex, relationships and pressure. We've made posters and PowerPoints about these issues. All schools should do this to make the school a better place, with the help of the student voice to get ideas."* Beth, Year 10, Hawarden School

## Key Finding 5: Young people with protected characteristics don't always feel they have equal opportunities to participate

- Young people that identified as trans ( $n=31$ ) feel far less likely to take part in decisions and feel their school council is less relevant to them. Across all settings, only 23% of trans respondents to The Right Way Education Survey feel they have decision making capabilities in their school, compared with over 60% of respondents who do not identify as trans. 77% of trans young people said the school council does not discuss issues of importance to them, compared to under 20% of respondents who do not identify as trans. They are also less likely to know what the school council does.
- Responses from disabled pupils ( $n= 464$ ) are almost always slightly less positive about participation than those without disability. For example, 21% of disabled young people say the school council doesn't discuss issues that are important to them, compared with 16% without a disability. Across all settings a smaller percentage of disabled children (55%) report feeling that they could make decisions in their schools compared with children without disabilities (60%).
- Young people and teachers express the desire for more equal representation from a more diverse range of young people. **Increasing diversity is the top suggestion from young people for how to improve their school council**, with 59% of respondents choosing this as the one thing that would improve their school council.
- Secondary school teachers are also less likely to agree that all pupil groups were represented on the school council than teachers in SEN or primary settings. A few teachers suggest that school councils should broaden their representation:

*"If more pupils were involved we could get a better idea of what different pupils need to help them in their education."* (Secondary Teacher, The Right Way Education Survey 2019)

*"Need more opportunities to support decision making for those students with communication difficulties."* (Secondary Teacher, The Right Way Education Survey 2019)

- Qualitative responses to The Right Way Education Survey 2019 didn't tend to mention discrimination based on protected characteristics as a barrier to young people taking part, but **feeling excluded from the school council is described by participants in community settings:**

*"There is no representative of different ethnicities on our school council."* (Workshop Participant, Faith Group Community Setting)

*"I don't know much about it [the School Council] and they do not promote it."* (Workshop Participant, Gypsy Traveller youth group)

*"The school council do not listen to dinner ticket boys."* (Workshop Participant, BAME youth group)

# Case study: Ensuring equality through participation

**Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Plasmawr** in Cardiff has just over 1,000 students on roll and ensures young people are not marginalised from participation due to gender or sexuality through an LGBT participation group. The school also has other active equality groups, including Balch (anti-racism) and Newid-ffem (feminism).

## Preventing and challenging discrimination

Digon (which means enough in Welsh) is the name of the LGBT inclusion group. Group members are LGBT pupils and LGBT allies. The first group included year 10-13 pupils but now Digon includes pupils of all ages. Digon was formed by pupils who witnessed homophobic bullying in the school and noted the challenges teachers experienced in preventing and tackling this behaviour. Since its inception in 2011, the group has changed their school policy on the response to homophobic bullying, held INSET session with teachers, and introduced new rules. The group has gone on to hold PSHE lessons within their school, as well as live-tweeting their lessons to engage more people in their message.

## Community engagement

Digon has also engaged with primary schools, presented materials at conferences, and contributed to a service at a local chapel. The group use rainbow week as an opportunity to continue to raise awareness of LGBT issues, marching at Pride events and fundraising for LGBT charities. Other recent campaigns include writing a letter to the Education Minister Kirsty Williams about the new RSE curriculum's lack of relevance to LGBT pupils, before marching to the Senedd to hand deliver their letter. The group has attracted national and international attention through their ongoing activism, with support from Sir Ian McKellen and Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

## Impact

Group members note that Digon has given an opportunity for pupils to express themselves freely and without fear about their sexuality. It has encouraged a culture of inclusion within their school, in which they note attitudes have been transformed for the better in the last few years. Other positive changes the group attribute to their work is the decline in the use of homophobic language and homophobic bullying within the school, mentioning that such occurrences have become extremely rare and are responded to promptly. The group is an example of a participatory opportunity created to include everyone and to make the school itself more inclusive.

