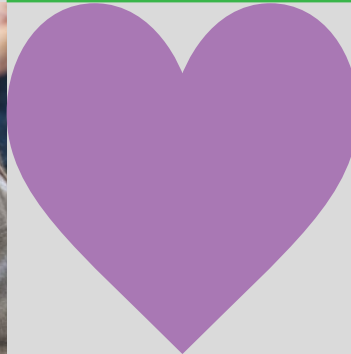




**Comisiynydd
Plant Cymru**

Children's
Commissioner
for Wales



Annual Report & Accounts 2025-26



**Comisiynydd
Plant Cymru**

Children's
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language version of this report is available on our
website, under 'Publications'.**

INTRODUCTION AND HIGHLIGHTS

from the Children's Commissioner for Wales,
Rocio Cifuentes MBE



2025-26 is my fourth year in post and the third year of my three year strategy, Making Life Better for Children in Wales.

In a year of significant change in the organisation, I'm pleased to report that the team have made important progress towards improving children's lives during the year and secured some promising changes at national level.

In a role which is as wide-ranging and varied as mine, it's hard to pick out highlights, but here are some which I feel have been particularly impactful for children and young people, aligned with the four purposes of my role:



Here for all children

During the year, I have undertaken 54 visits to meet directly with children and young people in every local authority in Wales. These have included 20 primary and secondary schools, but I've also focused on reaching a wide range of community groups, including WYCYD Young Carers in Wrexham, young people from Dar Ul Isra Mosque in Cardiff, children from Y Bont specialist childcare provider in Bridgend, to name but a few. It was also great to be with children and young people attending the Urdd Eisteddfod in Margam in May and to be part of the Senedd Ieuenctid's annual debate in the Senedd Chamber in November.



A Truth Teller

It's my privilege to be able to speak out on the issues affecting children and young people, and this year, amongst many other topics, I had the honour and responsibility of giving voice to the experience of children and young people in Wales affected by the Covid pandemic, giving oral and written evidence to the UK Covid inquiry in London in September 2025. I also spoke numerous times to the Welsh media about critical issues affecting children and young people including about screen time, safeguarding governance issues, and on children's experiences of homelessness.



A Rights Realiser

One of the most fundamental roles of the office is to help children and young people to make their rights real. This has been a particularly busy year, reaching out to new audiences – including presenting at 31 conferences to share the message of children’s rights and raise awareness of how we can help children and young people.

Our Right Way to Social Care Conference, held in March in Newport, was an important opportunity to share good practice and to raise awareness of the application of children’s rights for children in social care.



A Challenger

Challenging those in power to make positive change is what the role is all about, so it’s been gratifying to see Welsh Government announce two significant reviews which I’ve long called for – one into School Governance and the other into Safeguarding Governance Arrangements in Wales. I look forward to both reviews progressing and doing justice to the victims of the sad cases of abuse which were the catalyst for both reviews. I’ve also continued to challenge Welsh Government to do more to respond to and prevent racism, in the context of continued escalation of community tensions impacting on children and young people. Our wider calls for the new Welsh Government were collated in our ‘Manifesto’ document published in October 2025.

This annual report contains much more detail on all of the above areas, including 35 overarching and thematic recommendations for the Welsh Government.

An independent evaluation of progress on my first three year strategy will inform my next three year strategy to be launched in 2026, which will take me to the end of my term in 2029. For now, there remains much to do, and I look forward to continuing to push ahead on all four purposes and making a real difference to children’s lives.



Rocio Cifuentes MBE

Children’s Commissioner for Wales





HERE FOR ALL CHILDREN

During 2025-26, our team of three participation officers and one engagement support officer have worked to listen to children and young people's views across Wales, both through in-person visits and engagement, and online through our *Monthly Matters* resources.

We have used these views to inform and influence our policy work and shine a light on issues affecting children and young people across Wales. The participation team have supported the Commissioner on her visits to meet with children and young people across Wales and have delivered training and awareness-raising sessions for children, young people and a range of professionals.



Our work with children and young people

- * Supported the Commissioner to undertake **54** visits to meet with children and young people in every local authority in Wales.
- * Worked directly with over **4,500** children and young people, from all local authorities in Wales in schools and community youth settings.
- * Taken part in a number of national events in person including National Cub Fun day, Young Wales events, meeting the Welsh Youth Parliament, and meeting with children and young people from across Wales.
- * Met with over **1000** of our Super Ambassador pupils online and partnered with e-Ysgol to engage with over **2500** children in interactive online rights activities.
- * Heard the views of over **11,600** children and young people from every local authority in Wales through our Monthly Matters resource.
- * Gathered views on issues including the Senedd elections, school uniform, transport, anti-bullying guidance, views on a social media ban for under 16s, amongst other topics.
- * Updated our resources on our website to make it easier to access offering different routing options for children, young people, parents/carers and professionals.
- * Supported young people with work experience in our team, which directly links to our Corporate Parenting Promise to children and young people.
- * Created a Routes to School video – we met with families whose children had issues with safe routes to school and made a video highlighting the key issues this young person would face.
- * Launched a Scout and Guide Rights badge to help children and young people to learn about their rights and gain a badge.
- * Joined Heronsbridge School's Lego Club and supported children and young people's rights to play while also gathering their views on our Monthly Matter resource and looking at the changes we could make.
- * Created reports for every local authority; this included a highlight of data we had received from Monthly Matter responses and the number of calls/cases from their local authority that Advice and Assistance have dealt with and an overview of what those issues related to, for each month in 2024-25.
- * Held a final meeting with our Youth Advisory Panel members as individuals and introduced a new model to work with Community Ambassadors as advisors.



Our work with professionals who work with Children and Young People

- * Represented at the All-Wales National Participation Network, the North Wales Participation Workers Network and the All-Wales Care-Experienced Network.
- * Online training session for Welsh-medium, first year education students at UWTSO on the UNCRC and role of the office.
- * Delivered a presentation on 'The Right Way' to the UK Youth Participation Network as an example of good practice in Wales.
- * Worked with Cwtch Addysg to deliver UNCRC training to their new advisors ahead of their work on Relationship and Sex Education (RSE).
- * Delivered training for Police Cadet leaders in Bridgend Police Headquarters.
- * Delivered joint event on The Right Way to Tackling Child Poverty in partnership with the Children's Legal Centre Wales.
- * Delivered a whole-authority children's rights training day attended by all council leaders as well as other representatives and children and young people from local panels.
- * Delivered training on the UNCRC and our office to Tŷ Hafan children's hospice, providing staff with the space to think about which rights were most important to their roles.
- * Provided training to social work students in Bridgend and Cardiff with a particular focus on Article 12 and how social work students can listen to children and young people effectively.
- * We collaborated with Public Service Board leads (PSBs) in North Wales and Welsh Government to deliver a session for PSB members on Children's Rights.
- * We delivered a conference in Newport to raise awareness of our guide The Right Way to Social Care – and to create a space to highlight and share good practice and hear about key issues from professionals in this sector.

Our impact



Some feedback on our children's rights training

From professionals:



It was well-rounded, interactive and engaging! I would definitely encourage it on a larger scale due to its important message and its balanced effectiveness, created with genuine warmth and good intentions as well as lack of bias"

From young people:



I thought it was very informative and extremely useful to learn more about my rights. I look forward to sharing the information and advice given with my peers"



A TRUTH TELLER

As a truth teller, our communications team have supported the Commissioner to speak out throughout the year on national media including the BBC, ITV, S4C and Nation Cymru on topics including:

- ✓ Safeguarding in religious institutions
- ✓ Senedd elections
- ✓ Childcare costs during summer
- ✓ Response to child sexual abuse strategy
- ✓ Response to Neil Foden Case
- ✓ Newyddion Ni and Newyddion piece on screentime
- ✓ Nation Cymru piece on flags and anti-immigration sentiment
- ✓ Interview to mark start of UK Covid Inquiry with BBC
- ✓ Our Manifesto for Children and Young People ahead of the Senedd Elections

Project spotlights

The Right Way Survey – was run as a Monthly Matters resource and completed by **215 professionals** (of which 163 were teachers or teaching assistants and 52 were youth group/forum leaders) and **3,523 young people** (of which 2,484 were from primary schools, 896 were from secondary school or college and 143 were from young people in a youth group/forum). The national data we have from this has been used to feed into our Participation Structures report and has been used to influence our three-year strategy 2026-29. Individualised data was shared with all school and youth settings to use as a template to improve their rights-based work. Local authorities were also able to request anonymised data.



Key Publications this year have included:

- **On Housing & Homelessness:** www.childcomwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/How-housing-and-homelessness-affects-children-and-young-people-in-Wales.pdf
- **On Disabled Children:** www.childcomwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Disabled-Children-Lives_ENG_2425.pdf
- **On Mental Health:** www.childcomwales.org.uk/mental-health-roundtables-report/
- **Our Manifesto for Children and Young People:** www.childcomwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Manifesto-ENGLISH.pdf



Participation in Wales: From Principles to Practice

– The Participation Project started in April 2025, with the dissemination of questionnaires to all 22 local authorities seeking information about how children and young people's participation is supported and implemented within each authority, what the key barriers are and any examples of good practice. There are statutory duties on local authorities to involve children and young people in decision making, including from Section 12 of the Children and Families (Wales) Measure, and the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act.

As a follow up to the written survey, between July – December 2025 the Commissioner and the Project team visited all 22 Local Authorities to meet with key professionals to discuss how they are meeting their duties to support meaningful participation of children and young people within their respective authorities. The purpose of the visits was to explore responses in more detail and take the opportunity to meet face to face and build connections. We gathered evidence of best practice as well as identifying barriers to meaningful participation and will share a summary of this in line with the five principles of The Right Way approach: Embedding; Equality and Non-Discrimination; Empowerment; Participation and Accountability along with conclusions and recommendations in a report by Autumn 2026.

First Minister's visit – In October 2025, we invited schools from across Neath and Port Talbot to join us at our office for a unique chance to meet with the First Minister and the Children's Commissioner for Wales to share their views and get their voices heard. Young people talked about mental health support, transport and journeys to school while children from primary school talked to the First Minister about the support they get in school and the things that help their mental health.



