



Cyngor
Gwynedd

The Voice of the Child Strategy



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Why does the Strategy exist?

The Voice of the Child Strategy establishes a clear corporate framework to ensure that the rights, views and experiences of children and young people meaningfully influence decisions, policies and services across Cyngor Gwynedd. While strong statutory duties and legislative provisions are already in place - including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Bill 2011, the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014, and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 - the Strategy emphasises the need for consistent arrangements and clear expectations to ensure their full implementation. The Voice of the child is not simply a moral principle; it is a fundamental element of good governance and effective decision-making.

Article 12:

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views, the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

What is the long-term vision?

The aim is for the Council to operate in accordance with a children's rights-based approach, embedding the Voice of the Child in all aspects of leadership, culture, processes and systems. In a mature organisation, the right of children to be heard (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12) is regarded as an operational principle that informs the planning, delivery and evaluation of services. This approach is expected to foster and lead to better decisions, more responsive services, and higher quality well-being outcomes.

Our seven promises to children and young people

These promises are shaped from the words and priorities of young people. They will guide the way the Council listens, acts and gives feedback.

1. **You have a right to be heard.**
2. **Your voice will influence, not just be collected.**
3. **Everyone will have an opportunity, not just the most confident.**
4. **We'll tell you what we did with your opinions.**
5. **Your voice will reach the decision-makers.**
6. **We will use methods that suit you.**
7. **Listening to you will help keep you safe and improve your well-being.**

Success will be measured by how clearly children and young people can see that their opinions have influenced a decision, action or explanation, not just by the number of consultation activities.

Background, challenges and opportunities

Legislation and policy frameworks in Wales set clear expectations on local authorities to listen to children and address their rights. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 emphasises sustainable and thoughtful decision-making, while the National Participation Standards offer benchmarks of good practice.

However, there is evidence of significant variability between services, resource pressures and a risk of under-representation of children on the periphery or with complex experiences. At the same time, there are clear opportunities to strengthen consistency, improve the quality of decisions and increase corporate maturity by using the voice of children as strategic evidence.

What is driving the need for the Strategy now?

A combination of operational pressures, increased statutory expectations and learning from inspections and practice reviews have highlighted significant risks when children's voices are not heard. A higher demand on public services runs the risk of there being an inconsistent approach without a sound strategic direction. This strategy therefore offers a framework to prioritise children's rights, demonstrate accountability and ensure continuous improvement.

Basic principles of the Voice of the Child Strategy

1. CHILDREN AS RIGHT HOLDERS

Children are full right holders, with a statutory right to have their views considered. Their status is recognised not as recipients of a service, but as individuals whose voices need to be answered.

2. THE VOICE OF THE CHILD AS A BASIS FOR THE QUALITY OF DECISIONS

Children's lived experiences are a key element of informed and effective decision-making. Clear evidence is expected of the contribution of children's voices to all key decisions.

3. MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

Participation means that children and young people have real opportunities to express their opinions, contribute to discussions, and influence decisions that affect them. It ensures that their voices are heard, valued, and used to inform planning, delivery, and improvement.

Participation is only considered to be proper when participation is sincere, has a clear purpose and leads to real influence. Children need to understand why they are being questioned and get feedback on the impact of their contribution.

4. INCLUSION AND NON-DISCRIMINATION

Every child has an equal right to be heard, regardless of their background, ability or life experiences. This includes taking time to understand the needs, preferences and perspectives of non-verbal and pre-verbal children.

Communication methods are adapted to meet the needs of the child, not to fit into the routine practice of the service.

5. ACCOUNTABILITY, FEEDBACK AND TRANSPARENCY

Listening to children involves a duty to explain how their views have been used, how they could be used, or why they could not be acted upon. Transparency is part of respect and rights.

6. CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY ACROSS THE COUNCIL

The Voice of the Child is not a one-service task. It is a corporate requirement that applies to all functions, reflecting statutory duties under Welsh legislation.