*"Oedd pawb yn galw enwau ar y iard — neb yn teimlo'n ddiogel i ddod allan (cyn Digon)."* ("Everyone was name calling on the yard — nobody felt safe to come out (before Digon).") Young Person, YGG Plasmawr

*"Un o'r pethau wnaeth e (Ian McKellen) dweud oedd i fyw bywyd yn agored, ac fel grŵp rydym yn trio lledaenu'r neges yna."* ("One of the things he (Ian McKellen) said was to live your life openly, and as a group we're trying to spread that message.") Young Person, YGG Plasmawr

## Key Finding 6: Young people that are less academically or socially confident don't always have equal opportunities to participate

- Significant numbers of qualitative responses to The Right Way Education Survey 2019 say young people feel unable to take part due to **lack of confidence or shyness in speaking in front of others** (61 counted responses). Many demonstrate that a lack of confidence stopped them from taking part, and others note a sense of anxiety about public speaking as a barrier:

*"I'm probably not good enough."* (Secondary School Respondent, The Right Way Education Survey 2019);

*"I'm not confident."* (Secondary School Respondent, The Right Way Education Survey 2019);

*"I don't like talking in front of people."* (Secondary School Respondent, The Right Way Education Survey 2019);

*"I'm shy."* (Secondary School Respondent, The Right Way Education Survey 2019)

- Consistent with this, some young people acknowledge they are **able to have a voice because of their self-confidence** with public speaking:

*"I'm confident with speaking in front of others."* (Secondary School Respondent, The Right Way Education Survey 2019)

*"I'm not shy and I'll say what I think."* (Secondary School Respondent, The Right Way Education Survey 2019)

- A considerable number of qualitative responses to The Right Way Education Survey 2019 (40 counted responses) cite **discrimination on the basis of academic ability** or performance and behavior as a barrier to all young people taking part:

*"The teachers always pick the smart ones."* (Secondary School Respondent, The Right Way Education Survey 2019)

*"The school doesn't listen to underachieving pupils."* (Secondary School Respondent, The Right Way Education Survey 2019)

*"Our school lets some people speak out and some not because of behavior."* (Secondary School Respondent, The Right Way Education Survey 2019)

*"I'm on red report." [given reason for not able to take part in decisions]* (Secondary School Respondent, The Right Way Education Survey 2019)

- A significant number of respondents also say **lack of popularity** means they don't have a voice:

*"Because I'm awkward and no one likes me 😞"* (Secondary School Respondent, The Right Way Education Survey 2019)

*"Mae pobl sydd yn gwneud y penderfyniadau yn pobl poblogaidd."* (Secondary School Respondent, The Right Way Education Survey 2019)

- Similarly, a few young people say they feel **able to speak up due to their popularity** or due to being liked by teachers:

*"I'm on pupil parliament cos teachers like me."* (Secondary School Respondent, The Right Way Education Survey 2019)

*"Because I'm cool and smart."* (Secondary School Respondent, The Right Way Education Survey 2019)

- These findings are supported by face-to-face workshops. During every workshop in a secondary school settings young people identified the following groups of young people as being left out of their school council or other participation structures:
  - Young people that are more shy;
  - Young people that are less popular;
  - Young people that are less academically confident;
  - Young people that don't want to speak in public;
  - Young people that have issues with behavior.

*"Lower set don't get listened to as much — teachers might think they are not clever enough."* (Workshop Participant, Secondary School)

- Participants in workshops also suggested other reasons why not all young people felt able to take part, these included:
  - Young people having other priorities;
  - Peer pressure not to speak out.

*"Some don't want to be involved as it is too much work, they don't care."* (Workshop Participant, Pupil Referral Unit)

*"In secondary there is too many people — there is peer pressure not to speak out."* (Workshop Participant, Faith based community setting)

*"They don't want to waste their time."* (Workshop participant, Secondary School)

- In one workshop young people discussed the link between being different and lacking confidence, suggesting that some young people will face multiple barriers to participation where they have protected characteristics or other differences and also lack confidence:

*"Lack of confidence if you feel different and then you don't want to say anything."* (Workshop Participant, Secondary School)

### **Key Finding 7: Many young people feel that their school council does not link to a wider structure of participation and operates in isolation from the rest of the school community**

- Estyn note in their [2016 report](#) that having a clear structure of participation that reaches across the school is an important element of a strong approach to participation. Some survey responses illustrate that some schools do this, linking well to a wider structure that allows those not on councils to participate:

*"Mae'r ysgol yn cynnal llais y ddisgybl, mae hyn pryd mae pob disgybl dweud ei syniadau am beth mae nhw eisiau gweld newid yn yr ysgol, ac maen i gyd yn ddiennw."* *"The school runs pupil voice, this is when pupils say their ideas about what they want to change in the school, and it is all anonymous."*

(Secondary School Respondent, The Right Way Education Survey 2019)

- However, pupils **not on pupil voice groups or the school council feel less likely to take part in decisions**. The Right Way Education Survey 2019 shows that across all settings, 46% of those not on a participation group feel they don't take part in decisions, which compares to only 22% of children and young people that are members of participation groups.
- Over 80 comments in this survey suggested that **only those in pupil voice groups or councils were able to be involved in decision making**.