A RIGHTS REALISER

My Children's Rights Advice and Assistance Team provides confidential and independent advice and assistance to children and young people, and to the adults and professionals who contact us about their rights. Every enquiry concerns a child or young person, although the person making contact may be a parent, carer, family member, professional or member of the public.

Our approach is tailored to the circumstances of the child, young person, or of the adult contacting us. Some people need clear information or help understanding a process. Others need sustained casework, liaison with public bodies, or intervention to help secure a rights-respecting response.

As a rights-based service, we consider the whole situation: the child's voice, their best interests, access to support, participation in decisions, and the duties of the public bodies involved.

How our Children's Rights Advice and Assistance Team helps

1

Listen

We listen to understand the child's circumstances and concerns.

2

Explain rights

We identify the rights involved and explain complex processes in clear, everyday language.

3

Explore options

We set out the best next steps, including complaints, appeals and sources of support.

4

Advise or intervene

We provide timely, accurate advice and, where appropriate, act on the child or family's behalf.

5

Make a difference

We help secure change, clarity or a way forward. Our evidence also informs our wider policy and influencing work.



Highlighting children's experiences and voices



We analyse our casework trends to make sure we continue to highlight the experiences of children and young people – bringing attention to the issues they face.

By turning individual experiences into thematic evidence, our advice service helps ensure that children and young people's rights inform wider policy, influencing, research and service improvement.

During 2025–26, casework intelligence was used to support organisational work on access to health services, safeguarding, emotionally-based school avoidance, racism and identity-based bullying, medical support in schools, Additional Learning Needs and social care. This evidence informed policy discussions and position papers, project and business planning, media responses, conferences and engagement with organisations including Care Inspectorate Wales, Estyn, Social Care Wales and Dysgu. In this way, the experiences reflected in our casework help colleagues and external organisations better understand the challenges facing children and young people and identify where practice, professional training or public services may need to improve.



I would highly recommend the service to any parent or caregiver. We received professional advice at every stage of our journey."

Feedback from parent



I received a full and detailed response to my query. I honestly couldn't have asked for a better response! Thank you very much, and I wish that other organisations could emulate you."

Feedback from parent

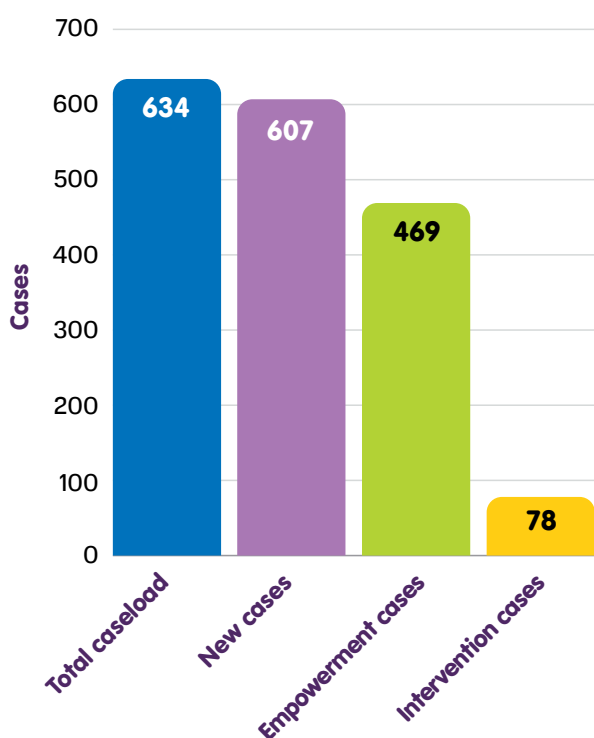
2025–26 at a glance



Between 1 April 2025 and 31 March 2026, the team dealt with a total of **634 advice cases** concerning children and young people's rights, remaining broadly consistent with figures from the previous financial year.



Caseload during 2025/26



We received 607 new enquiries this year. These enquiries involved 947 recorded issues – an average of 1.6 issues per enquiry. This demonstrates the complexity of the cases we deal with as children's rights issues rarely occur in isolation, but alongside other interwoven issues.

The caseload reflects the full range of enquiries handled by the Advice and Assistance Service during the year. 'Empowerment cases' refer to enquiries where the person was provided with timely advice, information or signposting that enabled them to understand their rights and take the appropriate next steps confidently, often on the same day. 'Intervention cases' required more detailed and sustained support, including exploring options, reviewing information, liaising with services or intervening on behalf of a child or young person. This range - from focused advice to in-depth casework - reflects how we tailor our response to each child's circumstances and the complexity of the issues raised.



Enquiries

607

new enquiries about
children's rights received



Casework activity

4,127

recorded casework
activities and interactions



Issues raised

947

an average of
1.6 per enquiry



National reach

All 22

Welsh local authority
areas reached

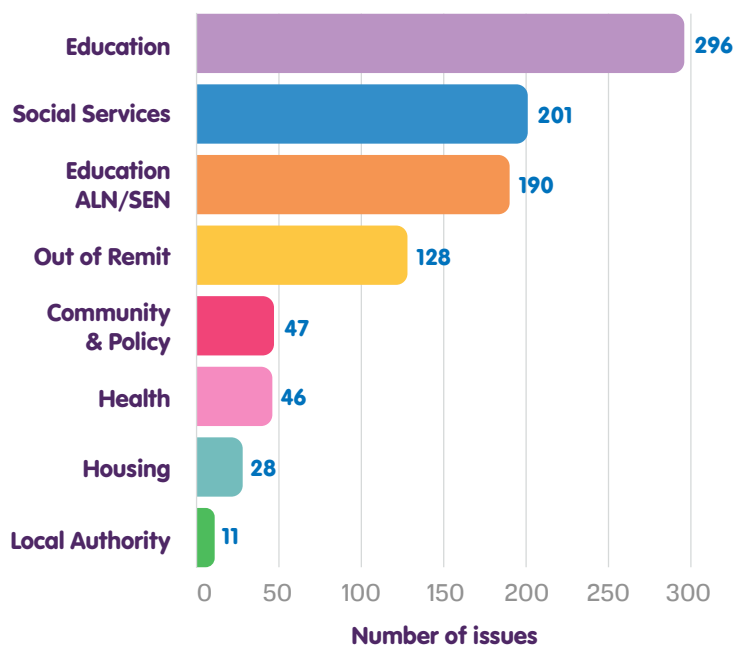


Analysis
Key Issues and Trends

What the year tells us

- * Education, additional learning needs (ALN) and social services remained the three largest issue areas.
- * Complaints and difficulties navigating systems were recurring themes across education, social care, health and housing.
- * Recorded outcomes included practical support, changed decisions or practice, clearer routes forward and assurance that rights had been considered.
- * Parents remained the largest group contacting the service. Increasing direct awareness and access for children and young people is an important area for development.

Main issue areas in our casework 2025/26



During the reporting period, the Advice and Assistance Service responded to a wide range of issues raised by children, families, and professionals.



Our three largest issue areas

Share of all **947** issues recorded

31%

Education

Complaints, advice, transport, exclusions and bullying.



21%

Social Services

Complaints, advice, placements, provision and safeguarding.



20%

ALN

Placements, Individual Development Plans, provision and tribunal appeals.



Of all issues recorded, Education, Social Services issues and Additional Learning Needs (ALN) represented our three largest issue areas. Education and ALN issues are often interlinked. Together, both Education and ALN accounted for over half of all issues, demonstrating the need for access to clear, reliable and accessible support to navigate an often complex and challenging system. The President of the Education Tribunal for Wales described the system as 'intellectually challenging' in a recent review of the ALN Legislative Framework.

A cross-system theme

At least **207** issues were explicitly categorised as complaints across education, social services, health and housing (22% of all issues recorded). This points to the importance of clear, accessible and child-centred routes for resolving concerns.

Access and reach

Who contacted us?

Parents were the largest referrer group, accounting for 57% of all new enquiries. Other enquiries were made by extended family members, members of the public, and foster carers. Children and young people contacted the service directly in 19 recorded enquiries. It is important to note that each enquiry has a direct impact on a child or young person as our advice and support means that they can find a way forward and realise their rights.

How people got in touch

Over half of new enquiries began by phone (56%), with approximately 44% taking place via email. Two enquiries were made by letter, and two in person.

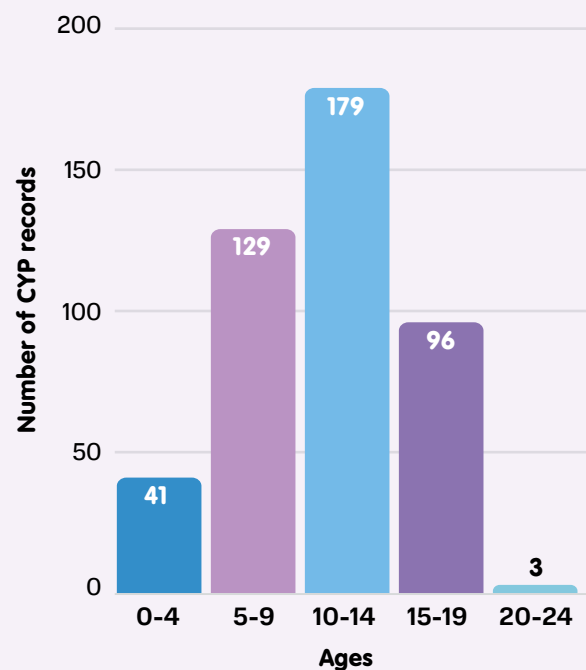
Wales-wide Reach

Casework represented all 22 Welsh local authority areas. Among enquiries where an area was recorded, the largest numbers came from Cardiff (53), Rhondda Cynon Taf (46), Swansea (43), Bridgend (42) and the Vale of Glamorgan (34). These figures describe recorded demand and should not be interpreted as a measure of service quality or prevalence in a particular area.

Ages of the Children and Young People in our Casework

Detailed child-level information was recorded in 486 child records. Age was known in 448 of these records. These are recorded details, not a measure of the service's total reach or a confirmed count of unique children. In some quick or general enquiries, it was neither necessary nor appropriate to collect personal details.

Ages of Children and Young People represented in our casework



Outcomes and impact

What difference did the service make?

The impact of advice work cannot be captured in a single measure. Sometimes, it is a changed decision or new provision. Sometimes, it is a child being included in a meeting, a family understanding their rights, an unsafe or unsuitable arrangement being reconsidered, or a public body giving a clear and accountable response.

