

This response was submitted to the [Equality and Social justice Committee](#) on the [inquiry into Social Cohesion](#)

SC 17

Ymateb gan: Comisiynydd Plant Cymru

Response from: Children's Commissioner for Wales

Ymateb i Ymgyngoriad / Consultation Response

Date / Dyddiad: 13/2/25

Subject / Pwnc: Social Cohesion

Background information about the Children's Commissioner for Wales

The Children's Commissioner for Wales' principal aim is to safeguard and promote the rights and welfare of children. In exercising their functions, the Commissioner must have regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The Commissioner's remit covers all areas of the devolved powers of the Senedd that affect children's rights and welfare.

The UNCRC is an international human rights treaty that applies to all children and young people up to the age of 18. The Welsh Government has adopted the UNCRC as the basis of all policy making for children and young people and the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales)

Measure 2011 places a duty on Welsh Ministers, in exercising their functions, to have 'due regard' to the UNCRC.

This response is not confidential.

Children's Commissioner for Wales

In recent years, the UK has witnessed a series of societal unrests, such as protests, demonstrations, and civil discontent over issues related to economic inequality, racial injustice, police violence, and the erosion of public services. Most recently the horrific attack in Southport on 29 July 2024 and the violent disorder in its aftermath, have caused grave concern across the country. There have also been instances of targeted attacks against refugees and asylum seekers in communities across the UK. In 2024, the [Home Office](#) reported that whilst there was an overall decrease in hate crime, there was a 25% increase in religious hate crimes compared with the previous year. These instances of unrest have affected Wales, contributing to heightened divisions and tensions across communities. At the time of these incidents, we heard from children and young people who felt unsafe to go out and play in their local parks. As a result, my team and I have become increasingly concerned about community tensions, particularly Islamophobia,

Xenophobia and racism across Wales, the impact this has on children and young people and their access to their rights.

More broadly, systemic inequality presents as a challenge to social cohesion with poverty, discrimination and access to services acting as a barrier to promoting cohesive communities. It is widely recognised that these factors are detrimental to children's rights as outlined in the UNCRC and should be a priority for Government to address.

Whilst Welsh Government have the frameworks in place to continue tackling these broader inequalities, they must prioritise progress against the actions set out within action plans (such as the Child Poverty Action Plan and Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan). It is my view that specific and measurable timeframes would be helpful in demonstrating a clear commitment from Government to delivering upon these much-needed priorities.

All children have the right to non-discrimination, as outlined within the UNCRC (article 2), and it is unacceptable that children and young people are being denied this right within their communities. [The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's concluding observations](#) (2023) outlined the need for “targeted policies and programmes to combat racism and eliminate discrimination against children in disadvantaged situations, including children belonging to ethnic minority groups, asylum-seeking, refugee and migrant children, Roma, Gypsy and Traveller children and many other disadvantaged groups.” The recommendations made by the committee should be considered in full, adopting a children’s rights approach to promoting community cohesion. The response of [Welsh Government](#) to these concluding observations highlights a commitment to facilitate regional forums to understand the “lived experience and establish direct engagement with Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic people including young people, across Wales.” I would welcome an update on the progress of these forums and how Welsh Government are ensuring the voices of young people are being included.

In 2023, my office published a spotlight report, [“Take it seriously”: children’s experiences of racism within secondary schools](#). The 22 recommendations set out within the report support a broad approach to promoting social cohesion, but in particular the recommendations sets out the need for “more training and professional learning resources should be developed which cover different types of racism which are prevalent in Wales including faith-based racism (particularly Islamophobia and Anti-semitism), racism against white Europeans, racism against Gypsy, Traveller and Roma communities, and racism against refugees and asylum-seekers.” I welcome Welsh Government’s [response to this report](#), which highlights its diversity and anti-racism professional learning

project (DARPL), and its commitment for resources to be “continually reviewed, refreshed and extended as appropriate”.