7. LISTENING AS A BASIS FOR SAFEGUARDING AND WELL-BEING

Understanding the child's experience is central to safeguarding and promoting well-being. Evidence shows that failing to hear the voice of a child is a serious risk factor.

What we will and will not do

We will:

- Listen purposefully and meaningfully to children in decisions that affect them.
- Work within the framework of children's rights and give due regard to statutory rights.
- Use suitable, accessible and inclusive methods to enable all children to express their views.
- Ensure clarity about purpose, influence and feedback in all engagement processes.
- Clearly show how children's opinions have informed decisions, or explain why change is not possible.
- Develop the workforce to listen ethically and confidently.
- Fully integrate the Voice of the Child into corporate systems and processes.
- Involve children, where possible, in the decision-making process, enabling them to participate in considering options and steering outcomes, rather than just through one-off consultations.

We will not:

- Gather children's views without a clear purpose or for the simple purposes of compliance.
- Create unachievable expectations or promises.
- Treat participation as a superficial activity or the responsibility of a single service.
- Exclude any child from being heard due to context or circumstances.
- Make decisions that affect children and young people without giving appropriate consideration to their views and experiences.
- Force children to repeat their story or participate in processes that undermine their emotional safety.

Embedding the Voice of the Child in the work of the Children's Service

Children's Services operate on the basis that the voice of the child is an essential element of effective professional practice, safeguarding and high-quality decision-making. Understanding the child's lived experience is central to all aspects of assessment, planning, intervention and review, and is not a stand-alone activity or a supplement to the professional process.

Professionals will take proactive and appropriate steps to ensure that each child has a genuine opportunity to express their views, feelings and experiences. This will include using methods of communication appropriate to the child's age, development, language, ability and individual needs, and providing opportunities for the child to be heard in an environment that is safe, supportive and free from inappropriate pressure.

The voice of the child will be systematically collated, recorded and used as part of:

- **any investigation into allegations against a person in a position of trust;**
- **well-being and risk assessments;**
- **care and support plans;**
- **multi-agency meetings and conferences;**
- **statutory reviews;**
- **and all decisions that affect the life, safety and well-being of the child.**

Professional records will clearly show what the child's point of view is, how it was gathered, and how this point of view has been taken into account in decision-making. Where it is not possible to act on the child's choice or wishes, a clear, honest and age-appropriate explanation will be given, and this will be duly recorded.

Professionals have a responsibility to ensure that the voice of the child is not taken for granted or disproportionately filtered through adult interpretation. Where appropriate, the child will receive support to express themselves, including the use of independent advocacy, alternative means of communication, or support from professionals who have a trusted relationship with the child.

Managers will provide effective professional supervision to ensure that the voice of the child is a visible and high-quality element within practice. This will include reviewing records, examining decisions, and challenging practice where the child's views have not been adequately considered or clearly recorded.

In addition, wider feedback, complaints, praise and contributions from children and young people will be systematically used to inform the evaluation and improvement of services. The Children's Service will be able to demonstrate how children's experiences and perspectives have contributed to developing practice, improving provision and strengthening the quality of services.

Through these arrangements, the voice of the child will be embedded as a fundamental operating principle within the Children's Service culture, systems, and practice, ensuring that each child is heard, respected, and considered as a central individual in the decisions that affect their life.

The Voice of the Pupil in Schools and School Councils

Schools operate on the basis that the pupil's voice is a core component of effective education, positive well-being and high-quality leadership. Every pupil has a right to be heard in matters affecting their educational experience, well-being and personal development, and this right is realised through systematic, inclusive and meaningful arrangements.

Schools will ensure that regular, accessible and appropriate opportunities are available for pupils to express their views, opinions and experiences. This will involve a combination of formal and informal structures, such as School Councils, pupil surveys, class discussions, focus groups and other approaches appropriate to pupils' age, ability and needs.