Recorded outcomes included:

- specialist or more suitable education placements being secured or progressed;
- one-to-one support, home tuition and other educational provision being put in place;
- school transport assistance or mileage support being agreed;
- attendance practice changing to reflect a child's health needs;
- children and young people being better-included in meetings and transition-planning;
- families receiving clearer explanations, reassurance and practical next steps;
- a care-experienced young person gaining access to personal information; and
- casework evidence being shared internally to inform wider influencing and policy work.

What difference did the service make?

Without accessible, independent advice, children and families may be left to navigate complex systems alone, uncertain about their rights or how to challenge a decision. This can increase the risk of delays, unresolved safeguarding concerns, unsuitable provision and children being excluded from decisions affecting them.

Our service helps people understand their rights, identify the appropriate route forward and raise concerns with the relevant public body. Where necessary, we intervene to seek accountability, clarification or practical change. By bringing individual cases together, we also identify recurring barriers and ensure that children and young people's experiences inform wider policy, influencing and service improvement.

Without accessible advice	With our support
Complex processes can be difficult to navigate	Rights and processes are clearly explained
Families may not know how to challenge decisions	Practical options and challenge routes are identified
Risks or unmet needs may remain unresolved	Concerns can be escalated to the appropriate decision-maker
Children's views may not be fully considered	Participation and best interests are placed at the centre
Individual experiences can remain invisible	Casework themes inform wider organisational work

Anonymised case snapshots

Impact in practice

Keeping education accessible after a family move

The issue: A family had moved because of domestic abuse and needed help with the cost of maintaining the child's school journey.

Our action: The team raised the transport issue and sought a rights-based response from the local authority.

The difference: The Head of Education authorised a mileage allowance, helping the child continue to access education.

Rights in focus: Articles **3** (best interests), **19** (protection from violence and harm) and **28** (right to education).

Support agreed for a child with additional learning needs

The issue: A parent was concerned that their child did not have the support needed to take part fully in education.

Our action: The team clarified the process, advised the parent and pursued the provision required.

The difference: The local authority agreed full-time one-to-one support, and the parent had a clearer understanding of the process.

Rights in focus: Articles **3** (best interests), **28** (right to education) and **29** (education should develop the child's abilities).

Education maintained while needs were reviewed

The issue: A child needed education at home while further evidence was gathered to inform their Individual Development Plan.

Our action: The team pursued interim educational provision and the assessment information needed for planning.

The difference: Five hours of home tuition were provided and an updated report was requested to inform the IDP.

Rights in focus: Articles **3** (best interests), **28** (right to education) and **29** (development through education).

Attendance practice changed to reflect illness

The issue: A young person's ongoing illness was affecting attendance and the way absences were recorded at school.

Our action: The team raised the concern and sought an approach that recognised the child's health circumstances.

The difference: The school accepted that the illness should be managed at home and agreed not to record related absences as unauthorised.

Rights in focus: Articles **2** (non-discrimination), **3** (best interests), **24** (right to health) and **28** (right to education).

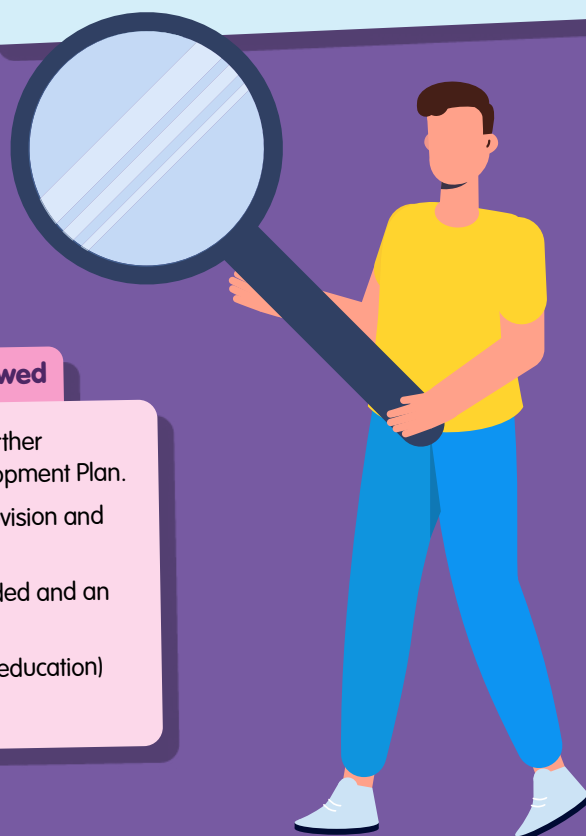
A young person included in decisions

The issue: A young person wanted to attend a meeting about decisions affecting them.

Our action: The team emphasised the young person's right to participate and have their views heard.

The difference: The school agreed that the young person could attend their meeting.

Rights in focus: Articles **12** (right to express views and have them taken seriously) and **13** (right to seek, receive and share information).



A close-up photograph of a young person with curly brown hair and freckles, looking down and speaking into a black microphone. They are wearing a dark blue shirt with a small circular logo on the sleeve. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a stone wall.

A CHALLENGER

My Policy and Public Affairs team makes sure that everything we hear from children and young people becomes the fuel that drives the challenges we make to Welsh Government and other public bodies.

In 2022, through my Ambitions for Wales consultation, I heard from more than 8,800 children and young people across Wales. They told me what matters most to them: good mental health, freedom from poverty, feeling safe, getting the support they need in education, being treated fairly and having a meaningful say in decisions that affect their lives. These priorities have shaped my work as Children's Commissioner for Wales and continue to provide a powerful statement of what matters most to children and young people.



Since then, I have continued to engage extensively with children and young people. Over the last three years, my office has engaged with more than 36,000 children and young people, gathered the views of around 20,000 children and young people through our Monthly Matters programme, received more than 3,500 responses through The Right Way survey and used learning from almost 2,000 advice and assistance cases to identify barriers to children's rights and services. This evidence has informed the development of my Manifesto Asks and my forthcoming Strategic Plan for 2026-29.

A clear message emerges: the priorities identified by children and young people through Ambitions for Wales remain the priorities they raise today. While progress has been made in some areas, too many children and young people continue to encounter barriers to accessing services, having their voices heard and realising their rights. The fact that many of the same concerns continue to be raised today suggests that insufficient progress has been made by Welsh Government in addressing the priorities. Throughout 2025/26, my policy work highlighted a concern that may help explain why progress has not always matched the scale of the challenges facing children and young people. Across several policy areas, there has not always been a sufficiently clear or consistent focus on the specific rights, needs and experiences of babies, children and young people.

In my view, this points to a more fundamental issue. Welsh Government has lacked both a clear vision and sufficient ambition for babies, children and young people. Too often, children's issues were fragmented across government rather than driven by a shared ambition to improve children's lives and realise their rights.

The result is that children and young people continue to identify many of the same priorities year after year, while significant inequalities and barriers remain. Having been the first country in the UK to establish the office of Children's Commissioner, Wales has rightly earned an international reputation for promoting children's rights. However, there is a risk that this reputation has bred a degree of complacency. My predecessor highlighted similar concerns, and the persistence of many of the same issues identified by children and young people suggests that Wales has not matched its reputation with sufficient ambition or pace for improving children's everyday lives.

With the Senedd election taking place in May 2026, there is now an opportunity for a new Welsh Government to take a different approach. It should place babies, children and young people at the heart of its Programme for Government, articulate a clear national vision for childhood in Wales and demonstrate greater ambition for improving outcomes for current and future generations of children. This requires more than individual policy commitments. It requires the legislative, administrative and institutional arrangements necessary to embed children's rights across government and to ensure that progress can be measured by whether babies, children and young people experience meaningful improvements in their lives.

Children and young people have been consistent in what they have told us. The evidence is clear. What has been missing is the vision, ambition and leadership needed to deliver the progress they have a right to expect. The next Welsh Government has an opportunity to reset its approach by placing babies, children and young people at the heart of decision-making and by strengthening the legislative, administrative and institutional arrangements that support their rights.

OVERARCHING RECOMMENDATIONS: **CALL FOR A RENEWED VISION FOR BABIES, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN WALES**



Article 4 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child requires governments to take all appropriate legislative, administrative and other measures to implement children's rights.

In accordance with these provisions, we make the following overarching recommendations as actions which should underpin the work of the next Welsh Government, as part of a broader call to make children's rights real.

Together, they provide a framework for ensuring that children's rights are not only recognised in principle, but reflected in better outcomes, better services and better life chances for babies, children and young people across Wales.



Recommendations ▶▶



Introduce a Children's Rights Bill for Wales that secures the full and direct incorporation of the UNCRC and strengthens the powers of my Office.

Wales has long been recognised as a leader in advancing children's rights. However, stronger legal protections and accountability mechanisms are needed to ensure that children's rights are consistently realised in practice.

Welsh Government should bring forward a Children's Rights Bill for Wales, providing for the full incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into Welsh law. This would help ensure that children's rights are embedded across legislation, policy-making and public service delivery, and that public bodies are directed to act compatibly with children's rights.

As part of this legislative framework, the powers, remit and independence of the Children's Commissioner for Wales should also be strengthened in line with the Paris Principles. This should include ensuring that my Office is funded by and accountable to the Senedd, extend the public bodies that fall within my remit, and strengthen the powers required to more effectively promote and protect children's rights.

2

Appoint a dedicated Minister for Babies, Children and Young People

Children's lives are shaped by decisions made across every area of government, yet responsibility for children's issues is often fragmented. A dedicated, senior Minister for Babies, Children and Young People should be created to provide visible leadership across government, champion children's rights at Cabinet level and coordinate action across ministerial portfolios, ensuring that children and young people's interests remain central to decision-making.

3

Publish a National Plan for Babies, Children and Young People

Wales needs a single, cross-government plan setting out a clear long-term vision for babies, children and young people. Such a plan should establish clear outcomes, milestones and accountability arrangements; bringing together action across poverty, health, education, social care, safeguarding, housing and transport. Supported by strong ministerial leadership and cross-government ownership, it would provide a clear framework against which progress can be measured and scrutinised.

