CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN CARDIFF

A Child Friendly Cardiff report, 2026.

A clearer route from children's voice to visible influence



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Executive summary

Cardiff has a strong foundation for children and young people's participation. Children contribute to school life, Council services, scrutiny, planning, play, transport and wider city decisions.

The organisational review adds the perspective of staff and partners. Forty-six respondents from 29 organisations and services described a wide range of participation activity, including co-production, school and community engagement, service design, recruitment, evaluation and formal decision-making. It also identified uneven use of the Wales National Participation Standards, inconsistent policies and feedback, barriers to inclusion, limited capacity and a need for stronger collaboration and shared learning.

Children value these opportunities, trusted adults, safe spaces and being able to express their views in different ways. However, their experience is not consistent. Some children are involved too late, do not receive feedback, cannot see who makes decisions, or face barriers linked to communication, disability, confidence, transport, cost or digital access.

The SHRN evidence supports this picture. Many learners can identify supportive adults, but fewer feel that their ideas are taken seriously or that they shape school life. The data also suggests that influence becomes less positive as children move into and through secondary school.

Cardiff does not simply need more opportunities for children to speak. It needs a clearer and more consistent system through which children can influence decisions and see what changed.

The review recommends a shared Cardiff participation framework, earlier involvement, stronger feedback, wider and more inclusive routes, clearer links to decision-makers, safe ways to question or challenge decisions, workforce support and better evidence of impact.

Context and purpose

Children and young people are affected by decisions made across schools, Council services and their communities. Their experiences can help Cardiff make better, fairer and more effective decisions.

Cardiff already has a broad range of participation activity through Cardiff Youth Council, school councils, surveys, youth work, scrutiny, peer research, community projects and service consultations.

An earlier organisational review found many examples of creative and youth-led practice. It also found that policies, standards, feedback and approaches to inclusion were not consistent across organisations and services.

This combined report brings the organisational evidence together with children and young people's direct experiences. The two strands broadly reinforce each other: both show strong commitment and examples of influence, but also point to inconsistency, late involvement, uneven reach and weak feedback.

This review was undertaken to understand how children experience participation, what helps or prevents them from taking part, whether their views reach decision-makers and whether they are told what happened as a result.

Our children's rights approach

Participation is a right, not an optional activity. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child says that children have the right to express their views on matters affecting them and for those views to be given due weight.

Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010

The Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010 strengthens participation by introducing duties on local authorities to promote and facilitate the participation of children and young people in decision-making. This includes ensuring children and young people are involved in the planning, delivery and review of services.

Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011

The Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011 places a statutory duty on Welsh Ministers to have due regard to the UNCRC when exercising their functions. This embeds children's rights within Welsh law and policy, requiring Ministers to consider and demonstrate how their decisions impact on those rights. Participation is recognised within the framework as a fundamental component of rights-based governance

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 further reinforces the importance of participation. It requires public bodies to consider the long-term impact of their decisions and adopt ways of working that actively involve communities in shaping the future. 'Involvement', one of the Act's five ways of working, explicitly highlights the importance of engaging with children and young people in decisions that affect them.

National Participation Standards of Wales

Local authorities are expected to adopt the National Participation Standards as the framework for meeting their statutory participation duties. Adoption of the Standards is positioned as an expectation rather than

an option, providing a practical and consistent means of ensuring that participation is meaningful, effective and aligned with children's rights in Wales. (Child Comm Wales: Participation in Wales: From Principles to Practice 2026)

The review used the Lundy Model: Space, Voice, Audience and Influence. A children's rights approach also means participation should be voluntary, safe, accessible, inclusive, honest about what can change and followed by clear feedback.

Participation is also connected to safeguarding. Children need safe and trusted ways to raise concerns, question adults, make complaints and seek independent help.

How the review was carried out

Organisational review:
46 respondents across
29 organisations/services
6 detailed case studies

Direct engagement: Peer-led groups and online discussions

One combined evidence picture

External checks:
UNICEF UK, Children's Commissioner and national learning

Survey Evidence:
Cardiff 2030 and SHRN

Children's rights lens:
Space | Voice | Audience | Influence

The review was completed in two linked stages. First, an organisational survey and case-study exercise examined how Council services, schools and partner organisations plan, deliver and review participation. Second, learner surveys, SHRN evidence, peer-led focus groups and online engagement explored how participation is experienced by children and young people themselves.

The review brought together broad survey evidence with smaller group discussions that explored children's experiences in greater depth. It looked for messages that appeared across several sources while retaining important experiences that were specific to particular groups. SHRN was used as an existing secondary source, so its respondents were not added to the number directly engaged through this review.



Evidence considered

Organisational participation review

The organisational review gathered 46 responses across 29 organisations and services spanning local government, education, youth work, health, voluntary and community settings. A follow-up exercise produced six detailed case studies. Together, the evidence shows that participation is taking place across a wide range of activity, including family support, education and training, play and recreation, service planning, neighbourhood and community work, transport, libraries, culture and formal decision-making.

