



Working with children and families

The Welsh commissioner for children

Academic

Peter Clarke, the children's commission of the Wales.

Peter Clarke

I'm an independent champion for children in Wales, and the independence is very strong and one reason for that is, is part of my role is to look at the assembly itself at all it's policies and all it's actions and decide which of those are for the benefit of children and which could be improved. My strongest legal powers actually obtain in any matter that's devolved under the government of Wales Act to the national assembly with regard to children. So just to give examples, that covers the whole of health, including primary care, the whole of education, including the curriculum and including further education, the whole of social services, anything that a local government does anything that a local authority does I have strong powers. And that power isn't restricted to those devolved things it can be applied to the Home Office run things like, juvenile offender institutions, to the benefit system, to anything in fact. That power for to comment. But my stronger powers, as I say, are reserved for things that are devolved for the government of Wales Act. And those powers are that I can require information from anyone who is providing any service for a child or ordinary resident in Wales, and they have to provide it in documentary form if I require it. And I have the power of the high court if they do not and they will be held to be in contempt of court. If they're not I just apply to the court for that.

It's the first bit of UK legislation to mention the UN convention to the rights of the child in it's regulations. I'm charged with making sure that children are aware of them and having regard to those rights in my own work. And I see the nub of that is Article 12, to do with children's participation, the right to have influence and say in decisions that affect them. And what I want to do in the seven years that I have this job, I can't apply for it again. I have it for seven years and that's my lot. But what I really do intend to achieve is to have a wide spread and representative system of children's participation in Wales. And I'll be watching very closely at the assembly policies that I welcome, to make sure they're put into action fully and we end up with systems of participation that are more tokenistic.

It's an easy phrase to say that the assembly have appointed a champion for children. I have two children and I know many children and I know that you don't actually just assume that you're someone's champion and go round thinking that you can then champion on their behalf. You have to earn it. I'm going to have to earn the respect and trust of the children of Wales in a sufficient number to be able to carry this task out meaningfully and properly. To do that I'm going to have to have all sorts of mechanisms to communicate with them and to listen to them and hear what they're saying, and what their concerns are. I want the commissioners staff team to be immersed in the culture and the concerns of young people, so that we genuinely reflect what it is that is going on for them. And there are some things we know we can do immediately, things like web sites which are interactive and I have plans to have ambassadors in every school in Wales, two or three pupils who will support and just let children know we're there. A whole range of ways of actually getting that communication going and we're going to have kept focussed on that. But that honesty of dialogue and keeping in touch, and keeping listening and keeping talking, is absolutely critical if I'm to hope to be young people's champion.

As I speak I doubt if 10% of the children of Wales even know I exist. I'm going to have annual targets so that by the end of the seven years we're getting the sorts of levels that ChildLine hits with regard to children knowing about it and that's just an intention that will be firmly

planned for and will have the communication strategy to do it, which children will help us build.

The only way I think we can protect the children who are most vulnerable is within an overall culture that is a talking culture, is a communicating culture. And underlying that too there's a belief that childhood is changing. Traditionally the idea was that children are there and we adults pass on knowledge and gradually they know how to use it. I think childhood these days, for all sorts of reasons, is much more to do with negotiation between adults and children. I think that every parent knows that, I know I do, that actually most things that go on in the family, not all, some things are still there as rules and boundaries and very important they are too but the biggest range of things is actually about negotiation between adults and children.

We know that as individuals, every teacher knows it, every parent knows it. But we haven't sort of wised-up to the fact that that's true in our institution relationships with children. It's as if we've still got a model in our institutions and our organisations that's based on the old idea and what was true and that's one of the reasons we're struggling so much because we've actually got to change our thought about this and just as in any negotiation you need works and mechanisms to do it well and do it properly. I will be aiming campaigns at professionals of various sorts, so that they increasingly, there are a number who do already, but increasingly see children as potential allies. People who are working alongside them, people they are negotiating with, they're doing deals with, they're sorting things out, rather than the thing that I as an adult still feel sometimes, which is that I should know the answers. And I feel uncomfortable if a child questions me because often it makes it very quickly and abundantly clear that I don't have the answers.

Well let's change our mindset and actually look on it as a joint endeavour. So that the adults and children of Wales, particularly in professional organisational settings that are there for children see themselves as partners and that there's going to be negotiation going on. Children are so much better informed than they were in my day, they have access to sources of information way beyond what I had and I think they often have skills that we don't have. I mean we take the standard joke, if you want your video recorder programmed, talk to a 14 year old boy. It's a joke but it's not. There's a profound truth in the middle of that and that is that many children and young people have an ease with new technology just by way of example which leaves us gasping as adults. Well let's use that, you know, there's something they're bringing to the table when we're looking at being in partnership with them. Let's acknowledge it, honour it and make use of it.

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Finally, Peter Clarke explains how this new way of thinking was reflected in his own appointment as children's commissioner for Wales.

Peter Clarke

My first interview after having been short listed was for an hour and ten minutes, with a panel of fifteen young people. They conducted the entire proceedings of the interview and there were three or four adult observers, just making sure everything was all right and being there as a support for them. The questions they asked, they had designed and decided and they scored candidates responses on them. And they ranged from the simple and obvious like, 'why do you want the job?' through to very telling ones really. Asking 'when you meet a child what do you look for?' and questions that had that apparent superficial simplicity but the minute you started to answer then, you realised there were several layers to this onion. And we believe this is the first time in the world that children have been involved in a public appointment at this level.

So that was an hour and a quarter and in a fairly conventional format, and then a second with ten or twelve young people where candidates, me included, were invited to do a role play of a situation they had set up. They then performed plays and set out scenarios and asked questions about them. They were such things as, if you were visiting a youth club and someone came up and said they were frightened of going home because they might be bullied, what would you do? And that tested one again well beyond a normal limits of what

you expect in an interview. So two of the young people were elected and sat along side the minister of health and the minister for education and a whole, panoply of people who were on the formal panel and they were full voting members of that panel. So here was a clearer and brave example of involving children and young people as partnerships in something that was being set up potentially for them and it's my firm intention, just for helping keep me sane and safe and on track that I've got a number mechanisms in place to make sure that I have regular and sustained contact with the children and the young people of Wales because that inspires me.