**Rocio Cifuentes, Children’s Commissioner for Wales**

**Annual Lecture for the Observatory of Human Rights of Children**

**6th Dec 2022**

**Ambitions to Actions: practicing what we preach on children’s rights in Wales**

Prynhawn da pawb, Good afternoon everyone. Diolch am y cyfle ac am y gwahoddiad.

Thank you for the invitation and the opportunity to give - what has become a prestigious event in the children’s rights calendar - the annual lecture of the Observatory on the Human rights of Children.

And before I start I just want to say a huge thank you to Simon and the whole team at the Wales Observatory for their sterling and world-leading work over the last decade. I’ve been involved with and aware of the work of the Observatory since my time in my previous role with EYST (Ethnic Minorities and Youth Support Team), where I worked with the Observatory to highlight the impact of things like Islamophobia and also Brexit on children and young people in Wales. In these, and many other ways, the Observatory has been proactive in making children’s rights real, and in bringing these to bear on our legal and governance frameworks. I’m sure it is no coincidence that Wales is also world-leading in terms of its legislative and government policy commitments to and vision for children’s rights. Although, as I will be outlining, I’m much less confident in how our practice and actions as a nation live up to that vision.

Over the next half hour or so I’ll share some of my experiences and reflections since taking up the role of Children’s Commissioners for Wales in April this year. Since then, through many many visits and even more meetings, as well as an important nationwide survey, I’ve started to gain some important insights into the realities of the challenges impacting on children’s lives, what some of the structural and contextual barriers are to children experiencing their rights, as well as starting to identify what the key priorities are where I feel I need to focus my efforts during my term. But I’ve also started to define exactly what role I see my own office taking in this, what the remit and purpose of the role is, and what I would like to see change in Wales for children’s’ rights over my tenure.

Seven years seemed an awfully long time when I started, but now with the first year nearly gone, suddenly it doesn’t seem like such a long time. But I’m also a very impatient person, and I think that - when it comes to improving children’s lives and making children’s rights real - impatience may also be a virtue!

**Reflections and Experiences**

So I will start with my reflections in the role. Well, it’s been just over 7 months since I took up post, and it’s certainly been a whirlwind since then. People often refer to the analogy of a rollercoaster, but I’d liken my experience more to a fairground waltzer - spinning circles within a larger spinning circle, with the first spinning circle being the multi-faceted experiences and range of issues impacting on children across Wales, and the second spinning circle being the breadth of services, organisations and public bodies who are delivering services, devising policies or strategically planning aspects of children’s lives. So for the last seven months, I’ve been on that waltzer, trying to familiarise myself with all of these issues and services and ensuring I deliver my remit of covering the whole of Wales…

Since I started, I have been in person to meet children and young people in 42 different settings in all but one of the 22 local authorities across Wales. In fact, together with my team we’ve engaged with over 11000 children through face to face work, just in the last 7 months. I’ve been to north Wales no less than 6 times in seven months, including spending 3 days in the Urdd Eistedfodd, visiting a secondary school in Mold, meeting a group of refugee and gypsy traveller children in Wrexham, visiting a Children’s Hospice in Conwy, presenting at a Nursery education conference in Llandudno and visiting an adolescent Mental health service in Abergele. That’s just North Wales, but I think it gives a flavour of the breadth of my role and the visits undertaken. This is why I call it a waltzer!

But the visits are crucial in enabling me to really understand the complex and diverse lives of children across Wales. There’s nothing like hearing directly from different groups of children about the realities of the challenges facing them, as well as hearing this from the adults who work with them. Seeing and experiencing, even if only for a few hours, their daily lived realities has helped me understand more clearly the urgency of doing something practical and tangible to address their various challenges.

* In the Urdd Eisteddfodd I spent 3 days immersed in the Welsh language community and hearing about the importance of places that children and their parents could learn and play through the medium of Welsh. This was a completely new experience for me, and really highlighted the diversity of communities which exist in Wales, and how they may not always interact.
* In a mental health hospital, I saw the impact of acute mental health distress on the faces of young teenagers, and also heard from the professionals just how hard they were trying to get them the right support, the right therapies, or the right accommodation upon leaving.
* I met with care experienced young women who told me of the crucial difference that getting a free period pack had made when they had arrived in their new foster placement, often having had to leave their previous home in a hurry.
* I heard young refugees in Wrexham tell me how they’d been spat at and called terrorists by their school peers, and two young gypsy travellers – aged just 8 and 9 years old - tell me that they were regularly verbally abused by adults driving past their site.

Well you can imagine that for the first few spins of a waltzer everything is quite a blur and doesn’t necessarily make sense. And yet.. slowly but surely the individual dots do start to join-up and some themes and patterns emerge.. If I was to produce a word cloud based on all the conversations I’ve had since taking up post, the biggest words would be no surprise to you all. They would be: Poverty & Cost of Living, Mental Health, Racism & Bullying, Impact of Covid. Then the smaller words would be: Transport, Neurodiversity, Additional learning needs, Disability, Climate change, Lack of services, Staffing issues, Lack of accommodation, Pressures.