*“Dim ond y cyngor ysgol sy'n cael gwneud penderfyniadau, nid oes siawns i bawb mynegi eu barn.”  
[“Only the school council get to make decisions, there's not a chance for everyone to express their opinion”] (Secondary School Respondent, The Right Way Education Survey 2019)*

*“I won't be heard or listened to as much as I probably would if I was in a school club.” (Secondary School Respondent, The Right Way Education Survey 2019)*

- This was **reinforced by teachers** with 32% of secondary school teachers in The Right Way Education survey stating that 50% or less of pupils had decision making opportunities.
- There were also some comments that mentioned a **lack of positive outreach** from school councils.
- Teachers' responses also highlight a need for improved communication with the wider school.
- Workshops also showed that many young people liked the practice or idea of anonymous voting on issues for the school council to consider and that many feel their school does enable participation across the school, see our case study as an example.



# Case Study: Making Sure Everyone Can Participate

**Olchfa Comprehensive School in Swansea**, a school of over 1,700 pupils, has created a participation structure that ensures all young people's opinions are considered by using tutor time in form groups. This is done by linking a **decision making** group to a **consultation** group.

## Decision-Makers

The School Council is called 'The School Advisory Board', and is made up of over 30 pupils across all ages alongside parents, teachers and governors. The Board splits into sub-groups, each focusing on a particular area of school life. The purpose of each of the sub-groups is to set questions to find out what the school community feel about particular issues, and then make decisions based on this data.

## Consultation Group

Parallel to the Advisory Board is the 'Communication Team'. This team consists of 2 representatives from each year group, and these representatives cannot also sit on the Board. The Communication team distribute a monthly consultation survey which has been created by one of the sub-groups of the Advisory Board. The members present this survey to their form group during tutor time and the class splits into small groups to discuss each of the questions. They then feedback the opinions of each of the groups, ensuring each pupil in the school has a chance to consider the issue and share their opinions. A subgroup of the communication team then analyse data from the whole school and create a report for the Advisory Board. The Communication team also ensure that each form has a chance to raise any other issue they like to the Board through the monthly survey and they can be contacted by e mail at any time.

## Feedback to everyone

Importantly, the Communication team also make sure that each tutor group receives feedback on the results of last survey and the decisions taken as a result.

## Impact

Felix, Year 8, a member of the School Advisory Board, says, *"I enjoy being on the team, it's really good to help out and improve my school. I'm proud of some of the changes we're making together, we're setting up new equipment to relax and play and we've decided to have free water bottles in school, and we know this was really important for everyone. One way we could improve is to make a way that people can give us ideas anonymously too, in case they don't want to talk in form time."*



## Key Finding 8: Pupils are not always chosen for the school council in a way that is perceived as fair or in a way that is in line with regulations

- [The School Council \(Wales\) Regulations 2005](#) state, 'appointment to the school council must be by election in a secret ballot in which all registered pupils are entitled to vote for candidates (if any) in their year group or within their special educational needs resource base.' This goes onto explain that the only instance that this doesn't apply is 'where arrangements are made for all registered pupils to be members of the school council.'
- Our survey of 24 secondary school councils indicates that a voting system like this is used to elect school council members in most schools but **in some schools teachers decide** (5 of 24) or the chair of the school council decides (3 of 24).
- Surveys and workshops suggested that some **young people experience the voting process as a popularity contest**

*"People a lot of time only vote on their friends rather than who would fit best which is unfair."* (Workshop Participant, Secondary School)

- Other young people in workshops described election systems as fair, and discussion highlighted the following as **ways that young people thought voting could be done fairly**:
  - enabling anonymous voting so that young people didn't feel they had to vote for friends;
  - using an application system where young people would need to say why they should be voted for;
  - enabling different ways for young people to stand for elections so it wasn't just those who felt confident to speak publically;
  - including representatives from other groups in the school, not just year groups;
  - exploring diverse representation in tutor times and lessons to encourage different young people to stand.