School Councils will act as a formal representative mechanism enabling pupils to contribute to discussions and decisions that affect school life. Schools will ensure that School Councils:

- 
- **are representative of the diversity of the pupil body;**
 - **operate in a structured, regular and effective manner;**
 - **have real opportunities to influence relevant decisions;**
 - **and receive clear feedback on the impact of their contribution.**

In addition to these representation assurance structures, schools will ensure that pupils are directly involved in individual decisions that affect them, in line with statutory expectations and the principle of respect for children's rights. This includes ensuring that pupils have appropriate opportunities to contribute to decisions relating to their additional learning needs, support, well-being and formal processes such as exclusions, ensuring that their views are appropriately considered. In addition, schools will provide a wide range of further participation opportunities through groups and initiatives such as eco groups, well-being groups, peer support initiatives and other action groups, enabling pupils to actively contribute to the development and improvement of their school and community.

School leaders will ensure that the pupil's voice is fully integrated within leadership, self-evaluation and improvement planning arrangements. This will include using pupils' perspectives as a source of evidence to:

- 
- **evaluate the quality of teaching and learning;**
 - **assess well-being and the sense of belonging;**
 - **identify strengths and areas for development;**
 - **and inform school improvement priorities and actions.**

Schools will be able to clearly demonstrate how pupils' views have been taken into account and, where appropriate, influence decisions, policies and practice. Where it is not possible to act on pupils' views, a clear, reasonable and age-appropriate explanation will be given.

Particular attention will be paid to ensuring that pupils who are at risk of under-representation, including those with additional learning needs, vulnerable pupils, or those who are less confident, have appropriate and supportive opportunities to be heard. Schools will take proactive steps to remove barriers to participation and to ensure full inclusion.

Governing bodies will play a key role in ensuring that the pupil's voice is taken into account as part of their oversight and quality assurance role. This will include obtaining and scrutinising evidence of pupil participation, and ensuring that effective arrangements are in place to enable pupils to contribute to the evaluation and development of the school.

Through these arrangements, the pupil's voice will be embedded as a visible and meaningful element of the school's culture, leadership and operation, ensuring that pupils are recognised as active participants in shaping their educational experience and learning environment.

The Role of Governing Bodies

Governing bodies play a key strategic role in ensuring that the pupil's voice is recognised, respected and fully integrated within the leadership, governance and operation of any school. As part of their statutory responsibilities for ensuring the quality of education, pupil well-being and leadership effectiveness, governing bodies will ensure that robust and effective arrangements are in place to enable pupils to express their views and influence relevant decisions.

Governing bodies will ensure that a designated member has clear responsibility for children's rights, including promoting and overseeing the implementation of Article 12 rights, and ensuring that the pupil's voice is systematically considered as part of the school's governance, assurance and improvement arrangements.

Governing bodies will provide strategic oversight of the arrangements that are in place to collect, consider and use the pupil's voice. This will include ensuring that school leaders are able to demonstrate clear evidence of how pupils' views have been taken into account when evaluating provision, developing policies and setting the school's strategic direction.

Governing bodies are expected to ensure that the pupil's voice is seen as a relevant and valuable source of evidence in the performance of their core functions, including:

- **monitoring and reviewing pupils' performance and well-being;**
- **evaluating the effectiveness of leadership and management;**
- **scrutinising policies and arrangements that affect pupils' experience;**
- **and contributing to the school's self-evaluation and improvement planning processes.**

Governing bodies will ensure that appropriate opportunities are available to hear directly from pupils, where appropriate, including through engagement with School Council representatives and by receiving regular reports on pupils' activity and priorities.

Governing bodies will ensure that school leaders provide clear feedback to pupils on how their views have been used, strengthening transparency, respect and accountability. Where it is not possible to act on pupils' views, governing bodies will ensure that clear and appropriate reasons are provided.

As part of their assurance role, governing bodies will challenge and support school leaders to ensure that pupil participation is meaningful, inclusive and has a visible impact on school life and development. This will include paying particular attention to ensuring that all pupils, including those at risk of under-representation, have an equal opportunity to be heard.

By carrying out these responsibilities, governing bodies will ensure that the pupil's voice is an integral element of effective governance, contributing to better decision-making, strengthening accountability, and ensuring that the school is responsive to the needs and experiences of its pupils.