4

Adopt a Children's Rights Approach to Public Budgeting

Budgets determine how priorities are translated into action. Children's rights cannot be realised without adequate and sufficient investment.

Welsh Government should adopt a Children's Rights Approach to Public Budgeting, ensuring that spending decisions are routinely assessed against their impact on children's rights, wellbeing and life chances. This should include greater transparency regarding investment in babies, children and young people, stronger scrutiny of spending decisions and closer alignment between budgeting and children's rights impact assessment.

5

Improve Children's Rights Impact Assessments

Children's rights considerations must be embedded throughout government decision-making and not treated as a procedural exercise. Welsh Government should strengthen its approach to Children's Rights Impact Assessments, as the main mechanism by which the statutory duty for Ministers to have due regard to the UNCRC is evidenced, ensuring they are undertaken consistently, published routinely and used to influence policy development at the earliest stages of decision-making.

During this reporting period, I was concerned by the frequent cancellation of meetings of Welsh Government's Children's Rights Advisory Group. The Group has an important role in providing independent advice, challenge and scrutiny in relation to the implementation of children's rights across government. Welsh Government should strengthen the mechanisms that support children's rights impact assessment and implementation.



Strengthen Participation and Participation Structures

Article 12 of the UNCRC recognises the right of children and young people to express their views and have those views given due weight in decisions affecting them. Meaningful participation is a cornerstone of a children's rights approach to policy-making and public service delivery. Throughout my term as Commissioner, children and young people have consistently demonstrated their willingness and ability to contribute to decisions that affect their lives. However, participation is too often treated as a one-off exercise rather than a routine part of decision-making.

Welsh Government should strengthen participation structures at both national and local level, ensuring that children and young people have meaningful opportunities to influence decisions. This should include a more joined-up and deliberative approach to policy development, involving children and young people throughout the development, implementation and evaluation of policy. Strengthening participation structures would help ensure that children's voices shape decision-making, improve the quality of policy and services, and make children's rights real in practice.



Improve Evaluation and Accountability to Children and Young People

Improving children's lives requires sustained focus, transparent accountability and effective evaluation. Welsh Government should establish clear national outcomes, indicators and reporting arrangements for babies, children and young people, enabling progress to be measured transparently and scrutinised effectively.

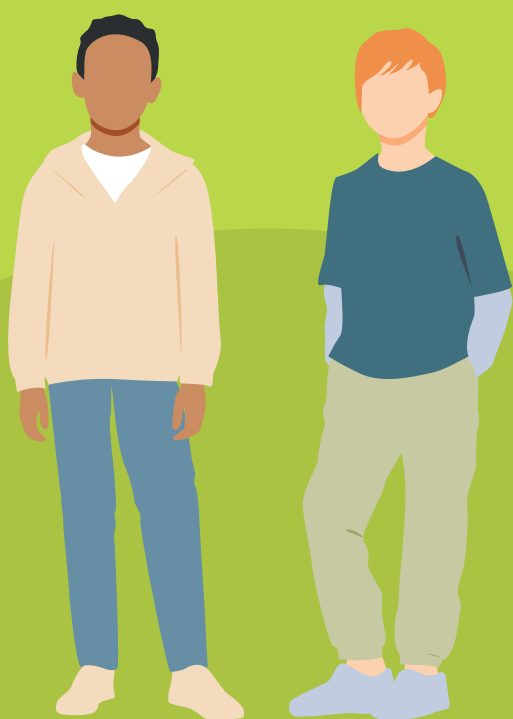
A National Plan for Babies, Children and Young People should be supported by annual reporting on progress, independent scrutiny of delivery and a clear assessment of whether outcomes for babies, children and young people are improving. Accountability should focus not simply on activity but on measurable improvements in children's lives.

Accountability should also extend directly to children and young people. Welsh Government should ensure that progress is regularly reported back to children and young people in accessible and age-appropriate ways, demonstrating how their views have influenced decisions and what difference government action has made. Children and young people should be able to understand not only what

commitments have been made on their behalf but whether those commitments are being delivered.

Building on its existing scrutiny activities, I would like to see the Welsh Youth Parliament have an enhanced role in holding the Welsh Government to account for progress on commitments to babies, children and young people. Rather than relying solely on the current arrangement where Welsh Government responds to individual reports, a mechanism could be introduced requiring the Welsh Government to report regularly to the Welsh Youth Parliament. The Senedd should explore all available mechanisms to strengthen the Welsh Youth Parliament. This could involve bringing forward targeted legislation to place the Welsh Youth Parliament on a statutory footing or, alternatively, embedding these specific accountability arrangements directly within the Senedd's Standing Orders. This would strengthen transparency and ensure children's voices are meaningfully heard and that children's rights are not only protected and promoted but made real in practice.

THEMATIC POLICY ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO WELSH GOVERNMENT





Child poverty

Tackling poverty continued to be a strategic priority of my Office during 2025/26. Despite child poverty remaining one of the greatest barriers to children's rights in Wales, the child poverty rate in Wales has changed very little over the past decade. While I acknowledge that Welsh Government does not have all the fiscal and policy levers required to tackle child poverty, and that positive steps have been taken in some areas, progress has been too slow. Far greater ambition is needed if Wales is to meaningfully reduce child poverty and improve the life chances of babies, children and young people.

In September 2025, I provided evidence to the UK Parliament Work and Pensions Select Committee's inquiry into the UK Government's draft child poverty strategy. I highlighted the need for action in reserved policy areas, the importance of involving civil society in strategy development and the value of ensuring that children's voices and experiences shape decision-making.

I also responded to the previous Welsh Government's Child Poverty Strategy 2025 Progress Report. Whilst welcoming areas of progress, I highlighted the need for further action including introducing a Welsh Child Payment, reviewing the Learner Travel Measure, and strengthening the free school meals offer in secondary schools. These priorities were reflected in my Manifesto for Children and Young People published in October 2025, ahead of the 2026 Senedd election.

During the reporting period, the UK Government announced the removal of the two-child limit on Universal Credit, a significant step that should help lift more children and families out of poverty. Welsh Government must now do all that it can to ensure that children and families have more money to buy life's essentials, reduce the cost of the school day, and are supported to meet housing costs.

Recommendations

The recommendations below are not new. They reflect recommendations made in my previous Annual Report and subsequent policy work. I am disappointed that insufficient progress has been to address these issues. Given the continued impact of poverty on children's rights, wellbeing and life chances, I reiterate these recommendations and urge the next Welsh Government to act on them as a matter of priority:

-  8 Develop a new Child Poverty Strategy with clear targets, milestones and accountability arrangements, shaped by the views and experiences of children and young people.
-  9 Introduce a Welsh Child Payment, similar to that available in Scotland, as an additional tool to help lift babies, children and families out of poverty.
-  10 Extend free school meal eligibility to all secondary school learners in households receiving Universal Credit, with a clear pathway towards universal provision in secondary schools.
-  11 Increase family incomes by improving access to Welsh benefits and entitlements, accelerating the roll-out of the Welsh Benefits Charter, and ensuring that all eligible households can easily access the support available to them.
-  12 Review housing and homelessness policy and guidance through a children's rights lens, informed by the voices and experiences of children and families, ensuring that children and families experiencing housing insecurity receive the support they need and that relevant guidance explicitly reflects obligations laid down in the UNCRC.



Education

Education remains one of the most significant areas of my policy work and casework. Children and young people consistently tell me about the importance of feeling safe, supported and included in school, and of being able to access the support they need to learn and thrive.

During 2025/26, my Office undertook work on a number of issues affecting learners, including Additional Learning Needs, school governance, school behaviour, complaints processes, and tackling bullying and discrimination. Whilst these issues are distinct, they are united by a common question: is the education system consistently delivering on children's rights and meeting the needs of all learners?

Across these areas, I continue to hear concerns about inconsistency, accountability and access to support. The following sections outline the action I believe is needed to ensure that every learner can benefit from an education system that is inclusive, rights-respecting and responsive to their needs.

Additional Learning Needs

Cases concerning learners with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) continue to make up a significant proportion and highly complex area of our casework.

During the reporting period, a number of important pieces of work examined the operation of the ALN system. Welsh Government's review into the Additional Learning Needs Legislative Framework concluded in October 2025 and recognised that challenges within the system remain. These include the application of the definitions of ALN and Additional Learning Provision (ALP), alongside the need for better access to information and support for families. The review also considered advocacy services provided to children and families under the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 (ALNET) and we are aware that Audit Wales was also commissioned to consider the sustainability of the system.

The Education Tribunal Wales (ETW) also published its own report highlighting 10 key issues. Many of these reflect concerns regularly raised with my Office by children, young people and families navigating what has been described by ETW as an "intellectually challenging" system.

During the review period, my Office continued to observe meetings of Welsh Government's ALN Reform National Steering Group and the new configuration of the ALN National Delivery and Improvement Board. What is striking is the degree of consistency in the feedback from reviews, stakeholders and families. The evidence increasingly points to the same conclusion: implementation remains inconsistent and the system is not yet delivering the improvements in experiences and outcomes that children, young people and families were promised.

Recommendations

- 13** Welsh Government should publish the findings of its review of ALN advocacy services, together with its response and clear next steps to address any barriers identified to accessing effective advocacy for children, young people and families.
- 14** Welsh Government should respond to the recommendations arising from the Audit Wales review, including consideration of the sustainability and transparency of ALN funding and whether current funding arrangements are sufficient to deliver the ALN system as intended.
- 15** Welsh Government should respond to the Education Tribunal Wales report and prioritise action on Key Issues 1 and 2: the application of the definition of ALN and identifying what constitutes ALP. It should set out how it will improve the consistency of the implementation of ALNET across Wales and make the system easier for children, young people and families to understand and navigate.

School governance

Following my call for a review into school governance, Welsh Government commissioned a review into how schools are governed. As a member of the review reference group, I called for the scope of the review to include consideration of improving the diversity of school governors and for the exploration of the remuneration of school governors.

The review comes at a significant moment for education in Wales. The crimes committed by Neil Foden have raised important questions about governance, accountability, oversight and safeguarding within schools. While the review is not solely a response to those events, it presents an important opportunity to consider whether existing governance arrangements provide the challenge, expertise and scrutiny needed to support effective leadership and safeguard children and young people.