What is working well. Organisations described strong examples of direct engagement, co-production and work led by children and young people. Children and young people have helped shape policies, curricula, museum and cultural projects, playgrounds and public spaces, sensory resources, transport proposals, recruitment and evaluation. Inclusive practice included bilingual and sensory-friendly sessions, targeted outreach, trusted relationships, adaptive communication and work with neurodivergent children, children with Additional Learning Needs and other underrepresented groups.

How organisations listen. Common methods included surveys, focus groups, workshops, young people's groups and advisory boards, co-production and informal feedback through frontline staff. The strongest examples involved children early, maintained consistent relationships, adapted methods to the group and were clear that participation should influence a real decision rather than become a token exercise.

Where practice is inconsistent. Awareness and implementation of the Wales National Participation Standards were uneven. Thirty-three per cent of respondents were unfamiliar with the Standards and 59% wanted to learn more. Twenty-six per cent did not have a formal participation policy and 54% wanted to improve how they provide feedback. Organisations also identified barriers linked to staff capacity, time, confidence, accessibility, language, transport, scheduling, digital access and reaching children who are less visible or less likely to join formal groups.

What the case studies add. The six detailed case studies showed that meaningful participation can improve services, attendance, transitions, confidence and engagement, while also leading to new opportunities and wider recognition. Common success factors were early involvement, consistency, genuine listening, flexibility and enough time for trust to develop. Practical barriers were reduced through flexible scheduling, digital options, sustained outreach and adapting activities in response to children's feedback.

What organisations said they need. Respondents wanted practical support rather than additional process. Their priorities were accessible training on the National Participation Standards; tools for participation policies and inclusive practice; a consistent approach to closing the feedback loop; a central way to record participation and impact; stronger collaboration and shared learning; participation champions; clearer resourcing; and better evaluation and celebration of children and young people's influence.

How impact should be understood. The organisational review proposed measuring impact at three connected levels: whether children and young people feel heard and see visible change; whether organisations make more relevant, inclusive and accountable decisions; and whether Cardiff embeds

children's rights across the city and improves outcomes. This shifts attention from counting activities to evidencing influence and change.

Guiding principles. The organisational evidence emphasised consistent identity, accessibility and universal design, safeguarding and ethical practice, workforce capacity, clarity about consultation and co-production, diverse methods, children and young people's involvement in evaluation, strategic alignment, sustainability and ongoing celebration and storytelling.

How the two reviews connect. The organisational evidence closely matches what children and young people told the review. Both strands point to the same core challenge: Cardiff has many strong examples, but children do not yet experience participation as one consistent, inclusive and accountable system.

Cardiff 2030 learner evidence

More than 1,300 primary and secondary learners contributed. In the survey, 60.4% agreed that adults in school listen to their ideas and concerns, while 52% agreed that pupils have a say when decisions are made. Learners were willing to understand practical limits; their concern was that decisions and outcomes were not always explained.

SHRN evidence

The review considered relevant School Connectedness and School Life measures from the Public Health Wales SHRN dashboards. In the 2024 primary data, 75.1% of Cardiff pupils in Years 5 and 6 felt children helped plan school projects, 71.3% felt children had a say in activities and 67.4% felt children's ideas were taken seriously.

The 2023 secondary findings were less positive: 61.9% could identify a member of staff to talk to about worries, 40.1% felt pupils' ideas were treated seriously and 32.2% felt their own ideas were taken seriously. The primary and secondary surveys cannot be directly compared, but together they suggest that influence may reduce as children move into and through secondary school.

Focus groups and online engagement

We trained a number of young people in peer research skills and knowledge and then reached out to identified priority groups.

We engaged with children and young people who had experience of being a young carer, seeking asylum, being an anxious learner, receiving education in a specialist setting, being care experienced and being electively home educated.

The groups we worked with were the unaccompanied asylum seeking learners based at Fitzalan High School, looked after and young carers learners at Mary Immaculate, learners at Can Y Deryn, English as addition language learners at Cardiff West Community High School, and the Digital Youth Club young people working with Cardiff Youth Services.

Peer-led discussions, online engagement, participation tools, notes and group summaries provided insight into confidence, accessibility, school experience, safety, belonging and barriers to influence.

Rights Respecting Schools Award assessment evidence

The review also considered evidence from UNICEF UK Rights Respecting Schools Award assessments in Cardiff. At the time of writing, 70 schools had achieved Silver or Gold, providing a substantial body of quality-assured evidence about children's experiences of rights, participation and influence in school.

The RRSA is particularly relevant because schools are assessed not only on whether participation opportunities exist, but on whether pupils are involved in decisions, feel their views are taken seriously and can identify how they have influenced change.

Silver and Gold reports also include recommendations for further development. These show that accreditation is not an endpoint and that participation can continue to be strengthened, including through wider involvement, stronger influence and better feedback. This provides a useful additional perspective alongside the wider participation evidence.