The Voice Tour: From Experience to Action

All participation pathways will follow a consistent, simple and visible process:



At the beginning of the process, children and young people should know the purpose of the activity, who will be listening, what may change and when they will be updated. An update will be given even when there is no final decision, and the final response will use the "You said – We did – What changed" approach.

Priorities set by young people

Children and young people will set part of the annual agenda of the participation arrangements. The initial themes of the workshop will include transport and school transport, play areas and green spaces, well-being, education and school resources, rural opportunities, the local economy and the environment. The priorities will be regularly reviewed by young people themselves.

Corporate Structure of Participation and Governance

To ensure a consistent, inclusive and sustainable approach to the implementation of the Voice of the Child across Cyngor Gwynedd, a structured corporate model is used which includes three interconnected streams of participation: Education, Youth Service and other Services. A clear and formal mechanism is provided through this model to gather, represent and transfer the views of children and young people from a local to a strategic level, ensuring that their voices inform decisions, planning and service delivery.

Education Stream

Through the Education stream, pupils can voice their views through established structures such as School Councils and pupil forums. These arrangements enable pupils to contribute to decisions that affect their learning experiences, well-being and school environment. These views are passed on through local, regional and county structures, ensuring that the pupil's voice contributes to the planning and improvement of education across the county.

Youth Service Stream

Opportunities to contribute through youth clubs, community projects and youth forums are delivered through this stream, enabling young people to have their say on issues that affect their lives and communities. Representation of a wide range of young people is secured, including those who may not engage through formal education. This stream supports the development of young people as active participants and ensures that their experiences inform the development of services.

Other Corporate Services Stream

Through this stream, the views of children and young people involved in wider corporate services — including care, well-being and community services — are systematically gathered and used. This ensures that children and young people's lived experiences contribute to the planning, delivery and evaluation of services across all the Council's functions.

Strategic Integration and Governance

The three streams come together in the form of the Gwynedd Youth Forum, which provides a recognised governance mechanism to ensure that the voices of children and young people are presented directly to the Council's leaders, managers and strategic decision makers.

An integral part of this structure is the participation of elected members, who by invitation sit on the Gwynedd Youth Forum and provide a direct democratic link between young people and those responsible for decision making. Through this arrangement, the voices of children and young people are heard directly in policy steering, setting priorities and strategic decision making, strengthening corporate accountability and ensuring the full integration of the Voice of the Child within the Council's governance structures.

As a whole, the model ensures that the Voice of the Child is a systematic and integrated element of corporate governance, embedded as an operational principle across all the functions of the Council.

The relationship between the Gwynedd Youth Forum and the Young People's Cabinet

The Gwynedd Youth Forum will continue as the main broad county mechanism for gathering, discussing and prioritising voices from the three streams. The Young People's Cabinet will be a representative executive group within the Forum, with the role of presenting the agreed priorities directly to senior leaders, elected members and the relevant decision-making structures.

The Cabinet will include geographical representation and a range of experiences. Responsibilities will be shared, including delegation arrangements, so that the pressure does not fall on one person. It will meet regularly and report back to the Forum and to the young people it represents.

Integrating the Voice of the Child into Corporate Arrangements and Decision-Making Arrangements

Cyngor Gwynedd will work to ensure that the views of children and young people are taken into account when developing policies, strategies and services that directly affect them.

To support this, the Council will:

- ensure that the views of children and young people, including those expressed through relevant participation structures, are considered when developing policies, strategies and services that directly affect children and young people;
- encourage services, where appropriate and proportionate, to identify how the views of children and young people have informed proposals or decisions that affect them;
- facilitate opportunities for the views of children and young people to be shared with relevant democratic and governance structures where this is relevant to the matters under consideration;
- ensure that appropriate feedback is provided to children and young people on how their views have been considered and how their input has contributed to the development of policies, services or activities;
- ensure that arrangements for the participation of children and young people align with the Council's wider framework for citizen participation and engagement, avoiding duplication and promoting common principles of meaningful participation.