I have been clear that this is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to consider all potential options for the future of school governance. Nothing should be ruled out. The review should be ambitious in exploring how governance arrangements can better support school leaders, strengthen accountability, improve safeguarding and ensure that learners' experiences and voices are meaningfully reflected in decision-making.

Recommendation ►►►

- 16** Welsh Government must ensure that the school governance review fully explores whether current governance arrangements provide sufficient expertise, challenge, oversight and accountability. It should use this opportunity to consider all options for reform and ensure that future arrangements are capable of supporting strong leadership, effective safeguarding and meaningful learner participation.

School complaints

In 2024/25, my Office undertook a project examining school complaints and made several recommendations in my previous annual report. Through this work, families told me that they lacked confidence in the complaints process, particularly where they felt that school governing bodies were not providing sufficient challenge or independent scrutiny of decisions made by school leaders.

During 2025/26, my Advice and Assistance Service continued to receive cases that reflected many of the same concerns. Families reported difficulties understanding the complaints process, uncertainty about how complaints would be considered and a lack of confidence that their concerns would be addressed independently or effectively.

An effective complaints process is an important part of accountability within education. It should be transparent, accessible and understandable to all those who use it. Children and young people should also be able to understand the process, know their rights and access appropriate support when raising concerns.

Recommendation ►►►

- 17** Welsh Government must work at pace to publish the revised school complaints guidance as soon as possible. It should also produce separate, child-friendly guidance for children and young people, alongside guidance for adult complainants, to ensure that the complaints process is accessible, transparent and rights-respecting for all.

School behaviour

School behaviour continued to be a significant area of discussion during the reporting period. In May 2025, the Cabinet Secretary for Education convened a Behaviour Summit, bringing together stakeholders to consider behaviour in schools and the factors that influence it.

A key theme emerging from the discussions was the importance of recognising behaviour as a form of communication. Contributors highlighted the impact of wider societal factors on behaviour, the need for stronger collaborative working between agencies including statutory and voluntary, and the importance of better data to understand trends, experiences and outcomes.

Children and young people do not experience behaviour policies in isolation from other aspects of their lives. Factors such as poverty, mental health, additional learning needs, discrimination and adverse experiences can all influence behaviour and engagement in education. Any national response to behaviour must therefore reflect the complexity of children's experiences and ensure that support is available holistically across services.

The proposed national behaviour framework presents an opportunity to develop a more consistent and inclusive approach across Wales, informed by the experiences of learners themselves.

Recommendations

18

Welsh Government should ensure that the development of the national behaviour framework adopts a cross-government approach and is informed by the experiences of learners, including learners with Additional Learning Needs and children and young people from groups with protected characteristics, so that it reflects the diverse experiences and needs of learners across Wales.

19

Welsh Government should publish updated behaviour guidance for schools as part of the national framework, setting out clear expectations and practical support to help schools respond consistently to behaviour, wellbeing and inclusion.

Tackling bullying and discrimination

Tackling bullying and discrimination has been a longstanding priority for both my Office and my predecessors. In 2023, I published a report on children's experiences of racism in secondary schools, highlighting the significant impact that racism can have on learners' wellbeing, sense of belonging and educational experiences. Unfortunately, children and young people continue to tell me that bullying and discrimination remain persistent issues in their lives. I continue to hear concerns about racism, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny and other forms of identity-based bullying, and the impact these experiences can have on children's confidence, wellbeing and participation in school life.

Following the publication of my report on children's experiences of racism in secondary schools, I have continued to engage with Welsh Government officials on the need for a more effective approach to recording and responding to racist incidents in schools. This is not a new issue. My Office, and my predecessors, have repeatedly raised concerns about the lack of consistent data on bullying and discrimination and the impact this has on accountability and school improvement.

Yet children and young people continue to share experiences of prejudice-based bullying, and there is still no national mechanism for recording and reporting incidents across all protected characteristics. Without comprehensive data, it is difficult to understand the scale and nature of the problem, identify emerging trends or assess whether action being taken by schools, local authorities and Welsh Government is making a difference. Welsh Government must now grasp this issue and introduce a more robust, consistent and national approach to recording and reporting prejudice-based bullying across Wales.

This concern was reinforced through engagement undertaken to inform my response to Welsh Government's updated Rights, Respect and Equality guidance. Children and young people told me that some teachers lack confidence in discussing issues relating to protected characteristics and do not always feel adequately equipped to respond to identity-based bullying when it occurs. Anti-immigrant community tensions which heightened throughout the summer of 2025 showed that this is an issue which is not going away.

In this context, the youth work sector has an important role to play. Young people consistently tell my Office that they value the informal, relationship-based support provided by youth workers, particularly when discussing issues such as identity, relationships and discrimination. Youth workers often bring specialist knowledge and expertise that can complement the work of schools and help create safe spaces where young people feel comfortable seeking advice and support.

The importance of these spaces was further highlighted during discussions about potential restrictions on children's access to social media. Whilst I support measures to improve children's online safety, any steps to restrict online connections must be matched by increased investment in opportunities for children and young people to meet, participate and access support in person. This includes ensuring that youth work services are adequately and sustainably resourced to respond effectively to this change.

Recommendations

-  **20** Welsh Government must bring forward new legislation to introduce a statutory duty requiring all schools to record incidents of bullying and discrimination based on protected characteristics. This information should be reported to local authorities to support school improvement, with aggregated data subsequently reported to Welsh Government. The resulting framework should provide a clearer understanding of the experiences of children and young people and strengthen accountability for tackling prejudice-based bullying across Wales.
-  **21** Welsh Government should work with the Youth Work sector to develop and pilot a national programme of specialist support. This should draw on the expertise of youth workers to promote strategic collaboration between schools and youth services. Schools and youth services should work together to develop and deliver learning programmes addressing racism, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny and other forms of discrimination; ensuring that young people have access to trusted adults, high-quality information and safe spaces for support and discussion.



Equalities

Throughout the year, my Office has continued to engage with Welsh Government on a range of equalities-related policy developments. A recurring theme across this work was the need to ensure that children and young people from groups who face discrimination and disadvantage are not only considered in policy development but are actively involved in shaping it.

Community Cohesion

In my previous Annual Report, I highlighted the importance of ensuring that children and young people have meaningful opportunities to contribute to the governance and accountability arrangements associated with the Anti-racist Wales Action Plan (ArWAP). While Welsh Government accepted my recommendation to establish a mechanism through which children and young people could contribute to ArWAP oversight and scrutiny, I am concerned that progress towards its implementation has been limited.

Racism, community cohesion, migration and sanctuary remain important and live issues for many children and young people across Wales. If Welsh Government is committed to ensuring that children's voices shape policy and decision-making, children and young people must have a meaningful and ongoing role in scrutinising these actions.

Recommendation ►►►



Welsh Government should establish a formal mechanism for children and young people to contribute to the governance and accountability of the Anti-racist Wales Action Plan, mirroring the role of the External Accountability Group.

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities

During the reporting period, my Office responded to several Welsh Government consultations on revised guidance relating to Gypsy and Traveller accommodation, site management and unauthorised encampments. These consultations provided an important opportunity to advocate for a children's rights approach and to ensure the needs, experiences and voices of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and young people are reflected in policy and practice.

Whilst I welcome Welsh Government's continued engagement with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, I remain concerned that there has been limited progress in creating meaningful opportunities for children and young people from these communities to influence policy and decision-making. This concern is not new. In previous Annual Reports, I called for mechanisms that would enable Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, including children and young people, to engage directly with Welsh Government and contribute to accountability arrangements linked to the Anti-racist Wales Action Plan.

Despite some progress in engagement with adult stakeholders, there remains a significant gap in ensuring that the experiences and perspectives of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and young people are heard, acted upon and reflected in policy development. Meaningful participation requires more than consultation; it requires ongoing structures through which children and young people can influence decisions that affect their lives.

Recommendation ►►►



Welsh Government should establish a dedicated, accessible and meaningful stakeholder engagement forum specifically for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and young people. This should enable them to receive updates on progress, raise concerns, share their experiences, and contribute directly to the development of policy and practice.



Disabled children and young people

I welcomed the publication of Welsh Government's Disabled People's Rights Plan and the renewed commitment to improving the lives of disabled people through a rights-based approach. My Office contributed to the development of the Plan, ensuring that the experiences and rights of disabled children and young people were reflected throughout the process. However, publication of the Plan must be accompanied by meaningful opportunities for disabled children and young people to influence its implementation. Disabled children and young people are rights-holders in their own right, with distinct experiences and priorities that must not be overlooked in wider discussions about disability rights.

The Plan commits to an External Advisory Board. While I welcome this commitment, there is currently no mechanism through which children and young people can formally contribute their views to the Board's work. This risks weakening the role disabled children and young people can play in shaping the implementation and evaluation of a Plan that will directly affect their lives.

Recommendation ►►►

24

Welsh Government should establish a dedicated and accessible stakeholder engagement forum through which disabled children and young people can formally contribute to the Disabled People's Rights Plan's External Advisory Board.

Mental health

Mental health and wellbeing continue to be among the issues most frequently raised with my Office by children and young people. During this reporting period, Welsh Government published its 10-year Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy and accompanying Delivery Plan. I welcomed a number of commitments within the Strategy, including the commitment to develop a new approach to delivering early intervention support, with a view to introducing same-day open-access psychological care across Wales.

However, I was disappointed that the Strategy was not accompanied by a dedicated delivery plan for children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. Given the distinct experiences, needs and rights of children and young people, a separate delivery plan would provide greater clarity about how commitments would support children and young people and would strengthen accountability for delivery and outcomes.

Whilst early intervention and prevention are essential, children and young people must also be able to access support when they are experiencing significant mental health issues or are in crisis. During 2025, I visited Sanctuary service pilots, which provide non-clinical settings for children and young people requiring urgent mental health support. I was impressed by the services being delivered and the positive difference they were making to children and young people. However, I was concerned about the long-term sustainability of these services, given that funding provided to them by Welsh Government was due to end in March 2026. In response, I wrote to the chairs of the three relevant health boards to understand how these services might be sustained in the future. I subsequently welcomed confirmation that Welsh Government funding would continue for a further year.