5.5 External evidence

The review also considered the Children's Commissioner for Wales Local Authority Participation Profile for Cardiff, the UNICEF UK Recognition Assessment Outcome Report 2026, the young people's Youth Summary Report and relevant national learning from the Neil Foden Child Practice Review, Our Bravery Brought Justice.

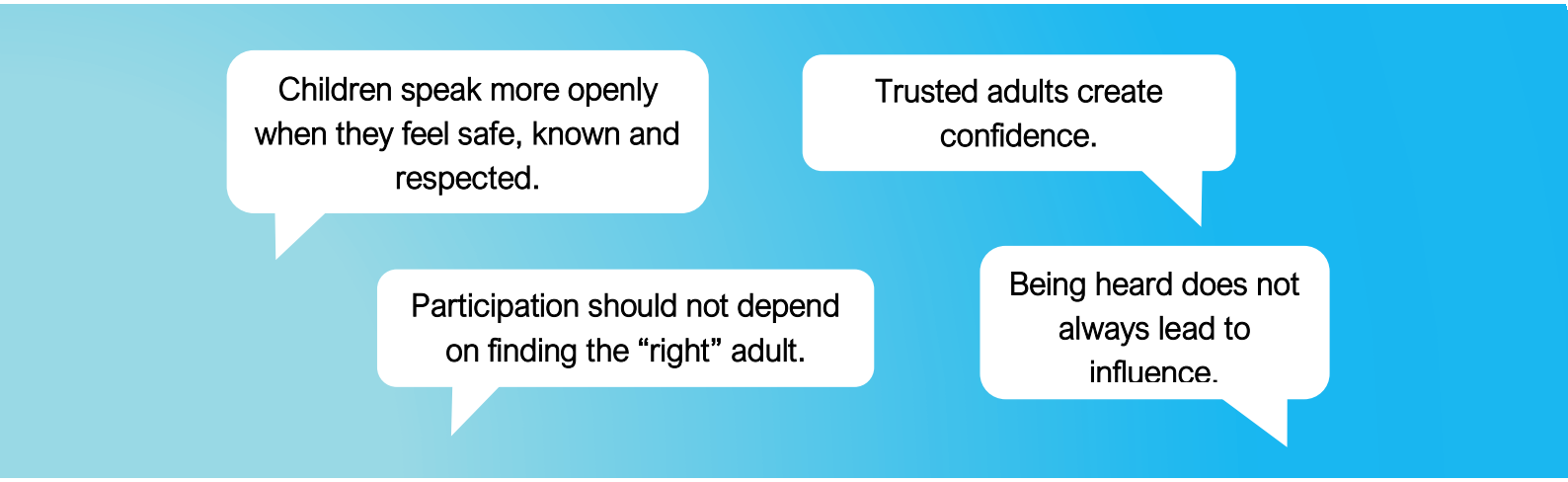
What we found

Cardiff has strong foundations

Children and young people can identify positive opportunities through school and youth councils, surveys, trusted adults, peer-led work, scrutiny, democratic engagement, planning, play, community projects and digital participation. There are examples of children influencing facilities, services, public spaces and wider policies.

The primary SHRN findings support this positive picture. The issue is not that participation is absent. It is that good practice is not experienced consistently across every setting or service.

Trusted relationships matter



Children often spoke most openly with adults who knew them, understood their needs and gave them time. SHRN also shows that many pupils can identify someone to talk to. However, participation should not depend on a child finding the right adult, and a supportive relationship does not by itself create a route to decision-making.

Participation is not equally accessible



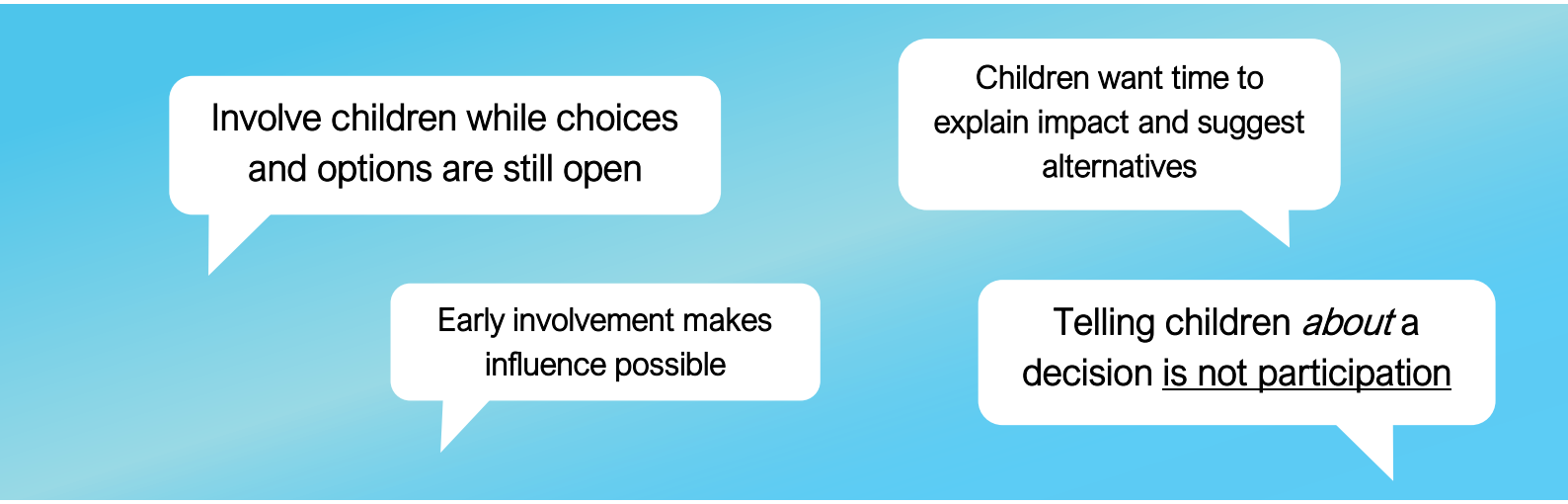
Children described barriers related to communication, disability, confidence, emotional safety, timing, transport, cost and technology. Older secondary learners and girls also reported less positive experiences across several SHRN measures. Participation therefore needs both universal opportunities and targeted support.