## Key Finding 9: Many governing bodies are not regularly sharing decision making with school councils and not all secondary school governing bodies follow regulations around Associate Pupil Governors

- The [School Council \(Wales\) Regulations 2005](#) state, 'The head teacher of a school must ensure that the school council has the opportunity to nominate up to two pupils from years 11 to 13 (inclusive) from its membership to be associate pupil governors on the school's governing body.' There is further detail in the Regulations about how associate governors take part and in which decisions they should not participate. The Regulations also state how Governors need to communicate decisions to the School Council.
- Our School Council Survey shows **that 6 of 24 secondary schools completing the survey did not have representation through associated pupil governors** on the governing body. This is reinforced by meetings with professionals from local authorities: governor support units have described that they are also aware of several secondary schools in their area that do not include associate pupil governors.
- Professionals leading governor support in local authorities have also described that whilst there are some examples of Governing Bodies with well-developed practice in this area, **there are challenges faced by many schools in enabling pupils to be associate governors**. The following challenges have been identified:

- Training for associate pupil governors isn't mandatory and whilst some pupils do access training not all are given the opportunity to sufficiently develop their skills;
- Some governing bodies exclude pupil governors from decision making that they could be part of due to uncertainties around confidentiality and the appropriateness of including pupils;
- Training about participation and associate pupil governors is not mandatory for governors nor chairs of governors, and not all governors will have the understanding or skills to include young people. This is reinforced by our survey for school governors as 77% of the 135 Governors completing this survey had never had training about children's rights in their role;
- Young people in Years 11, 12 and 13 have competing priorities with exams and are absent from school during exam periods;
- Associate pupil governors also face challenges in meaningfully linking the work of the governing body and the school council and they need support to do this.
- This is reinforced by our survey for school governors as **only 27% of Governors completing this survey attended school council meetings**. Our School Council Survey also echoed this, with over **half of secondary schools (13/24) reporting that none of their governors attend their school council meetings**.
- The most common way that governors describe working with their school council is that the **Head teacher informs them** about the school council and communicates messages from the governing body to the school council. Many also include presentations from the school council and pupil voice groups as part of their meetings.
- The survey also indicated that **school councils are not influencing the decision making of the governing body on a regular basis**. 23% of respondents stated that their decision making was 'never' influenced by the school council; and only 6% stated that their decision making was influenced more than once a term. The most frequently chosen answer was that the school council influenced decision making 'about once a year', with 43% of respondents choosing this answer.
- Qualitative responses showed that while many governors feel they already work closely with their school council and other pupil participation groups, others highlighted the idea of **direct meetings with the school council as one way that could help improve joint decision making**.

# Case Study: Local Authority Support for Effective Participation

In common with several local authorities in Wales, [Pembrokeshire County Council](#) has conducted school visits and reviews to assess the effectiveness of participation and school councils over the last three years, in light of the national participation standards. This work has built on previous evaluations. Information gathered has enabled the authority to identify actions to improve participation in secondary schools.

## Learning for supporting adults

Responding to needs identified through reviews, Pembrokeshire County Council has offered training about participation to all school leadership teams and ensured that all school council link teachers have taken part in professional development in order to fulfil their role effectively. Training has also been delivered to hundreds of school governors. Other local authorities have also developed training for governors so they can better understand the role pupil participation can play in their work.

## Importance of participation in safeguarding

The safeguarding audit carried out by Pembrokeshire County Council has been adapted to reflect the importance of effective participation in keeping children safe. This is in recognition that safeguarding requires children and young people to have clear and effective opportunities to voice their experiences.

## Linking secondary school councils into local authority participation

All secondary schools send representatives to Pembrokeshire Youth Assembly, and these representatives are also expected to share information between the Youth Assembly and their School Councils. This means school councils are able to contribute to young people's participation at a local authority level. In addition to this, the authority organises half-termly 'Lunches with the Director' for specific groups of young people to talk about their views and experiences directly with the Director of Children and Schools in the authority.