While this provides important short-term stability, uncertainty remains regarding the long-term future of the Sanctuary model. Welsh Government has commissioned the Royal College of Psychiatry to evaluate the pilots. Given the potential benefits of these services for children and young people in crisis, it is important that the evaluation is undertaken without delay and that future funding arrangements are clarified as soon as possible.

Recommendations ►►

- 25** Welsh Government should ensure that the evaluation of the Sanctuary service pilots is completed as soon as possible and that the findings are shared with relevant stakeholders.
- 26** Welsh Government should set out its plans for the future funding and sustainability of these services at the earliest opportunity, providing clarity to health boards, delivery partners, and staff.



Transport

Access to affordable, reliable, safe and accessible transport continues to be an important issue for children and young people. Transport is not simply about getting from one place to another. It is an enabler of children's rights, affecting their ability to access education, healthcare, employment and training opportunities, leisure activities and relationships with family and friends.

During 2025/26, my Office continued to engage with Welsh Government and the Senedd on public transport and learner travel policy. This included contributing to the scrutiny of the Bus Services (Wales) Bill, where I highlighted the importance of an inclusive bus network in supporting children and young people's access to support and opportunities. I also responded to the consultation on the Learner Travel Operational Guidance 2025, emphasising the

need for guidance that reflects the experiences of children and young people and promotes safe, equitable and reliable access to education.

I welcomed the introduction of a Young Persons Fare for children and young people. Affordable public transport can reduce financial barriers to travel, increase independence and enable greater participation in education, employment, training, and community life. Increased use of public transport and reduced reliance on private vehicles can also help to reduce carbon emissions and can contribute to tackling climate change. This is important because climate change remains a key concern for children and young people, who are already experiencing its impacts on their health, wellbeing, education and opportunities to play and participate in their communities.

While these developments are positive, they should be viewed as the first steps towards improving access to travel for children and young people in Wales. Too many children and young people continue to face barriers caused by transport costs, availability and accessibility. There is now an opportunity for Welsh Government to take a more ambitious approach to transport for children and young people, recognising the role it plays in enabling them to access their rights and fulfil their potential.

Recommendations ►►

- 27** Welsh Government should undertake a full review of the Learner Travel (Wales) Measure 2008 and associated guidance to ensure that it remains fit for purpose and reflects the needs and experiences of children and young people.
- 28** Welsh Government should commission an independent cost-benefit analysis of introducing free public transport for all children and young people in Wales, examining the economic, social, health, environmental and educational impacts, alongside the children's rights impacts.



Safeguarding

Safeguarding remained a significant focus of my policy work during 2025/26. I revisited a recommendation from the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IISCA) for the establishment of a Child Protection Authority in Wales. I reiterated my support for this recommendation, recognising the potential for a Child Protection Authority in improving child protection practice, advising government on policy and reform, and providing independent oversight of relevant institutions and settings.

Alongside this, I called on Welsh Government to review safeguarding governance and accountability arrangements in Wales to ensure gaps in the system were identified and addressed. I therefore welcomed the announcement in late 2025 that Welsh Government would commission a review of safeguarding governance in Wales. As part of my contribution to the review, I reiterated our call for a Child Protection Authority and highlighted the need for stronger accountability and oversight across the safeguarding system.

The review was expected to report by the end of March 2026, ahead of May's Senedd election. However, we continue to await publication of its recommendations. Given the importance of this review and the opportunity it presents to strengthen safeguarding governance in Wales, it is important that its findings are published as soon as possible.

The commissioning of the review coincided with the Child Practice Review relating to the crimes of Neil Foden. In response, Cyngor Gwynedd established a Response Board to oversee improvements to safeguarding arrangements and coordinate implementation of a response plan. My Office is represented on the Board and has observed positive progress in strengthening safeguarding arrangements and ensuring the voices of children and young people are central to its work.

As the Board's work has evolved, its focus has shifted from monitoring actions to measuring impact, with a greater emphasis on understanding whether changes are leading to meaningful improvements. My Office continues to contribute a children's rights perspective, sharing learning from our Advice and Assistance Service, and providing feedback on issues including participation, child-friendly communication and the voice of the child in policy development.

During this reporting period, the previous Welsh Government consulted on its 10-year strategy to tackle child sexual abuse. In my response, I highlighted the opportunity to strengthen safeguarding governance through the establishment of a Child Protection Authority, which could support the delivery of the strategy's ambitions and help improve consistency, accountability and oversight across Wales.

Recommendation

29

Welsh Government should publish the final report and recommendations of the Safeguarding Governance Review as soon as possible. The review presents an important opportunity to strengthen safeguarding governance, accountability and oversight in Wales, and its recommendations should be progressed without delay.



Social care

Improving outcomes for care-experienced children and young people remained a significant focus of my work for 2025/26. During the year, I responded to a Welsh Government consultation on the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act's Part 6 Code of Practice on Looked After and Accommodated Children, the focus of which was on corporate parenting. In my response, I emphasised the importance of ensuring that children and young people are meaningfully involved in their own lives, including reviews of their care and support. I also called for stronger recognition of children's dignity during placement moves, including ensuring that they are able to pack their own belongings and that suitable bags are provided. This work was informed directly by engagement with children and young people through the Hope Group.

Promoting children's rights and participation in social care has remained a longstanding priority for my Office. In March 2026, my Office hosted The Right Way to Social Care conference, bringing together stakeholders from across the public and voluntary sectors to explore how a children's rights approach can strengthen decision-making, improve outcomes and ensure that the voices of children and young people are heard throughout the social care system. The conference also highlighted innovative practice, including work to recognise being care-experienced as a protected characteristic and approaches to embedding children's rights within social care services.

Building on this work, my Office convened a policy roundtable event with partners from across Wales to consider progress made during the Sixth Senedd and identify priorities for the future.

Despite important reforms and improvements in recent years, there was a shared view that more remains to be done to improve the experiences and outcomes of care-experienced babies, children and young people. Four priorities emerged from these discussions: sustaining progress in transforming children's experiences of care; strengthening early intervention and prevention; improving support for young people transitioning from care into adulthood; and ensuring that children's rights and voices remain at the centre of policy and practice. My Office also

sought to fulfil its own corporate parenting responsibilities by offering work experience to a care-experienced young person. Whilst this is a small initiative, it reflected a wider point: care-experienced children and young people should have access to the same opportunities as their peers. There is scope for public bodies across Wales to act in line with their corporate parenting responsibilities and do more to better support this group of children and young people to develop skills, gain experience and fulfil their potential.

Recommendations ►►

- 30** Welsh Government should identify care-experienced babies, children and young people (alongside babies, children and families who are in contact with social services) as a priority within its Programme for Government.
- 31** Welsh Government should establish a Ministerial Advisory Group for care-experienced children and young people to drive improvements in policy, practice and outcomes, and ensure that the voices of care-experienced children and young people inform decision-making.
- 32** Welsh Government should require all public bodies to offer work experience to care-experienced children and young people, helping them to develop skills, confidence and pathways into future education, training and employment.



Local participation structures

Participation is about ensuring that children and young people have meaningful opportunities to influence decisions that affect their lives, with their views listened to, valued and acted upon, as set out in Article 12 of the UNCRC.

During this reporting period, my Office engaged with all 22 local authorities to understand how participation is being delivered in practice. Emerging findings highlight a strong commitment to participation across Wales, with examples of innovative and effective practice. However, they also point to significant variation in how participation is resourced, embedded and translated into meaningful influence.

While some local authorities have well-established participation structures and dedicated capacity to support engagement, others face challenges in ensuring that participation is consistently embedded across services. The findings also suggest that children and young people whose voices are less often heard, including Black, Asian and minority ethnic children and young people and disabled children and young people, can face additional barriers to participation and influence.

These emerging findings indicate that, despite progress, participation is not yet experienced consistently by children and young people across Wales. If participation is to become a routine and expected part of decision-making, there must be greater consistency in the support, capacity and infrastructure available to local authorities, alongside a stronger focus on inclusive participation.

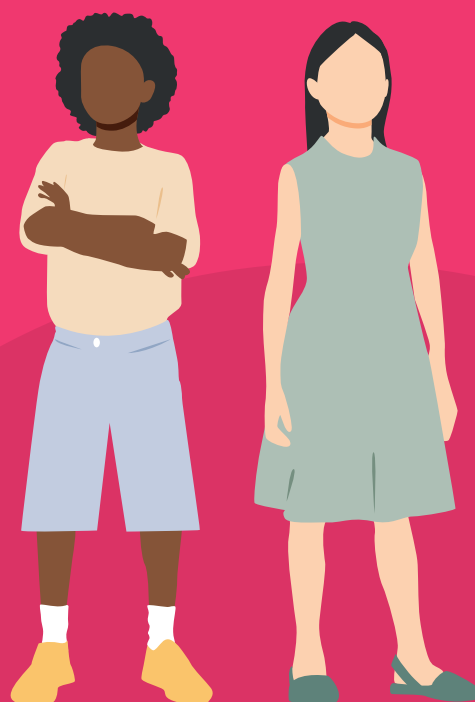
Recommendations ►►►

- 33** Local authorities should ensure that they are adequately and sustainably resourcing their participation structures, including sufficient staffing, capacity and infrastructure to embed participation across services and implement local Participation Strategies effectively.
- 34** Local authorities should undertake targeted work to engage children and young people whose voices are less often heard, including Black, Asian and minority ethnic children and young people, disabled children and young people, and other groups who face barriers to participation. This should be supported by dedicated funding and clear expectations regarding inclusive participation.
- 35** Welsh Government should review the effectiveness of existing statutory duties relating to children's participation and consider whether further legislative, policy or accountability measures are required to ensure consistent implementation across all local authorities in Wales.

OUR EQUALITY COMMITMENTS

There are certain national standards and duties that we must follow as a public body, including the Welsh Language Standards and the Equality Act. We'll also be reporting this year on the commitments we've made as a corporate parent.

Here's how we've delivered on these standards and duties this year.