Through these arrangements, the Voice of the Child will be formally embedded within the Council's corporate systems and processes, ensuring that it is an integral part of governance, accountability and strategic decision-making.

Strategic Priorities

In order to move from expectations and principles to consistent and mature action across the Council, this strategy will focus on strengthening the following areas:

Ensuring corporate consistency across all services

While robust practice already exists, the Council will strengthen consistency to ensure that the voice of the child is systematically considered across all services, not just in certain areas. This will reduce variance and ensure a clear and consistent corporate approach.

Strengthening the link between participation and strategic decision-making

The Council will ensure that the voices of children and young people directly and visibly influence strategic decisions, service planning and priority setting, moving from participation as an activity to participation as an influence.

Ensuring that all children, especially those in vulnerable situations, are heard

There will be a particular focus on strengthening opportunities to hear the voices of children who are at risk of under-representation or who have complex experiences, ensuring full and equal inclusion.

Strengthening accountability and the ability to demonstrate impact

The Council will strengthen arrangements to clearly show how children's views have informed decisions and services, ensuring transparency, organisational learning and continuous improvement.

Developing organisational capacity and a sustainable culture

The Council will continue to develop workforce capacity, leadership and systems to ensure that listening to children is a normal, sustainable and integral part of organisational culture.

Corporate Accountability and Strategic Oversight

Clear accountability is essential to ensure that the principles of this strategy are implemented consistently and effectively across the Council.

Strategic oversight of the strategy's implementation will be provided, which will:

- 
- **receive regular updates on the progress and implementation of the strategy;**
 - **monitor the effectiveness of children and young people's participation arrangements;**
 - **identify risks, gaps or inconsistencies in implementation;**
 - **ensure that appropriate action is taken to strengthen practice where necessary.**

Heads of Department and relevant managers will be responsible for ensuring that the principles of this strategy are implemented within their areas of responsibility, and that appropriate evidence of this is recorded and reported through established corporate arrangements.

Elected members will play a key role in providing democratic challenge, assurance and accountability in relation to the implementation of the strategy. An annual report on the implementation of the Strategy and progress against the Action Plan will be presented to the Cabinet as part of the Council's accountability and oversight arrangements.

Implementation and Delivery

To support the effective delivery of this strategy, a corporate Action Plan will be developed and maintained.

The Action Plan will:

- 
- **identify clear actions, timelines and responsibilities;**
 - **support consistent action across all relevant services;**
 - **ensure that action is realistic, proportionate and sustainable;**
 - **enable progress to be monitored and areas identified for further improvement.**

The Action Plan will be reviewed regularly to ensure that it remains relevant, effective and responsive to the needs of the Council and children and young people.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Assurance

Formal monitoring arrangements will be put in place to ensure that the implementation of this strategy is systematically and transparently evaluated.

This will include:

- **developing appropriate indicators to assess the delivery and impact of the strategy;**
- **gathering and analysing relevant evidence, including feedback from children and young people, professionals and governance structures;**
- **identifying areas of strength and any areas where action needs to be further strengthened;**
- **using monitoring findings to inform continuous improvement across the Council.**

Corporate assurance in relation to the delivery of the strategy will be provided.

Reporting and Transparency

To ensure accountability and transparency, progress reports on the delivery of the Voice of the Child Strategy will be prepared.

This report will:

- **summarise progress against relevant priorities and actions;**
- **outline evidence of impact on policies, decisions and services;**
- **identify any relevant challenges or risks;**
- **outline further steps to strengthen action.**

Where appropriate, information on the delivery of the strategy will also be shared with children and young people through established participation structures, ensuring transparency and meaningful feedback.

Standard of Feedback and Reporting

All issues that progress through the corporate arrangements will have an owner, status, next step and timeline for an update. Children and young people will find out what has changed, what hasn't changed and why. The Council will publish accessible examples of "You said – We did – What changed".

A short, accessible version of the Strategy will be available to children and young people.

Reviewing the Strategy

The Voice of the Child Strategy will be reviewed periodically to ensure that it remains relevant, effective and reflects statutory expectations, corporate priorities and the experiences of children and young people.

