

Cross Party Group on Children and Young People
Wednesday 18th November 2015
13:00-14:30
Committee Room 1, The Scottish Parliament
Chair: Mark McDonald MSP

Launch of the Child Rights Manifesto

Introduction

The Chair, Mark McDonald MSP, opened the meeting by welcoming the panel and members of the group for their attendance at the CPG meeting. The Chair introduced the launch of the Child Rights Manifesto. The Chair expressed that all MSPs had received an invite to sign up to support the manifesto.

The Chair then introduced Juliet Harris, Director of Together, who presented on The Importance of Having Child Rights Champions in the Scottish Parliament.

Juliet Harris, Director of Together (Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights)

Juliet Harris celebrated the launch of the Manifesto and reflected on why the Scottish Parliament needs Child Rights champions.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) helps promote, protect and fulfil the rights of children and young people.

Children and young people (CYP) make up to around 20% of the population and around 17% are under the age of 16. People under the age of 16 have no say over who will represent. However policy, legislation and actions have an impact upon their lives. They impact schools, transport and health.

Achievements

Since 2011 there have been achievements in the Scottish Parliament in relation to child rights. However, the parliament still needs to go further. The May 2016 Scottish Parliament election will provide new challenges and opportunities to promote child rights.

The Children and Young People Act 2014 (CYP Act 2014) enshrined the UNCRC. Ministers need to consider this act and report on the steps it is taking to meet the requirements of the UNCRC. The act could have been stronger and more ambitious.

The lowering of the voting age for 16/17 years olds in the referendum and extension to all Scottish elections has been another positive step of the Scottish Parliament.

The extension of the care leaver age to 21 for looked after children in the CYP Act 2014 is another positive step.

The 2011 National Play Strategy and the consultation on the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities was also welcomed.

There is serious recognition from other countries within the UK that the Scottish Parliament is keen to engage in UN Rights of the Child.

Concerns

Juliet Harris highlighted that there is still some way to go when it comes to child rights and highlighted a number of concerns.

- The criminal age of responsibility in Scotland needs to be addressed.
- Children require the same protection from violence in law as adults.
- The life chances of looked after children needs to be improved.
- Minority ethnic children are discriminated against in UK counter terrorism legislation.
- the attainment gap that exists between the least and most deprived.

Poverty was highlighted as another key concern. Over a fifth of children and young people are living in poverty. Holiday Hunger was unheard of in 2011. MSPs have a responsibility to address the consequences of poverty.

Next Steps

The importance of Child Rights Champions was re-emphasised by Juliet Harris. She remarked that the voices of children and young people are silent within communities and that children under the age of 16 need people to speak up for them. Children and young people need individuals to promote and protect child's rights.

Juliet Harris called upon MSPs to take active steps to help children who find it hard to be included and support the work of the Scottish Youth Parliament.

She stated that protecting child rights is not an aspiration but an obligation in international law, which should be at the heart of all debates and decisions.

Jordan Linden, Chair of the Scottish Youth Parliament

Jordan Linden opened his statement by saying that he was pleased to have been invited to the launch of the child rights manifesto and welcomed the opportunity to introduce the work of the Scottish Youth Parliament.

The Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) is the democratically elected voice of Scotland's Young People. The rights agenda is at the core of all of the work of the SYP. Article 12 of the UNCRC promotes the championing of children and young people's voices and views.

Jordan Linden highlighted a number of visits he had undertaken with The Children and Young People's Commissioner Tam Bailie to explore the different stories and experiences in relation to the UNCRC.

The visit to Glasgow City Mission provided the opportunity for members of the SYP to hear about the impact that welfare reform was having on the people of Glasgow.

Representatives from the SYP also attended the UN Pre-Sessional of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in Geneva. This provided an opportunity to discuss the impact of child poverty and its existence, votes at 16 for all elections and a focus on participation in politics.

Jordan Linden also indicated that there were a number of concerns for the SYP in relation to child rights.

- The impact that child poverty is having across the UK.
- The impact of benefit sanctions.
- The minimum age of criminal responsibility.
- And UN reporting.

Jordan Linden concluded by stating that the SYP support the manifesto and encouraged all MSPs to read the manifesto and show their support.