Children’s experience changes as they grow older

Primary pupils generally reported stronger opportunities to help plan projects and activities than secondary learners. Within secondary school, the percentage who felt pupils’ ideas were treated seriously fell from 61.1% in Year 7 to around 30% in Years 10 and 11.

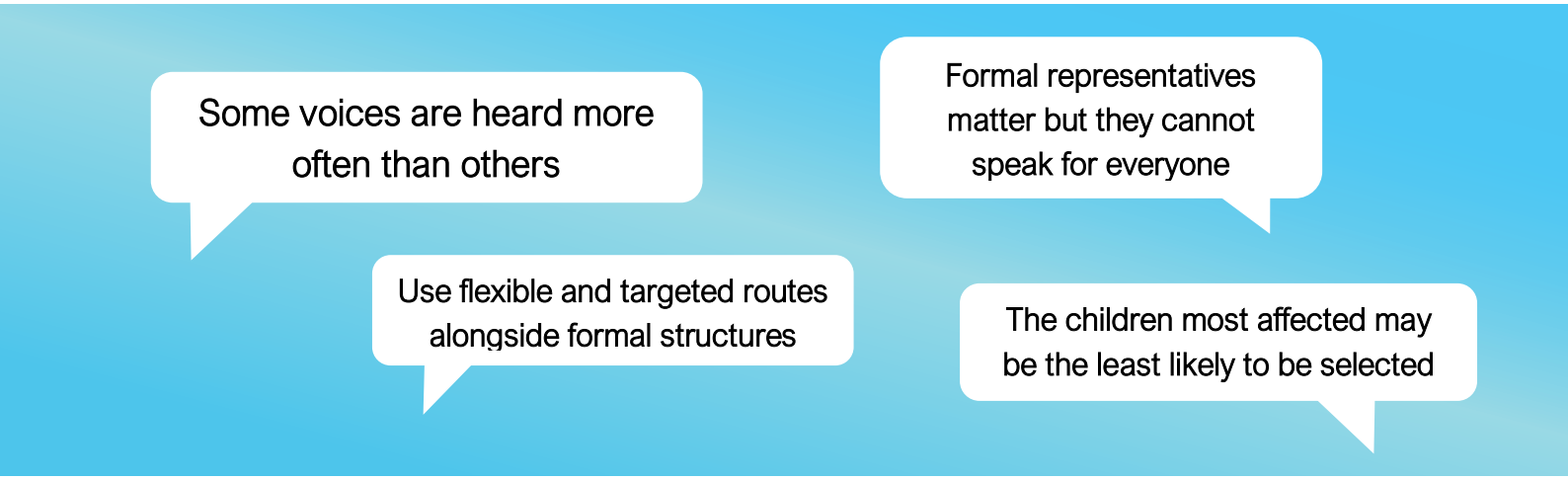
The surveys cannot explain why this happens, but the pattern is strong enough to require further exploration. Cardiff should consider how participation is protected through transition and maintained as children grow older.

