

Children's Parliament **"Ask us how we are"**

Children's Parliament Investigates Mental Health and Wellbeing

For Comhairle nan Eilean Siar
July 2021



**Children's
Parliament**
giving ideas a voice

Preface

Message from the Member of Children's Parliament (MCP) Investigators:

Lockdown has affected children's mental health very badly and we would like you to listen to how we think you can help us to improve children's mental health and well-being. Our main concerns are that children must be listened to. You must make sure children have their say.

Tha sinn a' coimead air adhart ris na beachdan agaibh a chluinntinn.

We look forward to hearing your views.

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Introduction

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar is working to improve children's mental health and wellbeing services across the Western Isles. To inform these developments Children's Parliament worked with children to capture their views and ideas on how to make sure all children can grow up happy, healthy and safe at home, in school and in the community.

This Investigation aligns with commitments made in the Outer Hebrides Community Planning Partnership (OHCPP)'s Integrated Children's Services Plan 2020 - 2023, the Children and Young People's Mental Health Task Force (2019) and The Scottish Government's Mental Health Strategy 2017-2027 including:

- Taking a children's human rights rights-based approach.
- Facilitating meaningful participation of children.
- Ensuring children are actively involved in identifying local gaps and needs.
- Recognising the role of public services including education in identifying children's mental health and wellbeing needs.
- Focusing on early intervention and prevention.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the 140 wonderful Members of Children's Parliament (MCPs) who shared their views, experiences and ideas for this Investigation.

We would also like to say an extra special thank you to the 15 MCP Investigators for demonstrating such kindness, respect, creativity and empathy throughout this Investigation. It has been such a joy to learn with and from you. Thank you: Alana, Alexia, Aonghas, Billy, Breanna, Chiara, Ellie Mae, Eva, Fraser, John, Katie, Kara, Maja, Michael and Sam.

This Investigation would have not been possible without the support of colleagues from:

- Castlebay Primary School and Nursery (Barra)
- Iochdar School and Nursery (South Uist)
- Laxdale School and Nursery (Lewis)
- Sir E Scott Primary School and Nursery (Harris)

Finally, we wish to thank Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (Western Isles Council) for commissioning this work as part of its commitment to realising the rights of children across the Western Isles.

The quotes, emboldened text and artwork in this report come directly from the MCP Investigators and the children involved in the school workshops.

Children's Parliament Investigates...

Children's Parliament takes a children's human rights-based approach, meaning our work is guided by the principles and furthers the realisation of the rights of all children as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

All children who participate in our programmes become Members of Children's Parliament (MCPs). Unlike other parliamentary bodies, Children's Parliament is not an elected body. Rather it is a participatory one, engaging with children across a range of settings in order to include as many children as possible.

Every space we create is a children's parliament. When children come into this space, we want them to bring with them their knowledge of what it is like to be a child, their ideas and their opinions, and to be willing to voice and explore them. The model of 'Children's Parliament Investigates' provides an opportunity for a small team of children known as 'the MCP Investigators' to work with peers and to explore an issue that is of concern to children, through the lens of children's human rights.

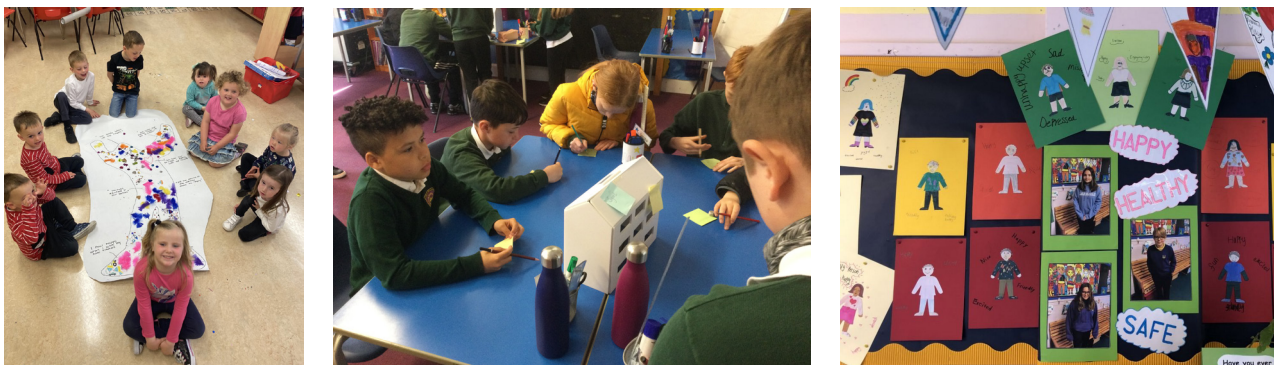
In this project, Children's Parliament worked in partnership with four primary schools and nurseries to capture the diversity of children's views, ideas and experiences on mental health and wellbeing. As with all our work, we used creative, participatory and play-based methods to support children to explore and express key concepts and views on mental health and wellbeing.

