# WRITTEN STATEMENT

# BY

# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

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| **TITLE** | **The Welsh Government response to the Children’s Commissioner for Wales Annual Report 2023/24** |
| **DATE** | **29 November 2024** |
| **BY** | **Eluned Morgan MS, First Minister** |

The Children’s Commissioner for Wales Annual Report provides important advice to Welsh Government on how we can support children to realise their rights. I am pleased to set out our response to the recommendations made in the Commissioner’s Report for 2023-24.

**Family Environment and Alternative Care**

The [Corporate Parenting Charter](https://www.gov.wales/corporate-parenting-charter) aims to strengthen public bodies in their role as corporate parents. With our Corporate Parenting Implementation Group (CPIG), which includes care-experienced children and young people, we are planning how to raise the profile of the Charter and increase sign up.

The voluntary basis for sign up has allowed us to focus on raising awareness, promoting and strengthening corporate parenting to the public, private and third sectors. It has enabled us to have honest discussions and work with organisations on what they can deliver. We expect all local authorities and local health boards to sign as a core requirement.

We are strengthening the guidance for local authorities and health boards through a dedicated chapter on Corporate Parenting within the Part 6 Code of Practice under the Social Services Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014. The chapter will set out clearly their duties as corporate parents and support a strengthened strategic approach.

**Protection from Exploitation and Violence**

Following consultation, the final version of the Single Unified Safeguarding Review (SUSR) Statutory Guidance was published on 1 October, with associated training and resources for practitioners. We consider this has addressed the Commissioner’s recommendations. In the first year of implementing this trailblazing new approach, the SUSR Coordination Hub will continue to work with all vested stakeholders to make further improvements to the process as and when identified.

**Education, Citizenship and Cultural Activities**

*Additional Learning Needs (ALN)*

Aimed at ensuring that children and young people with additional learning needs (ALN) are supported to achieve their full potential, the [Additional Learning Needs Code](https://eur01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.gov.wales%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fpublications%2F2024-04%2F220622-the-additional-learning-needs-code-for-wales-2021%2520%25282%2529.pdf&data=05%7C02%7CEmma.Toshack%40gov.wales%7C876c4080780e44592d1208dd03c03dbe%7Ca2cc36c592804ae78887d06dab89216b%7C0%7C0%7C638670846412334942%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJFbXB0eU1hcGkiOnRydWUsIlYiOiIwLjAuMDAwMCIsIlAiOiJXaW4zMiIsIkFOIjoiTWFpbCIsIldUIjoyfQ%3D%3D%7C0%7C%7C%7C&sdata=Pp8sKXSbm5wg%2FwfXTBZtQYo0xulsBjazUgHqmS2zaec%3D&reserved=0) for Wales (the ALN Code) and the ALN Act together with regulations provides the statutory system in Wales.

Our reform of the ALN system has been ambitious and, in our commitment to pursue improvements we are working closely with delivery partners to review the legislative framework to ensure that the ALN system can be made to work best for all and to ensure consistency in processes. Alongside, we are reviewing and strengthening the ALN information on our website to ensure it’s effective for those implementing the ALN Code.

Since 2020, Welsh Government have increased investment with over £107m of revenue funding and £60 m capital funding through grants to local authorities. Local Authority spend on ALN/SEN provision has increased by 55%, or over £200m since 2018, with an increase of £42.3m in the last year alone.

*Food in Schools*

We are the first UK nation to offer free schools meals to all primary school pupils, a significant step in tackling child poverty and supporting children in their right to good health and access to education. As a government, we are using every lever available to us to support families that need it most.

We have written to local authorities to remind them of their discretionary powers under the Education Act 1996 to provide free meals for children and young people whose parents and/or carers have No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF). Local Authorities will soon be consulted on proposed changes to, and the use of, the NRPF Guidance. Additionally, our Nation of Sanctuary Policy sets out our commitment to improve outcomes for all people seeking sanctuary, including those with No Recourse to Public Funds.

We agree hearing the views and experiences of a range of children and young people, including the views of neurodivergent children, is essential in the review of [The Healthy Eating in Schools (Nutritional Standards and Requirements) (Wales) Regulations 2013](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/wsi/2013/1984/made) and [Statutory Guidance](https://www.gov.wales/healthy-eating-maintained-schools-statutory-guidance). The review consultation, due to be launched in April 2025, will include engagement with a diverse group of children and young people.

*Asylum Seeker and Refugees – access to services*

In our [response to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child’s Concluding Observations,](https://www.bing.com/search?q=UNCRC+consluding+observations+resposne+wales&cvid=5c549d78e5d04a92b1afd4dde6dd1919&gs_lcrp=EgRlZGdlKgYIABBFGDkyBggAEEUYOTIGCAEQABhAMgYIAhAAGEAyBggDEAAYQDIGCAQQABhAMgYIBRAAGEAyBggGEAAYQDIGCAcQABhAMgYICBAAGEAyCAgJEOkHGPxV0gEIOTg1NmowajGoAgCwAgA&FORM=ANAB01&PC=U531) we reaffirmed our commitment to looking at the current support available for unaccompanied children and young people in Wales. During this Senedd term, we will explore how a guardianship service could work, the resources needed to implement it and the intersection with other statutory support such as personal advisors and advocacy provision.