Children are sometimes involved too late



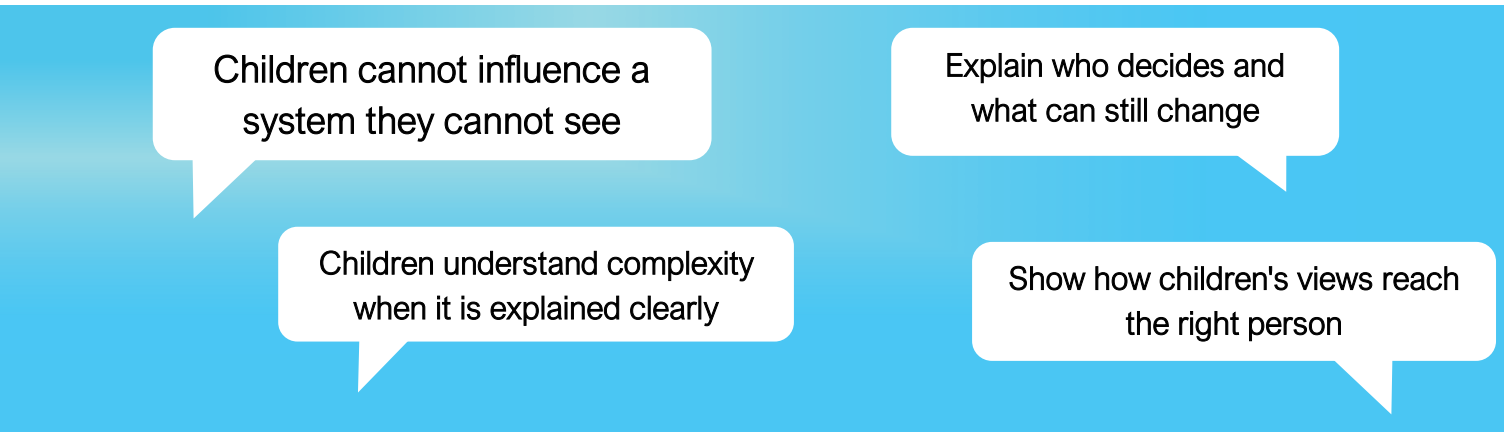
Young people described decisions being presented through assemblies, announcements or consultations after adults had already reached a preferred approach. They wanted to be involved early enough to explain impact, question evidence, suggest alternatives and help review the outcome.

Representation is uneven



Formal participation can involve a small number of confident, experienced or selected young people. Representative structures remain important, but Cardiff also needs wider routes that reach children who are less visible, less connected or most affected by a decision.

Decision-making is difficult to see



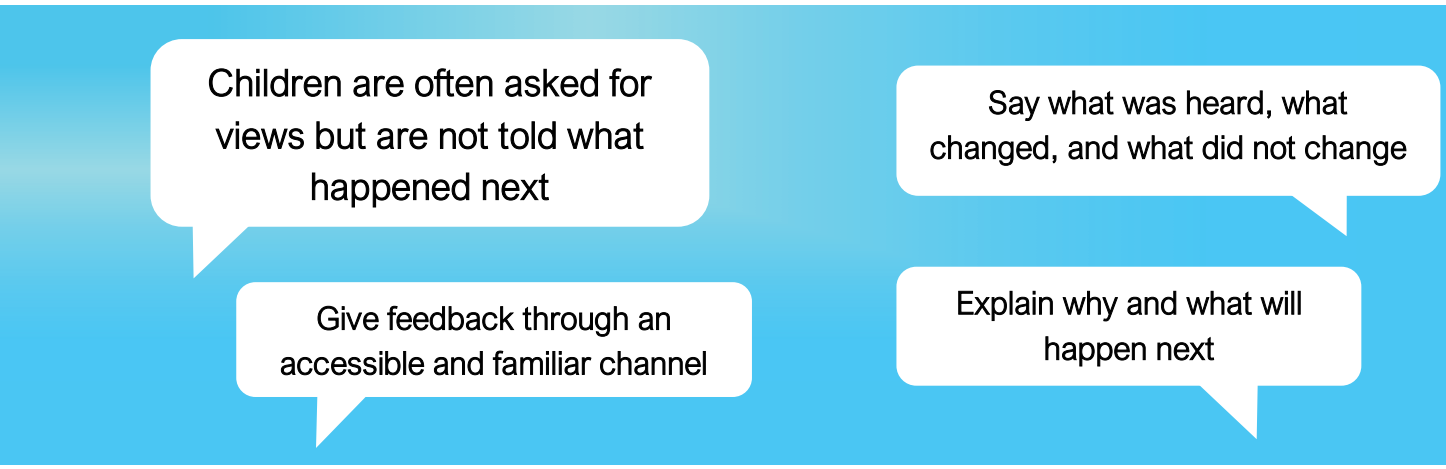
Many participants were unclear about the roles of officers, councillors and services, who held the power to act or how their views reached the right person. When processes were explained clearly, children engaged well with complexity.

Being supported is not the same as having influence

The survey and focus-group evidence show a gap between supportive relationships and influence. In secondary SHRN, 61.9% could identify an adult to talk to, but only 40.1% felt pupils' ideas were treated seriously and 32.2% felt their own ideas were taken seriously.