## Impact

Young people value the link between the Youth Assembly and School Councils and feel it makes their decision making more informed as information can be shared between the different settings:

*"Being part of the Youth Assembly has helped me be aware of issues for young people and what is being done about them. It's also helped me to raise these issues in school."* Lucy, Year 10, Pembrokeshire Youth Assembly

*"It's nice to know you have someone in your corner so people can support you with an issue if you have one, for example in school."* Carys, Year 13, Pembrokeshire Youth Assembly.

## Key Finding 10: Young people in secondary schools feel less able to take part in decision making about their learning than those in other settings

- Young people in secondary schools demonstrate they have less feelings of choice about what they learn than children in primary and SEN settings. **Only 29% of young people in secondary schools agreed that they sometimes had choice about what they learn** (compared to 66% in primary schools and 85% in SEN settings). This is mirrored by teachers, **with 34% of secondary teachers stating that young people had choice about their learning** (compared to 64% primary and 65% SEN teachers)
- Similarly **only 46% of secondary school pupils agree** with 'I have chances to share what I think about my lessons', compared with 78% in primary schools and 71% in SEN settings.
- However, the proportion of teachers reporting obtaining feedback after lessons was actually higher in secondary settings than primary ones with 78% of secondary teachers reporting this. But the lower figure of 61% of secondary teachers reporting that they used pupil reflections to inform teaching and learning plans suggests that even though a clear majority of secondary respondents create opportunities for feedback there are more opportunities to use this information to inform planning.

# Case Study: Learning through active citizenship

**Crownbridge School** is a Special Day School in Torfaen for children and young people aged 2-19. Young people in the school council wanted to raise awareness of the difficulties of using a wheelchair in their local community. The Participation Officer in Torfaen was supported by Crownbridge School PTA to secure funding from the Preventing Hate Crime funding for community projects, in order for the young people to research and take actions to improve wheelchair accessibility in their local community. The school applied for this project to be part of the Lleisiau Bach Little Voices approach used by the Observatory on the Human Rights of Children based at Swansea and Bangor Universities.

## Young People as Researchers

Four pupils planned and carried out their research fieldwork by going out with the local PCSO to gather evidence on 'Go Pro' cameras over 5-6 weeks. They presented their findings in a research report and a campaign film.

## Young People as Campaigners

Their report shows how their findings illustrate infringement to their rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child; The Equality Act; The Public Sector Equality Duty and The United Nations Convention on the Rights for People with Disabilities.

## Impact

To share their evidence, the group initiated a meeting in the Council Chamber with key influencers and decision makers, where the council made commitments to bringing about changes. The young people are currently following up on the pledges made on the day by officers and attendees.

*"We want to show awareness and change people's mindset."* Kane, Year 13, Crownbridge School Council Member

*"I want to go the same places as everyone."* Jamie, Year 12, Crownbridge School Council Member

# DISCUSSION

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## Summary of areas for improvement

While school councils are seen by many in secondary schools as helpful in enabling young people's ability to participate in decision making, learner attitudes to school councils are more negative in secondary schools than in primary schools, and highlight a lack of sufficient time and a feeling that participation can be ineffective. On the whole primary and SEN school pupils provided much more positive responses to all questions about participation than those in secondary schools.

Effective participation is seen by young people as beneficial to their wellbeing and the importance of participation in enabling wellbeing should be prioritized by school leaders, teaching staff and governors. This would be supported by a similar recognition on the part of organisations that are supporting schools to achieve the whole school approach to wellbeing, including local authorities, the consortia and Estyn.

Many school councils would benefit if they were more diverse and more representative. More needs to be done to make sure young people with protected characteristics have an equal chance to be heard. Other groups of young people can also be marginalized, notably those with less academic or social confidence.

Secondary schools would benefit from considering how participation goes beyond the school council and links into a wider structure that enables all pupils to contribute opinions and ideas, and to receive information about decisions that have been taken. Schools should also make sure school council elections are in line with regulations and do more to make elections fair and representative.

Many governing bodies could also work more closely with their school council to increase opportunities for shared decision making and communication. There appears to be a need to develop the understanding and skills of governors about how this can best be achieved, and how associate pupil governors can best participate.

School councils would benefit from more opportunities to consider teaching and learning, as young people in secondary schools feel less able to take part in decisions about their curriculum and learning than in other settings.