Within my [Annual Report recommendations \(2024\)](#), I have called upon Welsh Government to review their Community Cohesion Strategy, specifically exploring misconceptions around sanctuary seekers and Islamophobia, and ensure that children and young people’s voices are considered as part of this process. In Welsh Government’s response, they highlight the role of the Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan in responding to the recommendation, and I recognise the plan outlines a range of actions to address the causes of racist and religious hate, as well as providing free and accessible support and advocacy to those who experience hate. Further to my previous point, I would welcome specific milestones to measure the progress of the Anti-racist Wales Action Plan, including the actions it outlines on Nation of Sanctuary. As this action plan is implemented, there must be greater consideration for how children and young people will be represented and their voices heard in shaping future policy on this topic (Article 12, UNCRC).

Community interventions play a significant role in promoting social cohesion and supporting marginalized groups, such as minority ethnic communities or refugees and asylum seekers, seeking to ensure that their rights to be free from discrimination and to participate fully in society are protected (Article 2, UNCRC). They also provide a crucial space for communities to come together, meet others, share experiences and build relationships. It is important that the views, voices and experiences from marginalised communities are heard, and are actively involved in shaping policy. This should ensure processes are inclusive of the views of children and young people and they have equal opportunity to engage in opportunities to shape and strengthen community cohesion (Article 12, UNCRC). I welcome the focus on lived experience and voice within the update of the ARWAP, with particular reference to underrepresented groups such as Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. Again, it is critical that children and young people’s voices are included as this action plan is progressed.

From my engagement work with children and young people from Gypsy Roma and Traveller communities, I was particularly concerned about the young people’s experiences of racism. The young people shared how regularly they experience racism and discrimination in their local community. They spoke about their experiences within school, worries about employment discrimination and how they are regularly followed around shops and picked out of crowds. One young person stated “It’s like we have a sign on us, ‘follow me’”. They shared negative experiences when interacting with public services such as healthcare and the police. The young people were passionate about standing up against discrimination but had little hope that things would change, with one young person commenting “they’ll

never be on our side". This demonstrates another element of social cohesion that must be addressed.

As a result of the wider societal context of increased community tensions, my office will be hosting a social cohesion roundtable for young people in February 2025. This will bring together young people, in an online setting, to share with Government Ministers how the Summer riots of 2024 impacted on them, tensions within communities and what they would like to see happen within their schools and communities. This format and model of working provides an example of good practice, ensuring children and young people's voices and experiences are heard, and presenting the opportunity for them to hold decision-makers to account. As a result of this roundtable, I would be happy to share the findings with the Committee.

I value the role the third sector plays, in supporting social cohesion by providing support services, advocacy, and representation for marginalized groups. From speaking to children and young people who access third sector community groups, it is evident how these groups impact positively on their lives. Third sector groups such as EYST, Welsh Refugee Council also play a crucial role in delivering education and awareness sessions in schools on this topic. It is important to note the backlash and tensions these groups have faced as a result of delivering these sessions and the need to address this within any updated social cohesion strategies/ interventions. As highlighted within a number of my [report recommendations](#) on racism in schools, more training and support is needed for the whole school on understanding racism and responding to racist incidents. However, third-sector organisations face barriers, often related to funding. Many are dependent on short-term grants, which limit their ability to plan and sustain long-term interventions. A more sustainable funding model would ensure the continued investment in services many communities rely upon.

There are significant limitations to the support the Welsh Government can offer due to the devolution settlement. Some key issues related to social cohesion, such as policing, immigration rules, media regulation, and internet safety, remain the responsibility of the UK Government. These areas are crucial for ensuring the safety and well-being of children, as they impact their rights to protection from violence, abuse, and exploitation (Articles 19, 34, UNCRC). It is essential that the Welsh Government liaise with UK Government departments to advocate for policies on policing, internet regulation, immigration rules and media content that are designed to protect children's rights.

I would also like to see confirmation of the Welsh Government's position on the devolution of justice, particularly youth justice, and the actions they plan to take to advance any ambitions or goals in this area.

Given the evidence presented, it is vital that there is continuous and ongoing effort given to tackling broader inequalities across Wales, but also more specific interventions which focus on promoting social cohesion, tackling tensions within communities, whilst providing support for marginalised communities. The participation of children and young people, and ensuring their voices are heard in developing interventions and promoting community cohesion, is critical for embedding a children's rights approach.