The Investigation had the following key elements:

Exploratory Workshops

Between April and June 2021, 140 children participated in creative, activity-based workshops designed by Children's Parliament and then delivered by school staff. These sessions built children's understanding of children's human rights and explored mental health and wellbeing. Following the workshops, the children shared their views, reflections and ideas using interactive, digital surveys.

To support younger children's participation in the Investigation, Children's Parliament designed a workshop for children in their early years which was delivered in two of the nurseries, involving 16 children aged 3 to 5. This also fed into later analysis by the older children.



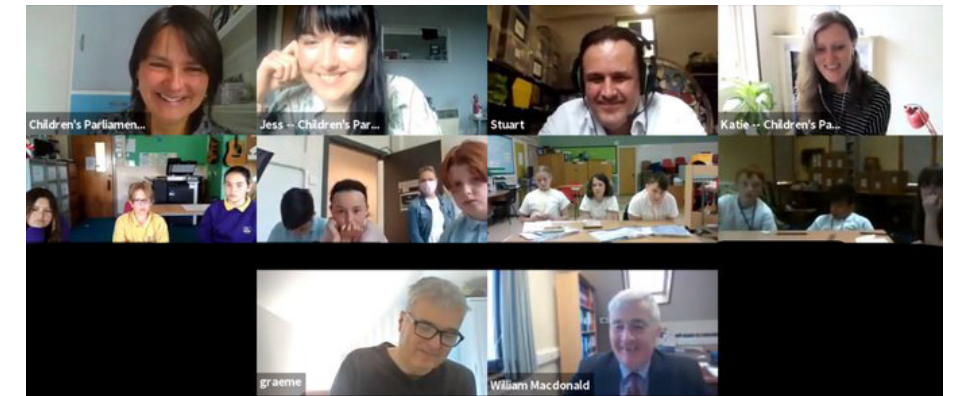
The Investigation

15 children from across the four schools became our team of MCP Investigators. Over eight weeks the MCP Investigators worked together remotely on online calls to share and further explore the views of their peers.

The MCP Investigators received MCP Investigator Missions in the post - creative activity packs which supported them to explore key concepts and ideas in their own time.

The MCP Investigators worked together to identify key recommendations – which we term Calls to Action – for Comhairle nan Eilean Siar to consider in its implementation of the Integrated Children's Services Plan and, in due course, forthcoming incorporation of the UNCRC in Scots law, as well as commitments made in The Promise.

In June, the MCP Investigators shared their key findings and Calls to Action with the Comhairle nan Eilean Siar Education Committee, with a view to continued engagement and dialogue upon receipt of this report.



MILLY (Mental Health, Island Community, Language, Listening, You)

Due to COVID-19, the entire Investigation took place without the opportunity for the MCP Investigators to meet up. However, the MCP Investigators' mascot MILLY the baby fox was able to travel and meet the children in each school. MILLY had lots of exciting adventures with the MCP Investigators, and played a special role helping the children to get to know each others' communities and the places across the Western Isles they felt were important for keeping children happy, healthy and safe.



Understanding Mental Health and Wellbeing

Our workshops with the Investigators analysed the outcomes of the Exploratory Workshops. They began by exploring children's understanding of mental health and wellbeing, its relationship with children's human rights, and children's reflections on what it means to them. Many children spoke about mental health and wellbeing in relation to how they feel inside their minds and about themselves. Children described their mental health as:

"What my thoughts, ideas and feelings are like inside my head"
 "When you feel happy about what you're doing and feeling healthy"
 "Keeping your mind healthy and happy"

Mental health and wellbeing

Many children also made the connection between mental and physical health, and are aware that a healthy routine, good nutrition, enough sleep and exercise are important for nurturing positive mental health and wellbeing.