**Ambitions for Wales**

But fortunately, we haven’t just relied on wordclouds and waltzers, as my office has devised a slightly more sophisticated way of gathering the views and experiences of large numbers of children and young people through a nationwide survey called Ambitions for Wales. This survey ran for 5 weeks from October to November, and received over 8000 responses from children and young people from right across Wales and nearly 2000 from parents, carers and professionals. We are currently analysing the full results and this analysis will inform my first three year work plan to start from April 2023. But the headline findings are still shocking if not surprising – while they very much echo the key words and themes from my mental world cloud – Poverty, Cost of Living, Mental Health, Inequalities, Covid, the survey showed just how much children and young people, and even very young children are worrying about these things.

* We already knew that child poverty rates in Wales were going in the wrong direction at around 34%, the highest level in the UK - but the survey let me hear directly from children, in their own words, how this felt for them.
* The survey tells us that a high proportion of children and young people - 45% of children aged 7-11, and 26% of young people 12-18 – are worrying regularly about having enough to eat.
* And an even higher rate - almost two-thirds (61%) of children aged 7-11 and 52% of children aged 12-18 said they worried about their families not having enough money for the things they need.
* It also told me just how much they were impacted by the pandemic, with 61% of 12-18 saying that the pandemic had a negative impact on their education, and 71 % of parents saying the same.
* And these are just the headlines, I’m sure once we drill down to look at what children and families from particular vulnerable groups are telling us the statistics will be even starker.

**Priorities**

Despite the breadth and range of issues that all my visits, meetings and the Ambitions for Wales survey have highlighted, the key themes and priorities are nevertheless clear.

At the risk of seeming obvious and repetitive, I cannot ignore the volume and density of calls to address the really big issue of poverty/ cost of living crisis. This is not a new issue, but its prevalence and severity is growing quickly, with over 34% of children in Wales now living in poverty – the highest level in the UK and the highest in at least two decades. Secondly there are loud and acute calls around the mental health of our young people – while figures are unclear, a growing percentage of children and young people experience mental ill health – estimated at around 1 in 8 children or 3 children in every class of 24, with these figures being 3 or 4 times higher for the poorest children in society compared to the richest. For both poverty and mental health, the pandemic has had a huge and so far immeasurable impact on both – and these ramifications may well impact on children and young people for a very long time - therefore poverty and mental health are my current top two priorities.

A close third is addressing identity-based bullying, particularly racism, and particularly improving the school response to this when it happens. There is some excellent practice but also some clear gaps and inconsistency, so this is something that I am currently seeking to focus on through a peer-led project which will start this year.

And a fourth priority is the area of public transport for children, which I am calling on WG to make free for all children under the age of 18 – this would provide immediate relief to those families who are already struggling and whose lives are set to get even more difficult with further rises in fuel costs over the coming months.

I do not wish to be a children’s commissioner who just sits back and lets the next few months pass by without demanding that Welsh Government takes the most radical action it can within its powers to ensure that all children in Wales can access their basic rights. If we can do it, we should do it.

We have the duty on Welsh Ministers to pay due regard to the UNCRC, we have the Rights of Children and Young Person’s Measure, the Social Services and Wellbeing Act, the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act. Yet, for all our wonderful legislation in Wales, I think something is going seriously wrong if we can still have so many children living such challenged lives. I want to turn policy into practice and rights into action. Urgent action where it’s needed. This is my overarching ambition.

And this is what I was talking about when I said that the realities of children’s lives and the challenges they face have been unveiled to me. And this is also what stands in such stark contrast to the visionary, ground-breaking and world-leading legislation, vision and ambitions we have in Wales when it comes to Children’s Rights.

I’m sure as an audience you don’t need any reminding about this, but Wales was the first country in the UK to create the role of Children’s Commissioner in 2001, and this was one of the first legislative acts of the newly devolved Welsh Assembly. In 2011 Wales went further and passed the Children’s Measure which further enshrined Wales’ commitments to children’s rights and the UNCRC, and made it a duty on Welsh Government Ministers to pay due regard to the UNCRC when developing or reviewing legislation and policy, and they must also ensure that people in Wales know about children’s rights. We also now have the UNCRC embedded into the new curriculum for Wales, meaning teachers must promote knowledge and understanding of the UNCRC amongst learners

Apart from funding my office, Welsh Government fund a number of programmes to promote children’s rights and ensure their participation in services. Most public services in Wales I would say are very good at talking the talk on children’s rights, but are they walking the walk? If at least 34% of children in Wales in 2022 are living in poverty, I’m not convinced that they are.