## Policy and Current Context for Improvement

### Renew and Reform

In June 2021 Welsh Government published their 'renew and reform' [recovery plan](#). The plan sets out how the Welsh Government will use £150m in additional investment in 2021-22 to help the education system recover following the Covid-19 pandemic. The huge disruption faced by young people and education settings during the pandemic has led to a number of competing pressures for education settings, but at the top of the national plan for recovery is prioritising the wellbeing of young people, followed by prioritising their progression in learning.



Listening to young people's experience and enabling young people to take part in the decisions about how this can best be achieved is key. This is not only because disruption of this nature is new for the modern education system in Wales and we need to understand it better, but also because emerging evidence about the neurodevelopment of young people indicates that young people's involvement in decision making is an essential element to ensuring successful interventions of support<sup>6</sup>. Effective participation, of which school councils are an important part, will have positive impacts across all aspects of young people's experience in education. This includes supporting their wellbeing and progression following the disruption caused by the emergency situation.

## Participation

In recent years there have been important steps in Wales to better enable the participation of young people. The [National Participation Standards](#), refreshed in 2016, should guide professionals to ensure that local participation experiences across Wales are effective and meaningful. At a national level, the Senedd Ieuencid / Youth Parliament sat for the first time in February 2019. This is a hugely positive development to ensure young people's participation and representation at a national level. [The Senedd and Elections \(Wales\) Act 2020](#) lowered the minimum voting age of National Assembly and local elections to 16.

However, the national focus on effective participation in schools seems to have lost momentum in recent years. This is not uniformly the case. Estyn's 2016 report, [Pupil Participation: a best practice guide](#), built on three Estyn reports on participation published between 2008-9 and provided helpful examples and guidance about how schools can develop strong participation. Through their website, Welsh Government also makes available the 2011 [training activities](#) in pupil participation for teachers, governors and pupils, alongside some other activities and guidance relevant to participation in out-of-school settings. But the 2011 *Pupil Participation - Good Practice Guide* is no longer available on the Government website and a revised version has not been provided. Some local authorities still use historic training materials and guidance around school councils to develop understanding among governors, teachers and pupils, and others have developed their own materials. However consultation with local authorities suggests it is fair to say that providing resources or training to schools is not as widespread nor well-resourced as has historically been the case: many school councils do not receive training nor guidance themselves, and neither do their teachers and governors in relation to participation.

## A curriculum for political and citizenship education

Against this context it is essential that participation is inherent within the Curriculum for Wales and that the new curriculum enables the full development of political and citizenship education. Article 2 of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training<sup>7</sup> sets out how human rights education should be a clear aim of education. This sets out that human rights education and training encompasses:

- a. Education about human rights, which includes providing knowledge and understanding of human rights norms and principles, the values that underpin them and the mechanisms for their protection;
- b. Education through human rights, which includes learning and teaching in a way that respects the rights of both educators and learners;

<sup>6</sup> [Why Interventions to Influence Adolescent Behavior Often Fail but Could Succeed - PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 19 December 2011 \[on the report of the Third Committee \(A/66/457\)\] 66/137. United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training](#)



- c. Education for human rights, which includes empowering persons to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others.

Government's direct inclusion of these aims and principles in the [Curriculum for Wales](#) has the potential to be internationally significant and could put Wales at the forefront of human rights education. But for this impact to be achieved, Government, Local Authorities and Schools must view the role of the school council and wider participation as a core and vital part of learning and the school experience.

## Learning through experience

An experience of a school council (its election; operation; and communication with the wider school) is an experience of a democratic exercise. For many children and young people this is their most significant experience of taking part in a democratic structure: it is learning through human rights in the way outlined by the United Nations above. An experience that is positive, and in which all members of school community feel able to participate, will be a positive experience of a democratic structure. The converse will also be true.

## Participation in curriculum design

Schools also need support, under the subsidiarity model, to enable school-level participation in curriculum design. Government state clearly that [involving young people](#) is a step that all settings should include in curriculum design and that this '*is of itself a valuable learning experience, supporting inquiry and critical thinking.*'

Curriculum guidance on involvement explains that, *"It is important to recognise that there are different levels of participation, and that enabling learners to take part in curriculum design can take place in different forms. Learners can be informed about decisions, can be consulted about decisions, can share decision-making with adults or can own decision-making and set their own areas and questions for consideration by the wider school community. Different forms of participation will be appropriate at different points in curriculum design.*

*Curriculum design should also use a participation structure that ensures all groups of learners can participate, including those who can be marginalised.*<sup>8</sup>

Some schools have already developed participation structures that are well able to rise to this challenge. But other schools will need to develop their participation offer in order to enable children and young people to take part in curriculum design in the way outlined in curriculum guidance and that is also consistent with the [National Participation Standards](#). Using the suggestions for improvement in this report will help achieve this.

