



Pupils from Llysfaen Primary School in Cardiff with Jane Dodds MS

Giving young people a voice

A College-led initiative is enabling children and young people in Wales to play a meaningful role in influencing government policy on mental health, public education and community engagement.

Cynefin – pronounced *kuh-nev-in* – is a Welsh word with no direct English translation, conveying a sense of place, belonging and connectedness to the world. It's also the name of a youth-led public education programme developed by RCPsych in Wales that encourages school pupils to discuss their experiences and views on issues that affect their mental health and wellbeing, and inform decision-making in the National Parliament of Wales (the Senedd).

The origins of the programme go back to December 2015 when RCPsych in Wales organised a debate featuring four eminent psychiatrists in front of an audience of secondary school students. While it was well-received, “the young people thought they had equally good skills and would rather be doing it themselves,” says Professor Alka Ahuja, Chair of RCPsych in Wales and the programme’s lead.

So, Cynefin quickly evolved into a series of student-led debates, with the young people also choosing the format and topics. “The debates have now become something the whole school gets involved with,” says

Professor Ahuja. “Often one school will host all the cluster schools in the area. It’s become like a national cultural event.”

Recognising the increasing number of younger children presenting in clinics on mental health grounds, the programme team decided to extend Cynefin to primary schools in 2016. “We involved the 10- and 11-year-olds,” says Professor Ahuja, “and they were amazing.”

As the programme grew, it expanded to include many other forms of self-expression, as well as debating. “We were mindful that not everybody feels comfortable standing up and talking about things,” says Professor Ahuja. So, activities such as drawing, painting, model-making, writing, animation and rapping are now part of it – additions that were particularly welcomed by pupils with autism and other special educational needs.

Cynefin now engages over 5,000 participants across schools and communities, exploring issues such as loneliness, body image and financial stress. It has also worked with the National

Children’s Laureate, who led workshops capturing themes that were later animated and shared on social media to amplify the young people’s contributions.

From the outset, Cynefin has piqued political interest. The Welsh Government formally recognised its influence on the development of the Welsh schools’ curriculum, citing it as an example of best practice in engaging young people. And, notably, RCPsych in Wales co-hosted a well-received debate on climate change featuring 12 youth climate ambassadors for Wales, which led to the formation of a cross-party group on the subject in the Senedd in 2023. The group is co-chaired by a member of the Senedd and one of the youth climate ambassadors – something that may be unique in Europe. “As far as I know, it is the only group that is co-chaired by a young person,” says Professor Ahuja. “It’s been very empowering.”

In February, a group of pupils from Llysfaen Primary School in Cardiff involved in the programme were invited to the Senedd to present their views on topics important to them and take part in a debate on smartphone policy in schools. “The young people did not hold back,” says Professor Ahuja, and their views directly influenced the final policy.

Also attending was Jane Dodds MS, Leader of the Welsh Liberal Democrats and Chair of the Senedd’s Cross-Party Group on Children and Families. “What struck me most was the confidence, clarity and compassion with which these young people spoke,” she says. “Hearing directly from the pupils about their experiences and views on such important topics – including the impact of social media, the challenges of transitioning from primary to secondary education and the pressures of exams – was both powerful and thought-provoking. We must continue to support and expand programmes like this if we are serious about building a democratic society that truly listens to, values and learns from its young people.”

There’s far more to Cynefin than the space here allows – from its ongoing work with teachers, to its mental health research award for sixth form students, to its recently launched, co-produced toolkit to help more schools to benefit from its approach. But for Professor Ahuja, one aspect jumps out: the Cynefin summer schools for secondary school students considering a medical or mental health-related career. “I always get emotional when I talk about this,” she says. “We’ve got one former attendee studying medicine at Cardiff, and another at Oxford. It’s my proud mummy moment.”