These are the words children used to described how poor mental health and wellbeing can make children feel.

unhappy weak
 unwanted
 unloved worked-up
 sad mad angry worried
 useless lazy upset
 stressed anxious
 nervous hurt scared lonely
 low worthless
overwhelmed

"It is important to have good mental health to feel good about yourself and not feel anxious, scared or stressed."

MCP, age 11, Lewis

"It means a lot since it can affect the way I do my work within school and outside of school."

MCP, age 11, Harris

"If someone has good mental health, they might feel happy, safe and healthy. Someone could make you feel happy by being funny or making you laugh. Family could make you feel safe because they can be there for you. And to be healthy, make sure you are eating healthily and going for a walk every day."

MCP, age 11, South Uist

"They might not be treating others the way they usually do."

MCP, age 12, Lewis

"They might feel left out or lonely, all alone and too worked up to do anything. Sometimes when you have too many feelings built up inside you, you feel too overwhelmed to carry on with what you're doing."

MCP, age 12, South Uist

"Mental health means to me getting to control or talk about your emotions."

MCP, age 11, South Uist

"While someone might feel happy, positive, excited and confident from getting a perfect score in a test or getting all your work done, there are times when it is okay not to be okay and happy. Don't pretend to be happy when you are not."

MCP, age 11, Harris

Children demonstrated an acute awareness that our mental health and wellbeing can change, and that good mental health and wellbeing does not mean that children or adults have to be happy all the time. Children understand that they might feel different kinds of emotions and feelings, sometimes at the same time.

Working from the children's perspectives, we also drew on the work of the Anna Freud Centre⁽¹⁾ to create this working definition of mental health in our work with children. We offer this for further consideration and to support a shared understanding:

Defining mental health

- **We all have physical health and mental health.**
- **Our mental health is our feelings, thinking, emotions and moods.**
- **Positive and negative emotions come and go.**
- **You can feel down, angry, stressed or overwhelmed. Or maybe you don't feel like yourself.**
- **You can feel happy, positive and carefree.**

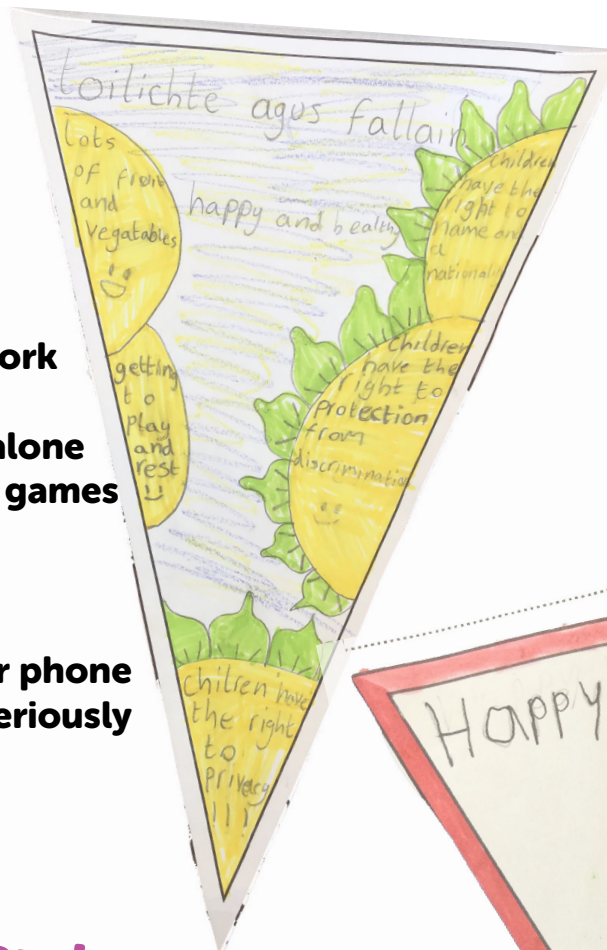


Happy, Healthy and Safe

Our shared efforts to foster positive mental health and wellbeing require a rounded view of children's lives. The Investigation supported children to reflect on life at home, at school and in the community and to consider what helps create a supportive, nurturing environment for all children to grow up in. In doing so children also identified the blocks to happiness, good health and feelings of safety. We report on these conversations with children because they are important for adults in terms of understanding the child's lived experience, but also to encourage adults to engage with children in the kind of discussions that will facilitate the broad understanding of mental health that we need to develop.