## Wellbeing

Participation should also be central to the framework [for embedding a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing](#). Young people's participation at a school level is a key element of

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<sup>8</sup> <https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/designing-your-curriculum/implementation-and-practical-considerations/>

supporting their wellbeing. As young people and wider research conveys<sup>9</sup>, being listened to and taken seriously enables the development of self-confidence and a sense of belonging.

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<sup>9</sup> For more information about young people's experience of participation and wellbeing see page 16

# GREAT SCHOOL COUNCIL

The Children's Commissioner has worked with her Advisory Panel of Young People to create suggestions for what a great school council in a secondary school looks and feels like. These suggestions are based on the findings of this report, examples of good practice, and the principles of [The Right Way: A Children's Rights Approach for Education in Wales](#).

The following suggestions show how you can use the principles of a children's rights approach to support your school council:

## **Embedding Children's Rights – making sure children's rights are at the centre of participation in secondary schools**

The Head teacher makes sure all members of the school community (staff, pupils and governors) understand that the school council is set up to help fulfil Article 12 of the UNCRC. Article 12 is the right of all children and young people to have a say in decisions that affect their lives.

Teachers in secondary schools plan learning opportunities that link to the school council and can enable participation in school decisions. An example of this is the case study on page 15. Integrating participation into teaching and learning could enable all pupils to be involved in making changes in their school or community and will help support young people to learn about, through and for their rights.

## **Equality and Non-Discrimination– ensuring that every child has an equal opportunity to participate in decision making in school**

The school council runs an anonymous survey of their school community to see if there are any groups of young people that feel less able to take part in decisions and why they don't feel able to take part. They then consider the findings to see how they can make sure everyone is included.

The lead teacher for participation works with young people to try new approaches to increase diversity in the school council and other participation groups. Some ideas from the Commissioner's Youth Panel to try are:

- Enable representatives to the school council to represent other groups as well as their year. This could be done by highlighting on the ballot paper where a candidate in a year group also represents a special interest group or minority group.
- Create opportunities in tutor time or curriculum time to explore diverse representation in elected bodies and why it is important;
- Enable different ways to apply to be a member including anonymous applications with no speeches so that young people with less confidence can join in;

- Enable any young person that is passionate about pupil voice to join a parallel group so there is a mixture of elected and non-elected opportunities. Some schools operate a Senedd or Cabinet structure with each Senedd (school council) member linking into and reporting on a different pupil participation group — including eco groups, sports ambassadors, teaching and learning development and equality groups. All pupils are encouraged to join at least one group;
- Make sure that young people with Additional Learning Needs have the support they need to take part.

**The school makes sure that voting can take place by secret ballot.** This is specified in the regulations and young people in consultation were supportive of this as anonymous voting reduces pressure to vote for particular people or friends.

## **Empowering - developing young people’s capabilities as individuals so they’re better able to participate and engage with their school leaders and school governing body**

School Councils use the Children’s Commissioner’s [Make A Difference- A Young Person’s Guide to Taking Action](#) for ideas and tools to hold meetings, consider different ideas, and make changes that they want to see.

**The local authority provides training about the role of pupil associate governors.** This is available for associate pupil governors themselves so that they have skills to take up this role. It is also available for head teachers, chairs of governors and school council link teachers to help them to:

- understand participation in the context of children’s rights;
- support pupil governors to take part in meetings;
- ensure that the work of the associate governors links to the school council meetings.

Where governor training is delivered by consortia, then the consortia should offer this training.

**The teachers in the school have opportunities for professional learning about effective participation.** Estyn have also identified a need for this<sup>10</sup> to ensure pupils voices are heard in decision making.

**The Chair of the Governing Body makes sure that pupils know what their governing body does and how pupils can contribute.** Chairs could work with teachers to ensure pupils learn how the school is set up and how pupils can interact with the governing body and vice versa through the school council.

