

Research Network on Children's Human Rights Event

13 November 2024 – Speaking note

Opening remarks by Natalie Don-Innes MSP (Minister for Children, Young People and the Promise, Scottish Government)

Good afternoon everyone – I am delighted to see so many of you in Edinburgh today for the third meeting of the Research Network on Children’s Human Rights.

It’s my pleasure to be able to open this event, hosted by the Observatory of Children's Human Rights Scotland. The Scottish Government is extremely thankful to the Observatory for your work to drive the implementation of children’s human rights in Scotland, with local impact and global learning. In particular, the Theory of Change for making children’s rights real in Scotland, continues to inform our work to support and bring cohesion to Scottish-wide efforts to implement the UNCRC Act.

The Scottish Government has a bold ambition, to make Scotland the best place in the world to grow up. We met a key milestone, when the UNCRC Act came in to force on the 16th of July this year. Scotland is the first country in the UK where it is unlawful for public authorities to act incompatibly with the UNCRC requirements when carrying out a “relevant function”.

Scotland is also the first devolved country in the world to directly incorporate the UNCRC into its domestic law. Being a member of a government that has successfully incorporated the UNCRC makes me incredibly proud, it couldn't have been achieved without the collective effort that brought us to this point. I’m especially proud of our children and young people; whose unwavering determination and powerful articulation of the value of the legislation was key to making this happen.

I know that many of you in this room also contributed to this incredible achievement. I thank you for that and your continued commitment to UNCRC Act implementation

and to making sure that all our children grow up loved, safe, respected and able to realise their full potential.

I also wanted to take a moment to thank public authorities for their vital role in delivering for children, young people and their communities. The Scottish Government are committed to working in collaboration with partners and public authorities to deliver a revolution in children's rights.

And we know that we have a way to go - full realisation of children's rights requires proactivity on the part of all public authorities, not only those working directly with children and young people so we will continue to work in collaboration with a range of partners to understand where there are gaps that need addressed.

We recognise that delivering the cultural, behavioural, policy and practice changes we seek will require concerted effort over a sustained period of time across Scottish Government and other organisations delivering public services in all sectors.

In order to achieve this, we will need to draw on the full range of knowledge, skills and expertise which exists across numerous sectors to ensure that we get this right and maximise the opportunity we have as a result of incorporation.

You will have been considering what UNCRC Act implementation means for you and the children and young people your organisations impact upon. The Scottish Government is providing support and resources to help public authorities to meet their duties and to support all organisations to take a children's human rights approach.

We recently published statutory guidance on Part 2 and Part 3 of the UNCRC Act to ensure all public authorities are aware of their duties and how to fulfil them. We have provided guidance on taking a children's human rights approach and we are funding NHS Education for Scotland to deliver a programme of support for health boards to successfully implement the UNCRC Act at a local level.

We're also working with the Improvement Service to provide advice and guidance for local authorities on UNCRC Act implementation and taking a children's human rights approach. The work aims to raise awareness, build capacity and support cultural change.

We continue to work on the development of a Children's Rights Skills and Knowledge Framework. Once launched, the Framework will provide a single point from which to easily access new and existing resources and training in relation to children's rights. It's intended to be a flexible and adaptable resource that can be used across a wide range of sectors, supporting users to implement a children's human rights approach.

We have also supported public authorities through the UNCRC Innovation Fund, to enable them to embed children's rights into culture, policy and practice. The decision-making process for the fund was informed by a diverse panel of young people who recommended the projects that they felt would have the most impact. Eight local government projects were funded and include a range of partners from justice, health and education. Project participants include infants, children and young people. The projects benefit some of our children whose rights are most at risk, such as children living in poverty, children with additional support needs and children in secure residential care.

The learning and outputs from the projects will form a key part of the broader UNCRC National Improvement Programme. The programme is focussed on sharing learning and practice to support public authorities in understanding the benefits of a children's human rights approach and how this contributes to other local and national strategic priorities.

The funded projects will run up until December this year. Once complete, lessons learned from these creative approaches to embedding children's rights will be shared.

The Scottish Government has also set up a Child Rights Regulation and Improvement Action Group, to assist us in identifying and implementing practical

steps to further embed children's rights within regulatory frameworks and inspection regimes.

As part of the work to embed a children's human rights approach, we aim to ensure that children, young people and their representatives have effective means of raising concerns without having to resort to the courts. Therefore, we have funded the Scottish Public Service Ombudsman to develop a child friendly model complaints process for public bodies under its jurisdiction. We believe this model will also support wider public bodies to consider how best to support children to raise concerns.

I'd also like to mention the success of the Scottish Government's 3-year grant to the UNICEF UK's Rights Respecting School Award. With over 80% of schools in Scotland now signed up, this programme is helping children and young people better understand and realise their rights. It's been really great to see this in action in our schools and chatting to many young people who are so engaged. I look forward to seeing how local authorities will continue to take forward this programme in the coming years.

I also look forward to sharing our first Children's Rights Scheme with you all in due course. This will set out arrangements that Scottish Ministers are putting in place to fulfil our duties under the UNCRC Act and to further strengthen children's rights in Scotland.

This will include, along with many other measures, an account of arrangements to consider the rights of children in the Scottish Government's budget process and to ensure that children are able to participate in decisions that affect them.

The full realisation of children's rights will of course mean taking steps to ensure that no child in Scotland lives in poverty – and that every child has the opportunity to reach their full potential and thrive.

This is why lifting children out of poverty is the top priority of the Scottish Government - as the First Minister made clear when we published our Programme for Government.

Despite facing the most severe financial challenges in the history of devolution, we have continued to prioritise spending for wide-ranging action to tackle poverty and mitigate the impacts of the cost of living crisis – allocating around £3 billion per year to these efforts.

Building on the foundation of successful policies such as the Scottish Child Payment, which is giving essential support to families on low incomes in Scotland, this year's Programme for Government sets out further action to drive progress on reducing child poverty. This includes expanding our place-based partnerships to join up services, maximise incomes, and help parents into work into five new areas - North Ayrshire, East Ayrshire, Perth & Kinross, Inverclyde and Aberdeen City.

Through actions like these, we hope that ultimately - in partnership with local government, third sector organisations and businesses – we can work collectively to make child poverty a thing of the past.

So once again, I thank you for all of your efforts to support UNCRC Act implementation and improve outcomes for children. We're all here at this event today because we believe in the importance of children's human rights so we will all have something to share and learn on this journey together.

Thank you for your time, and for giving me the opportunity to join you here today – I will now pass over to Professor Simon Hoffman, from Swansea University and the Welsh Observatory of Children's Rights.