

THE VOICE OF THE CHILD STRATEGY



Cyngor
Gwynedd

Strategic Integration and Governance - Voice of the Child

Please contact the Education Department, Cyngor Gwynedd if you would like this information in any other language or format, e.g. large print or Braille.

Contents

Purpose of the Appendix	3
Policy Statement	3
Governance principles	4
The corporate model	5
The flow of governance	5
The role of Gwynedd Youth Forum	6
The role of elected members	6
The role of leaders, managers and services	7
Integration with corporate decisions	7
Referral and escalation routes	8
Standards of response, ownership and escalation	8
Recording, reporting and feedback	9
What should we see in effective governance arrangements?	9
Assurance questions for corporate leaders and governors	10
Summary	10

STRATEGIC INTEGRATION AND GOVERNANCE

Purpose of the Appendix

The purpose of this appendix is to explain how the Voice of the Child is integrated into Cyngor Gwynedd's governance, leadership and strategic decision-making procedures. It responds specifically to the element of the strategy which states that the three streams of participation come together through the Gwynedd Youth Forum, and that this forum provides a recognised mechanism to present the voices of children and young people directly to leaders, managers and elected members.

The appendix describes the flow of children and young people's voices from a local to a strategic level; the role of the Gwynedd Youth Forum; the contribution of elected members; the responsibilities of officers and services; and the way in which the Council will ensure that the voice of children and young people is engaged in policy, planning, prioritisation and decision-making.

These procedures do not replace the Council's statutory responsibilities or formal decision-making processes. They reinforce those processes by ensuring that children and young people's experiences, perspectives and priorities are systematically considered before, during and after decisions are made that affect them.

Policy Statement

Cyngor Gwynedd will ensure that the Voice of the Child is a visible, systematic and accountable part of its corporate governance arrangements. The Council will use the Gwynedd Youth Forum as the county's main mechanism to bring together the voices of children and young people across three streams of participation: Education, Youth Service and Services.

These arrangements will ensure that children and young people have the opportunity to raise matters that are important to them, respond to matters being developed by the Council, and contribute to strategic priorities. Leaders, managers and elected members will listen to these perspectives, take them into account when making decisions, and provide clear feedback on what has happened as a result of the contribution of children and young people.

Governance principles

Voice is a part of governance, not a stand-alone activity

The voice of children and young people will be considered as part of the Council's decision-making, planning and evaluation arrangements, not as a supplementary consultation at the end of a process.

Inclusion and fair representation

The Council will pay particular attention to ensuring that arrangements include children and young people from different areas, backgrounds and experiences, including those at risk of being under-represented.

A clear pathway from the local to the strategic

Matters raised in schools, youth groups, services and communities will be able to move through local and regional forums to the Gwynedd Youth Forum and, where appropriate, on to management teams, elected members or committees.

Direct democratic link

Elected members will play an important role in listening to the voices of young people, explaining democratic processes, and ensuring that the views of children and young people are taken into account in relevant decisions.

Accountability and feedback

Matters raised by children and young people will receive a clear response. Where actions can be taken, responsibilities and timelines will be specified. Where change is not possible, the reasons will be explained honestly and appropriately.

The corporate model

The corporate model is based on three interconnected streams of participation. Each stream provides a pathway for children and young people to voice their views in a context relevant to their experience, and each stream contributes to the Gwynedd Youth Forum at a county level.

Stream	Main source of voices	How they contribute to strategic governance
Llais Ni: Schools	School councils, learner forums, class discussions, learner surveys, well-being groups and feedback through school arrangements.	Ensure that learners' experiences of learning, well-being, belonging and school life can influence education priorities, self-evaluation, improvement planning and relevant county decisions.
Llais Ni: Youth Service	Youth clubs, community projects, local and regional youth forums, surveys, informal activities and digital opportunities.	Ensure that issues that matter to young people in communities are heard, discussed and passed on to the county level, including the voices of young people who do not always engage through formal education.
Llais Ni: Services	Care, well-being, youth justice services, third sector partners, specialist groups and other services working with children and young people.	Ensure that the experiences of children and young people using specific services contribute to the design, delivery, evaluation and improvement of services across the Council.

The flow of governance

The arrangements work as a clear flow. This ensures that the voice of children and young people does not stay within local groups, but can travel to the places where decisions are made, and then return to young people through feedback.