Welsh Language

Our aspiration is clear: we want the Welsh language to be a living, breathing language in our organisation. In practical terms this means:

- the team uses it every day, in every aspect of our work;
- it is not something we just use to convey messages but it is a way of us connecting with one another and those who we are here to represent;
- among those in the Team who do not speak Welsh there is goodwill and a sense of ownership towards learning and using the language;
- there is recognition by all of the contribution of the Welsh language to the culture, society and economy of Wales;
- we achieve, and in some cases surpass, our statutory obligations under the standards outlined in the Welsh Language Measure (Wales) 2011;
- there is ownership of our aspirations to comply, promote and protect the Welsh language at Management Team level; and
- we monitor our activities through Management Team meetings, hold joint responsibility and agree proactive steps to support and increase the use of the language in our workplace



We actively promote the language and the principles of the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 and have measures to ensure we comply with these Standards.

As at 31st March 2026, there were **21** people working for the Commissioner. Of those staff members:

10

describe themselves as unable to speak Welsh/entry level Welsh

1

described themselves as having intermediate level skills in Welsh

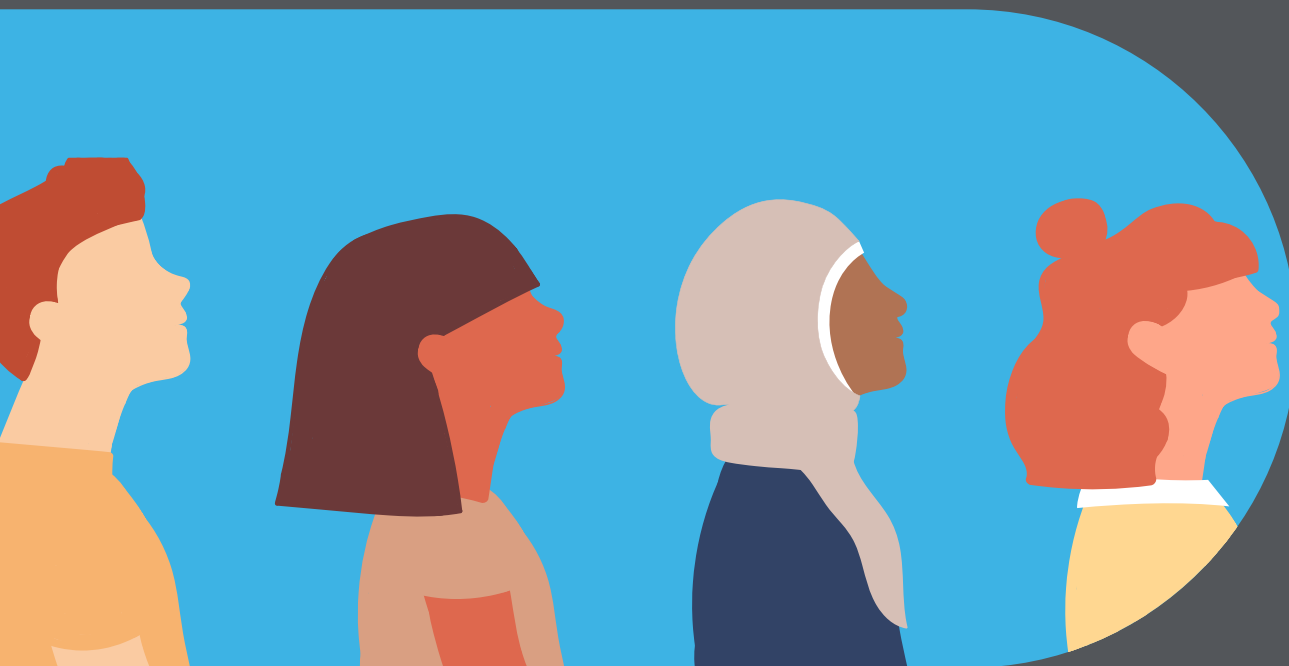
2

describe themselves as having advanced skills in Welsh

8

described themselves as proficient in Welsh

We received no complaints in relation to the Welsh language during 2025/26.



Equality

The Commissioner is a listed authority under the Equality Act (Statutory Duties) (Wales) Regulations 2011. This means that the office must follow what are called 'general duties' to promote equality.

As a national human rights institution, equality is at the heart of the Commissioner's vision and mission. You can read our strategic equality objectives and delivery plan on our website here: www.childcomwales.org.uk/about-us/our-work-on-equality/



Corporate parenting charter

In our [published commitments](#) to care experienced young people, we promised to report on our work and progress in all areas of the Welsh Government's Corporate Parenting Charter, which we have been proud to sign up to, and implement a full action plan to embed in our work.

Here are the highlights from our work in this space this year:

- We've made the participation of care-experienced children and young people a focus of our work, including convening a conference on 'The Right Way' in Social Care and a policy roundtable on the priorities for the next Welsh Government, which was launched with testimony from a care-experienced young person.
- During the year, we responded to a Welsh Government consultation on the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act's Part 6 Code of Practice on Looked After and Accommodated Children, the focus of which was on corporate parenting. Our response emphasised the importance of ensuring that children and young people are meaningfully involved in their own lives, including reviews of their care and support. We also called for stronger recognition of children's dignity during placement moves, including ensuring that they are able to pack their own belongings and that suitable bags are provided. This work was informed directly by engagement with care-experienced children and young people through the Hope Group.
- We've continued to engage with a number of different care-experience support groups or fora to hear directly from young people about their experiences and priorities. Staff from a range of teams within our organisation have taken part in these visits to ensure direct impact in all areas of our work.
- We've continued to explore work experience options for care-experienced young people and successfully concluded one placement during the summer of 2025. We supported the young person to engage with this placement and aim to encourage more public bodies to proactively offer similar experiences. We will continue to target care-experienced young people to facilitate work experience placements, as part of a broader approach to ensuring our work experience helps to address inequality and exclusion.

Workforce Equality, Diversity and Inclusion profile

Our workforce Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Profile
for the financial year 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026

Introduction and context

We gather information about diversity from our Team and the Commissioner's Audit and Advisory Panel members in relation to all of the protected characteristics covered by the Equality Act each year.

These important statistics help us to identify positive actions to improve the inclusive nature of our workplace. This is a voluntary request and approximately 15% of participants choose the 'prefer not to disclose' option for each equality characteristic so we do not have a complete picture and we caveat this section on that basis.

Whilst we recognise the importance of sharing our diversity statistics, we are a small team (just 21 people on 31st March 2026), so there are limitations on the level of detail we can share to respect the data protection rights of our colleagues.

For ease of reporting and comparing between years, we report our statistics on a fixed date in the year (31st March 2026). As a result, we must also accept that this method will not capture the diversity profile of all short-term employees or placement students we have supported in this time who will undoubtedly bring a wealth of perspectives and experiences to our Team.

Despite these limitations the data provides us with reasons to celebrate and an indication of what is helping us on our journey towards building a more inclusive workplace.



Reasons to celebrate

Despite the limitations in the data as indicated above, there are things to celebrate this year from an equality perspective about the make-up of our small Team:

- We are proud of our gender equality in terms of empowering women in the workplace. We have a female Children's Commissioner and a management team that includes 3/6 female leaders. This year has seen a significant shift in our gender pay differentials (see section 4);
- We are proud of our Welsh language representation. We have a high percentage of colleagues who are first language Welsh speakers, and 48% of our staff team have advanced or proficient skills in the language;
- We have also continued to improve the diversity of our team with some important (and previously missing) perspectives from minority ethnicities in Wales including the Chinese community and beliefs including Buddhism.
- We are proud of our efforts to support people with long-term health conditions in the workplace and have been learning from colleagues and Audit and Advisory team members who understand disability by association. Some of the support initiatives offered for our staff includes our flexible working approach, remote working abilities, leave to attend medical appointments, external services such as Access to Work and Occupational Health, purchasing of specific office equipment and DSE assessments. We support young people with disabilities to participate in recruitment processes and our Advisory Panel meetings and activities, learning all the time from their relatives and the young people themselves about the best way to enable their full participation. We have also continued our journey this year to becoming a trauma-informed organisation and we have continued learning from our membership of the Disability Confident Scheme.

- We employ people from across the age ranges with our youngest Team member being in their 20s and the oldest over 60 years of age.
- As a very small team of people, the diverse lived experiences of members of our Adult Advisory Panel and Children and Young People Advisory Panel also make a vital contribution to the breadth of our world views.

We are cautiously optimistic that the changes to our recruitment processes will continue to increase the diversity of our Team; nevertheless, we are not complacent about our workforce equality. We know the diversity of our Team can change with just one resignation and there remains some important lived experiences absent in our current staff make-up.

Our Advisory Panel members fulfil a vital role in bringing missing voices to our work. Our current panel includes people with LGBTQ+ lived experiences, disability and minority ethnic backgrounds and different religions.

During the past year, we have recruited for six job opportunities through which we have been able to refine and test our recruitment processes in relation to equality. We have introduced changes based on best-practice to increase the equality and inclusiveness of our processes, such as streamlining the application form and putting it online, introducing name-blind competency-based scenario questions alongside CVs as part of the shortlisting process, and offering informal conversations for applicants. We have seen a significant increase in the number of applications, high-quality applicants from a range of backgrounds, and positive feedback on the process.

Our learning and development activities this year included training on AI, Safeguarding, and learning more about public affairs and the opportunities presented by the 2026 Senedd election. The Management Team received a series of organisational development and leadership sessions.





Workforce diversity

On the 31st of March 2026, we had twenty-one people on the payroll (including the Children's Commissioner).

Between 1st April 2025 and 31st March 2026, six people left the Team. In this period there were six new appointments.