**The school council considers the structure of the council and specific roles for pupils.** The Commissioner’s Young People’s Advisory Panel recommends that every council has a Chair, Vice-Chair and Secretary and that the council should split into sub-groups to work on particular areas, for greater impact.

**The school council lead teacher has sufficient time to develop participation in the school.** Lead teachers may need non-teaching time in order to fulfil this, or more staff and resource could be allocated to develop this work.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/thematic-reports/pupil-participation-best-practice-guide>

## **Participation - ensuring that young people views are taken meaningfully into account**

The school council has a say about wellbeing in the school, in line with the [Framework for the whole school approach to emotional and mental wellbeing](#).

School leaders enable opportunities for young people to participate in curriculum design, in line the new curriculum. This includes the school council, but isn't restricted to these pupils; the whole school community is engaged.

Estyn ask about pupil participation in decision making on the pupil questionnaire to see if there are any groups of children that don't feel able to take part. At inspection Estyn already consider the role of the school council, and they also assess participation throughout the school. Current arrangements could be developed by asking all pupils their opinion so inspectors can assess participation of all young people in the school community. Estyn should analyse this information to assess whether particular groups of young people feel less able to participate.

School councils and school leadership teams use a structure for the school council to engage with the wider school population to inform and to feedback decisions. Here are some ideas from the Commissioner's Advisory Panel:

- school councils should be a minimum and there should be other participation groups for example a youth forum that encourages less confident pupils to take part and who can discuss ideas for the school council;
- surveys;
- drop-in consultation clinics;
- a regular way to feedback decisions to the school, like a You Said/We Did noticeboard, or through tutor time;
- school councils should allow anyone to give them ideas or recommendations, for example through an e mail address or a suggestions box.

Teachers don't choose school council members or pupil associate governors. Regulations are clear that school council members should be elected by pupils and that pupil associate governors are elected by the members of the council.

The local authority looks for ways to link local participation groups such as their youth forum to school councils and create opportunities to celebrate examples of effective participation in schools.

## **Accountability- making sure governing bodies and school leaders maintain and are accountable to effective school councils.**

Chairs of governing bodies involve the school council in their work. Chairs work with their school council to explore whether a link governor should attend school council meetings, and how they can best inform the school council about the decisions they have taken.

The Head teacher and Chair of the Governing Body create opportunities for the school council to find out how their participation has influenced decision making our Advisory Panel suggest that these opportunities include:

- providing feedback about how they have taken forward suggestions of the school council (for example a You Said, We Did display board which is regularly updated);
- Attending school council meetings to talk about the work of Governors;
- Discussing the minutes of school council meetings at Governors meetings;
- The Head or Chair comes to school council meeting and runs a 'hot seat' session, enabling members of the council to submit questions about this either face to face or anonymously, e.g. through a question box;
- The Head or Chair explains the reasons why some suggestions of the school council are not taken forward too.

**Chairs of governing bodies enable associate pupil governors to take part in meetings, in line with Regulations.**

# Further Resources

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This section lists how the Children's Commissioner for Wales can support participation in secondary schools

## [Make A Difference: A Young Person's Guide to Taking Action](#)

This guide has been specifically developed address some of the issues raised in this report. It can be used by school and community settings to help young people raise their voices about issues that matter to them. As part of the new curriculum this will enable experiences and learning in relation to the following What Matters statement in the Humanities Area of Learning and Experience: *Informed, self-aware citizens engage with the challenges and opportunities that face humanity, and are able to take considered and ethical action. (What Matters 5).*"

## [The Right Way: a children's rights approach to education in Wales](#)

This is practical guidance for education settings, with ideas and case studies based in the principles of the UNCRC.

## [The Children's Commissioner Student Ambassador Schemes](#)

This free scheme promotes children's rights in the secondary school and enables young people to inform the Commissioner's ongoing work.

## [Children's Human Rights in the Curriculum for Wales](#)

This short paper for teachers shows how the Four Purposes and the AoLEs promote specific articles and the principles of the UNCRC.

## [Professional learning resources for teachers](#)

The Children's Commissioner has worked with teachers in the EAS consortium area to pilot these online training sessions that can be used to help colleagues learn more about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the role of Children's Commissioner for Wales.

## [Teaching and learning resources for secondary school teachers](#)

Resources to help teach young people 11+ about their rights. Include resources on positive relationships, cyberbullying, Islamophobia and a Community Skills Challenge for the Welsh Bacc.