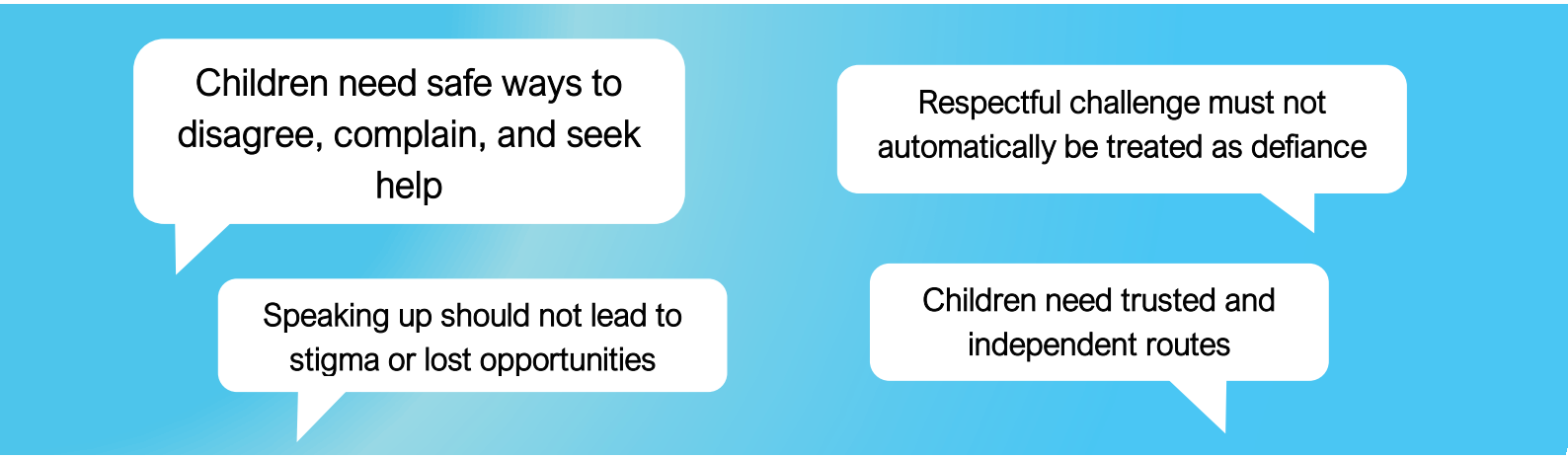
Children may therefore feel able to speak while remaining unsure whether their view will reach the right person, affect a decision or lead to change.

Feedback is the clearest weakness



Across the evidence, children repeatedly said they did not know what had been heard, what decision was made, what changed, what could not change or what would happen next. Feedback should be timely, direct and provided through a method that works for the children involved.

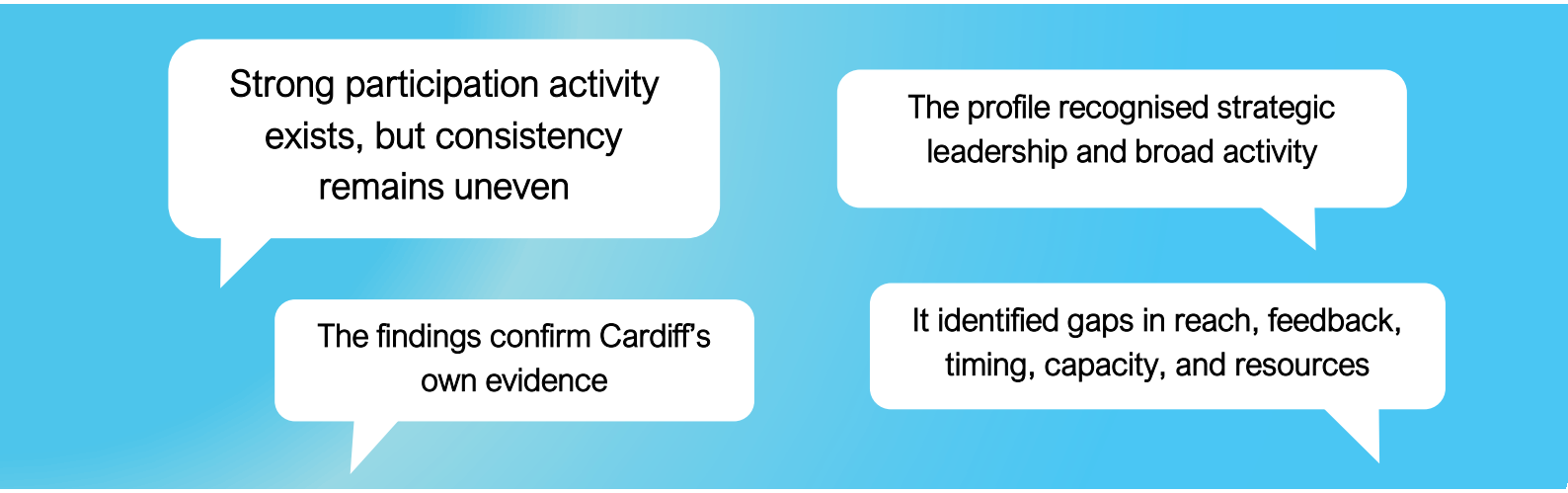
Children need safe ways to question and challenge



Some young people felt that disagreement could be interpreted as poor behaviour or defiance. A participation system must distinguish respectful challenge, complaints and safeguarding concerns from unacceptable behaviour, and provide trusted or independent routes where the usual route cannot be used.