In the 6th richest country in the world, I don’t believe that poverty is inevitable or something that we should think of as normal. The data on how wealth inequality has grown sharply, even through the pandemic, shows clearly that it is not about needing to increase our overall resources but it is an issue of distribution and one of social justice.

So I do think there is much more that we can do. And much more that that I can do.

**The Office of CCfW**

So what is my role in this, what can I do? Well while I know I’m talking to a room full of children’s rights experts whether by profession or by experience, I would still like to highlight what exactly my role and remit is as Children’s Commissioner for Wales because I think this is a really important question for us to ask of others and ourselves - what is the point and the purpose of a role or organisation. And it is also one of my initial organisational objectives to make the work of my office more visible and more accessible – which starts with clearly explaining what it is and what it does.

Well my purpose and remit is fundamentally to protect and promote children’s rights. This is done by listening to children and young people, supporting them to understand their rights, advising them if they are not experiencing their rights, and also by speaking out on their behalf directly to powerful decision-makers and challenging and influencing policy and practice to ensure that children’s rights are respected and realised.

But I don’t do this on my own. Thankfully, the role of Children’s Commissioner is not a one-person job, rather there is a team of 23 staff who support me in my role, and who have proved invaluable to me already, and I’m sure are well known to many of you here. Also fortunate is the fact that they are not all new like me, but many have been with the organisation for a few commissioners now, building up important expertise and institutional memory. Our office is based in Port Talbot, having relocated from Swansea around 18 months ago, but as I’ve already mentioned we work across Wales, and do so in practice not just in name

My office delivers its statutory function is to promote and protect children’s rights through three key services – Firstly our Investigation and Advice Team, who run a telephone based advice service which runs 9 to 5 Monday to Friday, staffed by three experienced advisers for anyone concerned about a child not getting their rights, aside from advising young people and families directly the team can also investigate what has gone wrong by making enquiries of behalf of a child or young person. Secondly, our Participation Team who enable the participation of children and young people in our work, skilfully bringing out their views, experiences and ideas to inform our work. The team also develop resources for use by schools and youth groups and can advise and support professionals on how to embed children’s rights within their work. And thirdly our Policy Team, who apply their research and analytical skills and their policy knowledge to bring the lived experience and views of children and young people to influence and critique public policies, making recommendations for improvements which aim to create long-term positive change for children and young people in Wales.

So this is the bigger team behind me, who do an excellent job, but nonetheless there are some **initial areas that I have identified for organisational development**. They include increasing the visibility of the office and what we do, ensuring our services are as accessible as they can be to reach children and young people from all backgrounds, and increasing the diversity of the staff team, as well as the stakeholders we engage with. These are some of the internal areas I am focusing on, while at the same time undertaking a thorough review of the evidence we have to inform our work plan and thematic priorities for the coming 3 years.

I also have my predecessors to learn from, as I am the 4th Children’s Commissioner for Wales. And I am also able to access peer support from my UK counterparts, the Children’s Commissioner’s for Scotland, Northern Ireland and England, with whom I meet regularly as well as doing joint pieces of work such as our recently published joint report to the UN Committee on the rights of the child.

The institution is also completely independent of WG – here to act as a critical friend and to scrutinise. The relationship with Welsh Government is an important one, and one which I have found to be a healthy one so far – they seem to welcome challenge, although I fully expect the limits of this welcome may be tested over the coming years. But I also interact importantly with other parts of civil society including the Senedd and its various committees including the Children, Young People and Education committee - who also had a role in endorsing my appointment. I would also like to develop closer and more formal links to the Youth Parliament – these 60 young people are elected by their peers, and is a democratic structure which we are very lucky to have had in Wales since 2018. But I would like to see it develop to have perhaps more power, more teeth, so we are giving real power to children and young people.

**Conclusion**

So, drawing to a close, I feel there is much to be optimistic about, solid structures to build on, and a clear vision for children’s rights in Wales. But there is also a lot to be done to make real that vision and deliver the ambitions we have as a nation to ensure that children in Wales really do have the best start in life. This is not something we should do only out of the goodness of our hearts, but also led by our heads, as something which is integral to the future wellbeing of Wales, as we all know that childhood lays the foundations for life outcomes. And the cost of not acting or investing now can be even greater in the long-term.

As I continue in my role I will be challenging not only Government but other public bodies, Local Authorities, Police, Health Boards to really tell me and show me how they are embedding children’s rights in their work, how they are practicing what they preach. Are they assessing the impact on Children’s rights of their budget decisions. Are they listening to and involving children and young people in their decision making. After they’ve done all of this, are children better off? If not, then I’m sorry but the whole process should fundamentally be questioned, else we risk an Emperor’s New Clothes situation, where we are all pretending that everything is fine.

We all have our part to play in this, and I firmly believe that we can do far more by working together, and I look forward to working closely with the Observatory on Children’s Rights, as well as many other stakeholders to identify how we can turn our Ambitions into Actions and achieve our shared vision of children’s rights being made real, being realised in Wales.