We also remain committed to developing a new phase of our Welcome Ticket free bus travel offer. Our intention is to develop a sustainable scheme providing time-limited free travel to asylum seekers dispersed to Wales and we would want to ensure children and young people are also able to access the scheme.

*Racism and Community Cohesion*

The [Anti-racist Wales Action Plan (ARWAP)](https://www.gov.wales/anti-racist-wales-action-plan-2024-update) contains 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. A key theme emerging as we refresh ARWAP is the need to better engage with young people, ensuring their voices are heard and represented in shaping future policies. We have included specific goals and actions focused on the engagement of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic young people.

The Commissioner’s [Racism in Secondary Schools](https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/our-work/policy-positions/racism-in-secondary-schools-in-wales/) report raised some important and challenging issues. There is no place for racism in our schools and, it is deeply concerning to hear so many children and young people across Wales are still experiencing racism in their lives. In the coming year we will work with stakeholders, including schools and learners to produce a consistent reporting format for racist incidents and harassment in schools and colleges. This will be done through strengthened data collection on how incidents were dealt with, actions taken and whether a satisfactory resolution was reached for the victim.

**Adequate standard of living**

*Gypsy, Roma and Traveller – Equality/Education*

Under ArWAP we are establishing a Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Group with community members and local authorities which will be operational in the new year. The group will give community members the opportunity to share their lived experiences and inform policy decisions that affect them. In 2025-26, we will also procure a third sector organisation to engage with a network of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and young people.

Through the National Attendance Taskforce (NAT) we have been working with a range of stakeholders to explore and better understand the challenges faced by all young people in attending school. We know that the reasons for non-attendance can be complex and varied.

Some cohorts of young learners, especially those identifying as Gypsy, Roma or Traveller, have specific barriers to attendance and these need further exploration. We are developing proposals for improving attendance at school more broadly based on the NAT discussions, focusing on the role of family engagement officers, youth workers and supporting the sharing of good practice across educational institutions.

*Mental health*

We recognise that children and young people can have specific needs and are committed to improving mental health provision for them. However, we consider these improvements would be best delivered by incorporating provision into a delivery plan that considers the mental health and wellbeing of the whole population. This will help ensure that support is person centred and needs led, rather than determined by age thresholds. The Strategy will continue our focus on young people through prioritising the early years, implementing our NEST/NYTH framework and our work in schools.

*Healthy Child Wales Programme*

We recognise the challenges around data collection and monitoring the [Healthy Child Wales Programme (HCWP)](https://www.gov.wales/healthy-child-wales-programme-0) at a population level due to the lack of digital data recording. In line with the recommendation, we are exploring options to evaluate and review the programme including considering a more prudent, digital approach to enhance data quality and ensure timely, meaningful reporting.

*Vaping*

In addition to creating a smoke-free generation, we want to reduce the availability and appeal of vapes and prevent them from being targeted at and used by children and young people in Wales. We are therefore pleased that the [Tobacco and Vapes Bill](https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3879) was laid in Parliament on 5 November, and will, if passed, provide comprehensive powers to tackle vape advertising, flavourings and packaging as well as powers to introduce licensing for retailers of tobacco, vapes and other nicotine products. This world leading public health measure, in addition to our planned ban on single-use vapes from 1 June 2025, is designed to protect children and improve the nation’s health.

To support schools with the challenges around vape use we asked Public Health Wales (PHW) to develop guidance for secondary age learners on vaping. [Information and Guidance on Vaping for Secondary-aged learners in Wales](https://phw.nhs.wales/topics/information-and-guidance-on-vaping-for-secondary-aged-learners-in-wales/#:~:text=Public%20Health%20Wales%20has%20produced%20an%20information%20and%20guidance%20resource)was published in September 2023 and provides evidence-based information for schools on how they can respond to and help address vaping. These resources have been promoted widely to schools and we continue to identify opportunities to develop resources on this important topic.

Any person 12 years or over who is smoking and vaping can access the same level of support as adult smokers, including the full range of behavioural support and Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT) tailored to their specific needs. Those over 12 who only vape can currently access one session of behavioural support through the national smoking cessation service *Help Me Quit*, without NRT provision.

*Public transport*

Welsh Government recognises the importance of affordable, accessible and integrated public transport especially for young people. Access to safe and reliable public transport brings social, educational and economic opportunities as well as the environmental benefits. We have already undertaken a comprehensive piece of planning work around options to deliver a ‘Fairer Fares’ offer in Wales, which has included detailed analysis of various fare schemes for children and young people. We are now focussed on making preparations for what will be the most ambitious reform of bus service provision across the UK. We will work with the Office of the Children’s Commissioner to understand the motivations and barriers to encouraging more young people to use public transport.