Stage	What happens	Who is responsible
1. Gathering voices locally	Children and young people share views through schools, youth clubs, service groups, surveys, digital activities or discussions with trusted workers.	Schools, Youth Service, relevant services, partners and direct workers.
2. Regional discussion	The regional forums of Arfon, Dwyfor and Meirionnydd identify themes, priorities and matters that need to be raised at a county level.	Forum co-ordinator, youth workers, schools, services and youth representatives.
3. Present to Gwynedd Youth Forum	Representatives of the three streams come together to discuss matters, challenge, prioritise and agree what should move forward.	Gwynedd Youth Forum, young people, partners, officials and elected members by invitation.
4. Link to corporate governance	Relevant matters are presented to departmental management teams, heads of service, Cabinet members, committees or action groups.	Board or Action Group, senior officers, relevant services and elected members.
5. Take action or explain	Services respond by taking action, developing options, changing arrangements, commissioning further work or explaining why change is not possible.	Heads of service, managers, lead officers and relevant partners.
6. Feedback and learning	Children and young people receive feedback on the impact of their contribution. Themes and learning are used to strengthen the arrangements.	Forum coordinator, relevant services, elected members and the Action Group.

The role of Gwynedd Youth Forum

The Gwynedd Youth Forum is the main point of integration between the three streams of participation and the Council's strategic governance arrangements. Its role is to bring the voices of children and young people together, to ensure that those voices are discussed in a structured way, and to provide a pathway for those perspectives to reach the people who can act on them.

The Forum will:

- receive issues and priorities from the three streams: Schools, Youth Service and Services;
- give children and young people the opportunity to raise their own matters as well as respond to matters that the Council is developing;
- discuss themes coming from local and regional levels;
- agree which matters need to be passed on to management teams, committees, Cabinet members or action groups;
- receive updates on agreed actions;
- ask for clarity when actions have not progressed;
- share feedback with children and young people across the county.

The Forum will function as an influence and governance mechanism, not as a body that supersedes the Council's statutory decisions. Its strength is to ensure that those decisions are informed by the voices of children and young people in a clear, purposeful and accountable way.

Role of elected members

The participation of elected members is an essential part of the model because it creates a direct democratic link between children and young people and those with responsibility for the Council's priorities, resources and strategic decisions.

When elected members participate in the Gwynedd Youth Forum, their role is to listen, understand, ask questions, explain democratic processes, and ensure that the views of children and young people are taken to the relevant places within the Council's procedures.

Elected members are expected to:

- attend the Gwynedd Youth Forum or relevant meetings by invitation;
- listen directly to the perspectives of children and young people without filtering their voice through adults only;
- help young people to understand how democratic decisions are made;
- ensure that matters raised by young people are referred to Cabinet, committees, scrutiny or services where appropriate;
- provide feedback to the Forum on how matters have been considered;
- act in a non-political, respectful and apt way for the participation of children and young people.

The role of leaders, managers and services

For the model to make a difference, all relevant services must understand that the Gwynedd Youth Forum is part of the way the Council listens, plans and makes decisions. Services will be expected to receive input from the Forum, present matters to the Forum where the views of children and young people are relevant, and respond to the priorities raised.

Role	Governance responsibilities
Heads of Department	Ensure that strategic matters affecting children and young people are brought to the participation arrangements where appropriate; respond to themes emerging from the Forum; and ensure that actions are included in service plans or work programmes.
Departmental Management Teams	Receive and discuss themes from the Gwynedd Youth Forum; identify opportunities to involve young people before decisions; ensure that services provide a clear response.
Service Managers	Follow up on relevant actions; provide accessible information to the Forum; attend when necessary; provide feedback on progress.
Youth Forum Coordinator	Coordinate the flow between local, regional and county forums; maintain records and actions; ensure that feedback goes back to young people; support young people's representatives.
Board or Action Group	Monitor that the arrangements are working; ensure that matters move to the right decision-making places; challenge a lack of progress; review themes, attendance, representation and impact.
Partners	Support children and young people to contribute through their services and communities; share relevant themes; work with the Council on action where appropriate.

Integration with corporate decisions

The Council will expect services to consider the Voice of the Child as part of the development of policies, plans, service reviews and strategic decisions that affect children and young people. The voice of children shouldn't just appear late in the process. It should be considered at the stage at which options are formed and when evaluating the impact of decisions after their implementation.

A step in the decision-making process	How the Voice of the Child should be integrated
Before developing a policy or plan	Consider which children and young people will be affected; decide how to listen to their opinions; use the forums or other methods to gather views.
When drawing up options	Use the experiences and priorities of children and young people to test whether options are realistic, fair and likely to make a difference.
When preparing decision reports	Include a clear summary of how the voice of children and young people was considered, what was said, and how that influenced the recommendation.
When making a decision	Ensure that elected members and officers see relevant evidence of the voice of children and young people alongside financial, legal, risk and performance evidence.
After a decision	Provide feedback to children and young people on the decision, the impact their input had, and the reasons why their views could not be acted upon.