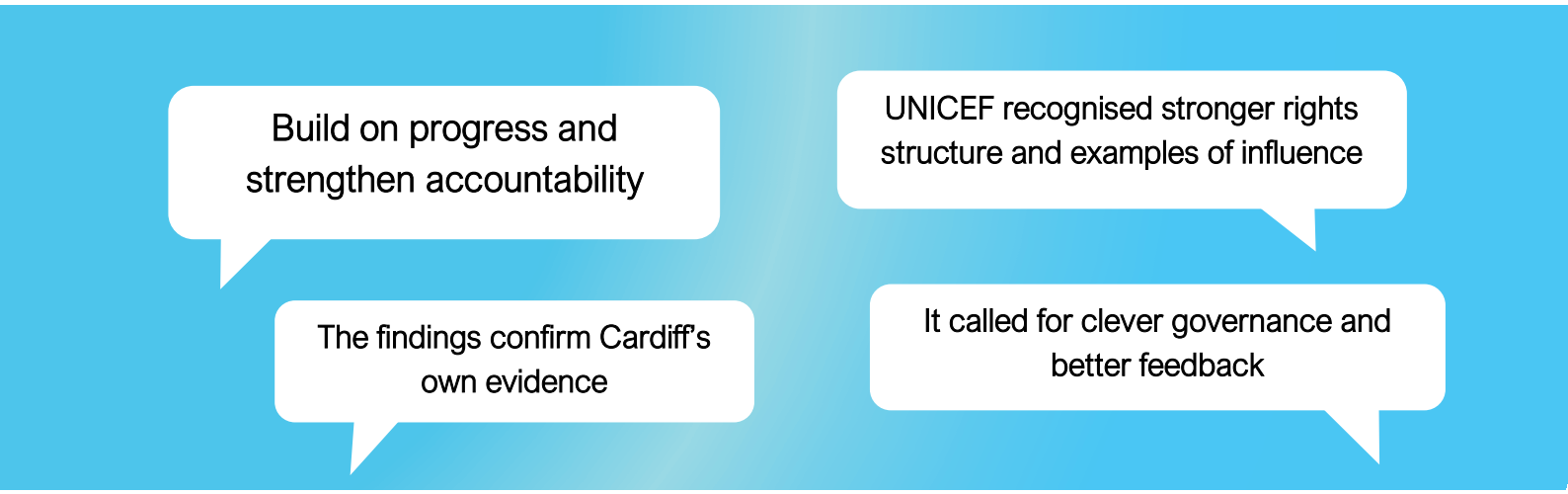
External assessment and national learning

Children's Commissioner for Wales



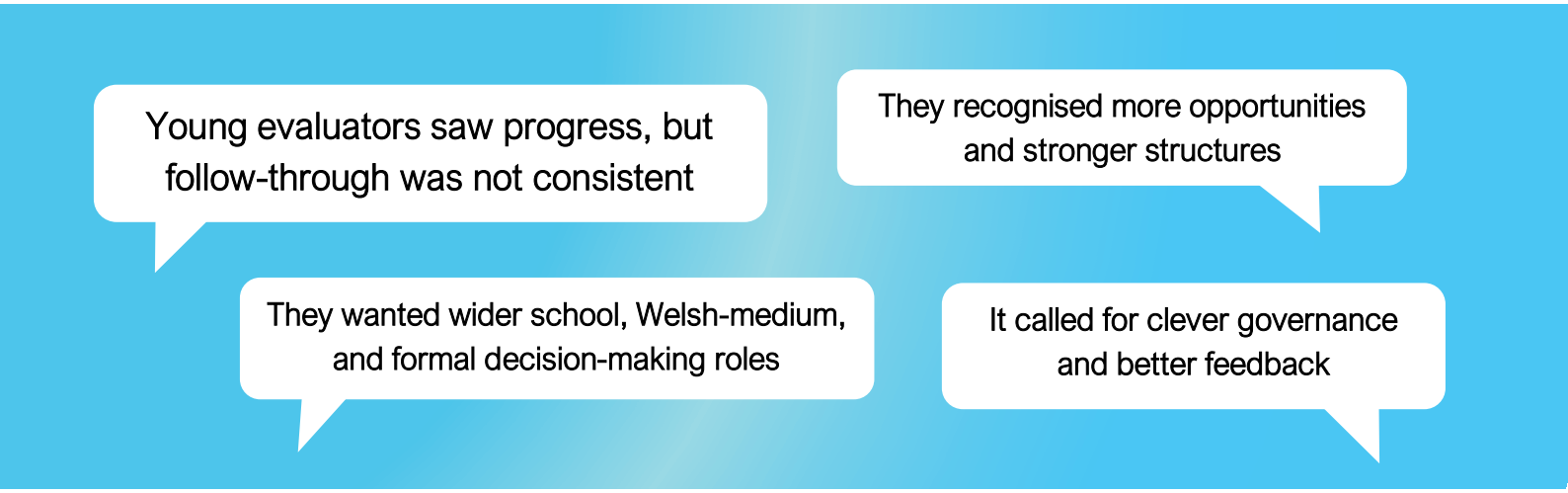
The Commissioner's profile recognised a wide range of participation activity and strategic leadership through Child Friendly Cardiff. It also identified workforce, reach, feedback, timing and resource challenges that closely match Cardiff's own evidence.