On 31st March 2026:

- **5%** of our workforce (1 person) was engaged on a fixed term basis directly related to maternity cover.
- **67%** of colleagues (14 out of 21 people) worked full time hours and 33% worked part time hours. There was a 9.5% increase in full-time workers from the previous year. 14% of our part-time workers are male (1 out of 7 people). This is a 5.5% increase from the previous year.
- **71%** of our workforce identify as female; this is a decrease of 11% from last year. Similarly, the majority of our Audit and Advisory Panel members are female.
- The majority of the staff team disclosed a heterosexual orientation or preferred not to disclose their sexual orientation. A small percentage of our Audit and Advisory Panel members disclosed a gay orientation.
- No one in the Team disclosed transgender, bi gender or gender fluid identities in this period.
- **28.5%** (6 people) of our colleagues in this period are under 35 years old; this is less than last year where 35% of our workforce was under 35 years of age. 33% (2 out of 6 people) of this age group works part time.
- **52%** (11 people) of our colleagues in this period are between 36 and 54 years of age. 27% (3 out of 11 people) of this age group works part time. The majority of our Adult Audit and Advisory Panel is in this age range.
- **19%** (4 people) of our colleagues are aged 55 years and over, slightly lower than last year's figure.; 50% (2 out of 4 people) of this age group works part time.
- We do not currently employ anyone over age 65.
- **19%** of our workforce live with a long-term health condition/disability; compared to 22.5% of the Welsh workforce as a whole.
- **86%** of our workforce on 31st March 2026 declared they were from a white ethnicity (slightly down on the previous year); with 76% describing themselves as White Welsh. Other ethnicities in our current Team include Latin American, Chinese, and White and Asian.
- **52%** of employees (11 out of 21 people) describe their Welsh language skills as either proficient, advanced or intermediate level. 48% of our workforce declared they have entry-level or foundation skills in the language.
- **33%** of our workforce declared their commitment to a specific religion (Christianity, Buddhism and one other included). 24% of colleagues declared they have no religion or belief, whilst 14% prefer not to disclose. Our Adult Advisory panel includes people from Sikh and Muslim religions.
- During this financial year, we have supported one person through pregnancy and maternity leave.
- Representatives from all genders, most grades and contract type accessed learning and development opportunities this year. In addition to individual learning applications, our whole team development programme continues and enables part-time workers, temporary workers and workers with protected characteristics to have equal access to learning and development opportunities.

Gender and Pay differentials

The Job Evaluation and Grading System that underpins the pay system in CCfW allocates a banding to individual posts based on seven different work factors: autonomy, problem solving, decision-making, impact, management of resources, contacts and communication, knowledge and skills. This system ensures that differences in salaries for posts relate to specific job requirements and contributes to our commitment to eradicate bias in the recruitment process.

Of the 16 female staff in post on 31st March 2026, 3 employees, or 19% of the female workforce, were employed in the three highest pay bands; compared to 3 male employees, or rather 60% of the male workforce. The differential between the two is 41%.

The gender balance of the Management Team itself is balanced with 3 female participants and 3 male participants. Female staff continue to be the larger part of our workforce, and a female occupies the most senior position in the organisation.

The average full-time equivalent salary for a female worker on 31st March 2026 has risen to approximately £47,600 from £45,500 last year and the average salary for a male worker has risen to

approximately £49,800 from £47,4265 last year. There has been an increase in the differential between the two genders this year, with male workers earning £2,200 per year more than female workers.

Only female staff members occupy the two lowest pay bands in CCFW and 6 of the 7 part-time workers in CCFW are female.

Of the 16 female staff members employed on 31st March 2026, 37.5% (6 people) occupy part-time roles. 20% of the male workforce works part time. This compares to 25% of the male workforce who worked part-time last year.



SUMMARY FINANCIAL INFORMATION

FOR 2025-26

My Finance and Core Services team support me in my role of Accounting Officer for the organisation.

The following is a summary of the financial information contained in the Commissioner's Annual Accounts for 2025-26. A full set of financial statements can be found on the Commissioner's website – www.childcomwales.org.uk

The accounts were subject to external audit; the Auditor General for Wales provided an unqualified opinion on these accounts.





The Commissioner's Management Team during 2025-26 was made-up of the following officers:

Rocio Cifuentes – Children's Commissioner for Wales
Jonathan Cox – Chief Operating Officer, from 15 September 2025
Sara Jermin – Deputy Commissioner and Head of Engagement, until 10 December 2025
Rachel Thomas – Head of Policy and Public Affairs, until 31 October 2025
Lina Liu – Head of Children's Rights, Advice and Assistance
Amanda Evans – Head of Human Resources; until 30th June 2025
Kathryn O'Kane – Head of Participation (Interim) from 10 December 2025
Paul Lewis – Head of Policy and Public Affairs, from 16 February 2026
Tony Evans – Head of Finance

Audit and Risk Assurance Committee

Further details of the role and function of this Committee can be found within our governance statement and in the Committee's Annual Report, which can be found on the Commissioner's website – www.childcomwales.org.uk

In summary, the Commissioner's Audit and Risk Assurance Committee provides advice and assurance in respect of corporate governance, risk management and control within the Commissioner's office and the adequacy of the internal and external audit arrangements. It meets at least bi-annually and is made-up of senior officials of the Commissioner's Office and Non-Executive members.

The Non-Executive members of the Committee are:

Julie Richards – Independent Writer/Strategic Communications Consultant

Bernie Bowen-Thomson – Chief Executive Officer at Safer Wales. Resignation received 16th July 2025

Jo Hendy – Chief Audit, Risk and Information Officer for Pembrokeshire County Council & Head of Internal audit for ERW and Swansea Bay City Deal. Resignation received 16th July 2025

Michaela Leyshon – Professional Tutor, Swansea University, from April 2022. Resignation received 16th July 2025

Suzy Davies (Chair) – Former Member of the Senedd, from April 2022

Kelly Harris – Chair of Adult Advisory Panel, from October 2023

Danielle Rees – Lawyer, from June 2024

Mark Jones – Chief Executive Officer of Gower College, from June 2024

Ellie Harwood – Development Manager for CPAG from February 2025

Jayne Drummond – Chief Executive Officer of Home Start, from March 2024

Representatives from Audit Wales and TIAA Ltd (our current internal auditors) also take part in every meeting.

Funding

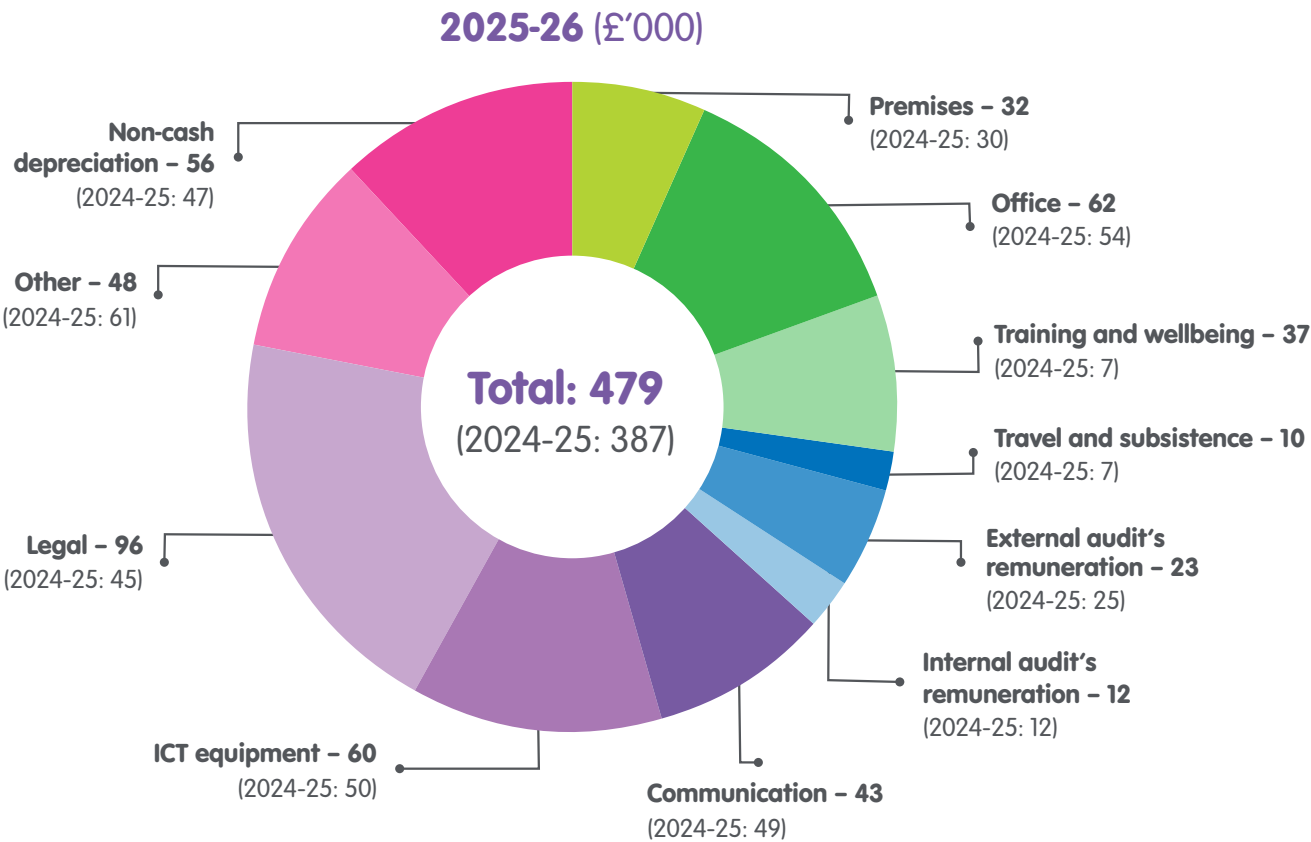
The Children's Commissioner for Wales is independent of, but funded by the Welsh Government. In 2025-26 the Commissioner received **£1.949 million** (2024-25: £1.667 million) to fund the Commissioner's activities.

Spending

During 2025-26 the Commissioner spent on the following:

Staff costs:	2025-26 (£'000)	2024-25 (£'000)
Salaries	1,094	936
National Insurance	134	94
Pension	255	257
Net recoveries in respect of secondments	-	-
Total	1,483	1,287

The chart below illustrates the costs of operating activities by category of expenditure. It also includes details of non-cash depreciation.





Helps. Speaks

lo, my name is Rocio
fuentes and I'll be the
Children's Commissioner
for Wales from April 2022
until April 2029.

It's my job to:

Listen to children and young people
to find out what you need.

Speak up about the things you need.
Help you, and those who care for you,
if you think you are treated unfairly.

Article 3:
Adults must be
Article 4:
Governments must protect with
my rights.
Article 5:
My family should help me
my own rights.
Article 6:
I have the right to
Article 7:
I have a right to
to a country.
Article 8:
I have the

28

Confensiwn y CU ar
Hawliau'r Plentyn



How can I learn
I can read

Confensiwn y CU ar
Hawliau'r Plentyn



27

Confensiwn y
Hawliau'r Ple



11

26



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01792 765600



**Comisiynydd
Plant Cymru**

Children's
Commissioner
for **Wales**