Referral and escalation routes

The arrangements should be clear enough to ensure that matters go to the right place. Not all matters need to go before the Cabinet or a committee; some can be resolved locally or through a service. However, when a matter is strategic, cross-departmental or related to children's rights more generally, there should be a clear escalation route.

Type of matter	Expected response path
Local or operational issue	The relevant service, school, local group or manager responds and provides feedback to the young people involved.
A regional matter or pattern arising in several areas	A regional forum will discuss it; if necessary, and will be submitted to the Gwynedd Youth Forum or to the relevant service.
A county or strategic matter	Gwynedd Youth Forum will prioritise it; and will be referred to a Departmental Management Team, Head of Service, Cabinet member, committee or action group.
Cross-departmental matter	A Board or Action Group identifies the relevant services and ensures that there is a coherent response.
Safeguarding matter or a direct risk	Follow relevant safeguarding procedures immediately. The forum does not replace statutory safeguarding processes.

Standards of response, ownership and escalation

Each issue referred to a service or decision-making structure will have a specific owner, next step and timeline for an update. The service will acknowledge the issue, explain the process and provide an update even if there is no final decision.

The Gwynedd Youth Forum or the Young People's Cabinet can request an update when there is no obvious progress. Cross-departmental issues will be allocated to a coordinating leader who is responsible for ensuring a single corporate response.

Direct contact with decision-makers

Regular sessions will enable young people to present priorities and questions directly to senior officials and elected members. A record of the response, actions and feedback will be shared in an accessible format.

Reviewing the model with young people

Young people will contribute to reviewing the effectiveness of the governance arrangements, including how easy it is to raise an issue, whether the issue reaches the right person, the quality of the feedback and the evidence of change.

Recording, reporting and feedback

To ensure accountability, there will need to be a clear record of what was raised, what the response was, who was responsible for actions, and how feedback was given to children and young people. Recording should be sufficient to demonstrate impact, but without creating a bureaucratic process that undermines natural participation.

Evidence should be kept of:

- matters raised by children and young people;
- the stream or region from which the matter emerged;
- which service, member or group considered the matter;
- what actions were agreed;
- who was responsible and what timetable was specified;
- what feedback was given to children and young people;
- any examples of change, learning or decision that was influenced by children's voice.

This information can inform progress reports, self-evaluation arrangements, reports to committees or updates for children and young people. The Council should use a clear approach such as "You said – We did – What changed" where appropriate.

What should we see in effective governance arrangements?

- The three streams of participation are clearly linked to the Gwynedd Youth Forum.
- There is representation from Arfon, Dwyfor and Meirionnydd, and of a range of children's and young people's experiences.
- Children and young people can raise matters themselves, not just respond to an adult-led agenda.
- Elected members and senior officers listen directly to young people where appropriate.
- Matters from the Forum are discussed by the relevant services or decision-making structures.
- Relevant decision-making reports set out how the voice of children and young people has been considered.
- Actions are monitored and not left without an owner.
- Children and young people receive timely and appropriate feedback on the impact of their contribution.
- The model leads to better decision-making, improved communication and greater trust between young people and the Council.

Assurance questions for corporate leaders and governors

- Do the matters being discussed by the Gwynedd Youth Forum reach the people who have the power to act?
- Is there evidence that elected members and officers listened to children and young people before making relevant decisions?
- Do services use the Forum to test out ideas before developing policy or changing provision?
- Is there a clear pathway between local forums, regional forums, the County Forum and the Council's decision-making arrangements?
- Is there a record of actions, responsibilities and feedback?
- Are the voices of children and young people at risk of being under-represented upon reaching the strategic structures?
- Can the Council show examples of decisions or priorities that have been influenced by this model?
- Can children and young people see that their contribution has made a difference?

Summary

This appendix confirms that the role of the Gwynedd Youth Forum is to act as a bridge between the voices of children and young people and Cyngor Gwynedd's strategic governance arrangements. The three streams of participation ensure that the voice of children and young people is gathered from different contexts; the Forum ensures that those voices are discussed and prioritised; and the link with elected members, management teams, services and committees ensures that those voices can influence decisions.

The proof of success is that the Voice of the Child is a routine part of the way the Council thinks, plans and makes decisions: from a local to a strategic level, and from listening to taking action and feeding back.



Cyngor
Gwynedd