Panel

- Mark McDonald MSP (SNP and Convenor of CPG)
- Councillor Melanie Main (Children and Families Committee, Edinburgh City Council- Scottish Green Party)
- Liam McArthur MSP (Liberal Democrat)
- Iain McGill (Conservative Candidate)
- Iain Gray MSP (Labour Shadow Education Secretary)

Views from the Panel

The panel were requested to present their views to the CPG.

Iain McGill (Conservative Candidate)

Iain McGill opened by saying that he was happy to sign up to be a child rights champion. He welcomed the reference calling for more support for children and young people with mental health and emphasised that there should be support for young disabled people.

He highlighted the contrast between the attainment gap in Scotland and England.

Iain McGill also stated his party's opposition to the Named Person. Stating that it was an intrusion on family life and directs resources away from children and young people.

Councillor Melanie Main (Children and Families Committee- Edinburgh City Council- Scottish Green Party)

Councillor Melanie Main expressed support for the fact that people aged 16 can now vote in Scottish elections. However she emphasised that young people under the age of 16 have opinions and need to have their say taken into consideration. Children should be included in debates and discussions. In order to empower children and families we need to invest resources into helping children and young people understand their rights.

Iain Gray MSP (Labour Shadow Education Secretary)

Iain Gray thanked the CPG for their work in producing the manifesto. He said that the manifesto outlines a vision and demand for how parliamentarians should behave. He stated that this was a powerful approach and should be considered in every policy position. He suggested that manifesto allows those elected to be held accountable for everything.

He also welcomed any commitments to provide support for care leavers.

He congratulated the CPG for focusing on the child rights agenda and emphasised that we need to listen to the views of children and young people regarding their rights.

Liam McArthur MSP (Liberal Democrat)

Liam McArthur opened by stating that he would sign up to be a child rights champion and would encourage other colleagues to do the same. He highlighted the potential of young people when they are given a voice and are encouraged to participate.

He highlighted the achievements of the CYP Act especially in relation to care leavers. However he suggested that enshrining children's rights in law could have been included within the act.

He said that a cultural shift in policy would help led to practical implications.

Liam McArthur then highlighted a number of issues to be addressed:

- The minimum age of legal responsibility
- Protection for children in relation to violence
- Mental health failings for CYP
- The persistence of the attainment gap

Mark McDonald MSP (SNP and Convenor of CPG)

Mark McDonald highlighted the contrast in poverty within his constituency and asked the question how do we ensure that we help improve those areas adversely affected by poverty?

He welcomed the manifesto for its focus on values rather than policy. He suggests that further policy discussion and debate will help to build upon those values.

He emphasised that just because someone is not old enough to vote doesn't mean they don't have a role to play in decision-making.

He encouraged school groups to petition their local MSPs and suggested that adults consider themselves to be the best people to represent children's views. Youth representation has made progress within local authorities and through representation by the Scottish Youth Parliament.

Group Discussion

After the presentations there was the opportunity for CPG members to make comments or direct questions to the panel.

Children's First

The panel was asked for their view on the practical steps that can be taken to help fulfil commitments made in the manifesto.

Councillor Melanie Main responded by saying that schools and school communities will be key to implementing practical steps. She emphasised that children's rights should be embedded into Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) allowing all children the opportunity to understand the rights they are entitled to.

She also suggested that there should be roots into democracy at a local level for children and young people.

Iain McGill highlighted the pupil premium in England and emphasised the importance of early years provision.

Mark McDonald emphasised the use of equality and rights impact assessments within local authorities. He also suggested that although some policies do not specifically mention children they still have an impact. For example, the impact that partner violence can have on the mental health of children and young people.

He suggested that children and young people need the opportunity to be heard during processes and suggested that politicians need to make themselves accessible and approachable to help support this.

Children in Scotland

Following on from this question the panel were asked how representatives relay the messages they have heard from children and young people.

Mark McDonald responded to this question by discussing how he engages with children and young people in schools through surgeries. He also discussed the possibility of using social media to help connect with young people and share their perspective.

He emphasised the importance of capturing the views of looked after children especially those who have been placed outside their local authority area.

Councillor Melanie Main suggested that the school environment provides an opportunity for young people to engage with politics. This was significant during the referendum when people aged 16 and 17 had the opportunity to vote.

Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA)

The comment was made that some looked after children are not in mainstream education and there needs to be a way to incorporate their views outwith the school setting.

The convenor closed the meeting by thanking everyone in attendance. He encouraged all members to sign up to the manifesto and show their support.