UNICEF UK outcome assessment



UNICEF renewed Cardiff's Child Friendly City recognition for 2026–29. It recognised stronger child-rights structures and examples of influence, while calling for clearer governance, better feedback, stronger evidence of impact and more equitable participation.

Youth Summary Report



Young evaluators recognised more opportunities and stronger structures. Their biggest concern was feedback. They also wanted participation to reach beyond the same young people, with stronger school participation, Welsh-medium involvement and formal roles in boards, committees and scrutiny.

Neil Foden Child Practice Review

The Neil Foden review is not evidence of the same practice or failures occurring in Cardiff. It provides important national safeguarding learning. Its central message is that organisations must show that ways of listening to children are embedded and working, not simply written into policy.

For Cardiff, this reinforces that participation is also a condition of safety. Children need trusted and independent ways to speak, challenge, complain and seek help, including where their communication is indirect or where they have not made a formal disclosure.

Overall conclusion

Cardiff has made real progress. There are committed staff, trusted relationships, established youth structures and examples of children influencing services and decisions. These strengths have been recognised by children and young people, UNICEF UK and the Children's Commissioner for Wales.

However, children do not yet experience one clear and consistent participation system. Many learners can identify supportive adults, but considerably fewer feel that their ideas are taken seriously or that they help shape decisions.

The evidence points to six priorities: earlier involvement; wider and fairer reach; protecting influence through transition and secondary education; clearer decision-making routes; feedback as a standard part of every process; and safe routes to question, challenge, complain and seek help.

Cardiff's next stage should focus less on creating separate consultation exercises and more on connecting existing activity into a fair, accessible and accountable system.

Recommendations

Recommendation	What this means?
Develop whole system approach participation model	Set clear minimum expectations, aligned with the Lundy Model and National Participation Standards, for Council services and relevant partners.
Involve children earlier in the participatory process	Build participation into the start of policies, service changes and decisions, linked where appropriate to Child Rights Impact Assessments.
Create a feedback guarantee	Every engagement should explain what was heard, what changed, what did not change, why and what will happen next.
Make participation inclusive by design	Plan for language, age, disability, confidence, digital access, transport, cost, time and different ways of communicating.
Clear routes to democratic processes and decision makers	Explain who makes decisions, how children's views reach them and how CYC, schools, scrutiny and other forums connect to formal governance.
Strengthen processes for children to safely challenge adults and receive independent support	Ensure children can question decisions, complain, raise concerns and access trusted or independent help without fear of unfair consequences.
Support the workforce to be skilled and confident in participatory processes	Provide practical training, tools, examples and a community of practice for Council services, schools and partners. Including the Wales National Participation Standards and the Lundy Model.
Measure influence, change and impact of participatory processes/opportunities	Record not only how many children took part, but what changed in decisions, services and children's experiences. Also use a small number of SHRN measures to monitor progress over time.

Next steps

- Return to participating groups with an accessible initial response.
    - Ask children and young people whether the findings reflect their experiences.
    - Identify anything that is missing or has been misunderstood.
- Agree governance, leadership and accountability arrangements.
- Develop an action plan with timescales and measures of success, including milestones where children and young people will remain involved in reviewing progress.
    - Work with young people to identify actions, from their perspectives, that will help realise the recommendations.

Sources and limitations

Sources

- Cardiff organisational participation review: 46 responses across 29 organisations and services, workshop evidence and six detailed case studies.
- Cardiff 2030 Learner Review.
- Public Health Wales SHRN Primary School Connectedness data (2024).
- Public Health Wales SHRN Secondary School Life data (2023).
- Peer-led focus groups, online engagement, participation tools, transcripts and summaries.
- Children's Commissioner for Wales Local Authority Participation Profile – Cardiff.
- UNICEF UK Cardiff Recognition Assessment Outcome Report 2026.
- Child Friendly Cardiff Youth Summary Report.
- Neil Foden Child Practice Review: Our Bravery Brought Justice.

UNICEF recognition report

Youth Summary Report

Neil Foden Child Practice Review

Limitations

- The focus groups provide detailed insight but do not represent every child in Cardiff.
- Some groups were small, and the quality and completeness of recordings and completed tools varied.
- SHRN is anonymised, aggregated and self-reported. It cannot explain why children answered as they did or show that a particular policy caused the result.
- The primary and secondary SHRN surveys involved different children, different questions and different survey years, so they should not be treated as one directly comparable dataset.
- Individual accounts about particular policies or events may require further discussion or verification.
- The Neil Foden review has been used as national practice learning and not as evidence of safeguarding failures in Cardiff.

*** This document is available in Welsh ***