1. Home

- Family time
- Parents/carers coming home early from work
- Caring families
 - Having privacy at home or space to be alone
 - Lots of exercise and time for playing + games
 - Having healthy food and water
 - Having a safe, clean home
 - Good sleep
 - Parents/carers not being on their phone
 - Listening to us and taking us seriously



What gets in the way of being happy, healthy or safe at home?

- Not getting much time with family
- Staying up late
- When parents shout at you
- Not being cared for
- Parents/carers working from home
- Conflicts with siblings and parents/carers
- Parents/carers arguing and fighting in front of you
- Noisy family or neighbours
- Not being able to talk to or trust adults at home
- Using electronics too long
- Poor WIFI connection
- Not having enough food to eat or eating too much
- Eating things that are not healthy and not getting exercise
- Not brushing teeth
- Not having a say in things
- Getting interrupted
 - When parents are separated and it's difficult to spend time with both
 - Parents/carers being too busy and working too much so there's no one to talk to
 - Not being listened to, taken seriously, or being ignored by parents/carers

What helps children to be happy, healthy and safe at home?

"To make sure children have good mental health you should always ask them how their day was, and if they say fine ask them again just in case."

MCP, age 11, South Uist

"It makes me happy being outside, playing boardgames, being with my family, playing with my rabbits and other animals."

MCP, age 11, South Uist

"Having no one to talk too, no one to help you, or if you're scared to tell someone."

MCP, age 11, Harris

2. School

- Feeling included
- Friends
- Playtime
- Having fun

- When people play with you
- Soft starts at the beginning of the day
- Check ins to see how everyone is feeling
- Having safe, quiet spaces at school to go to, to calm down and talk to teachers privately
- Healthy school meals that we like to eat
- Learning and spending time outside
- Being listened to and having a say
- Kind, caring teachers

"There's a safe space in our library, but the school I used to go to had a sensory room where you could read and maybe use sensory items like blankets and lava lamps, and it was a bit like a den. I really liked it."

MCP, age 11, South Uist

"Ask us how we are, take the time to talk to us."

MCP, age 9, Barra

What helps children to be happy, healthy and safe at school?

What gets in the way of being happy, healthy or safe at school?

- Teachers shouting at children
- Being scared of teachers
- Having no one in school to talk to
- Feeling nobody likes me
- Loud people and too much noise in the classroom
- COVID-19 rules in the school
- Not having enough time for tasks
- No private places to talk to teachers when we need help or support
- Getting left out of groups or games and having no one to play with
- Sometimes work being hard
- Bullies

"When I told my teacher that I was bullied nothing happened, it just got worse because the bully then knew that I had told the teacher."

MCP, age 14, Barra

"In school we don't have anywhere private to talk, or any other teachers. Sometimes if you're really upset you have to go outside in the corridor, but there's other students walking past."

MCP, age 11, Lewis

3. Community

- Access to beautiful nature
- Community events
- Occasions for the community to come together to have fun
- Having people in the community to talk to if feeling unsafe or worried
- Places to gather like parks and playparks
- Outdoor areas with picnic tables
- Public swimming pools
- Outdoor centres and local clubs for children to make new friends
- Fun activities where children can learn new skills

What helps children to be happy, healthy and safe in the community?

"A healthy environment is a human right."

MCP, age 12, South Uist

"Get children to explore outside, support them with their hobbies. Teach them about the world and life, not just schoolwork."

MCP, age 11, South Uist





Image: When exploring how children feel about the places they live, many children referred very positively to their communities. One task for the MCP Investigators was to create local community maps which they presented back to each other on one of the MCP Investigator workshop calls.

What gets in the way of being happy, healthy or safe in the community?

- Not having fun places to go to
- Not enough paths along the roads for walking and running safely
- COVID-19 and not being able to access activities, shops + places to hang out
- Feeling anxious and shy to talk to people in the community
- Tourists and camper vans – not knowing people around you
- Vandalism, stuff being broken at play parks
- People fighting, arguing, not caring, or just not getting along
- Not having opportunities to do activities
- Not living near your friends
- Support groups not available
- Parents/carers that cannot drive
- Limited public transport
- Families not having the money to afford activities
- No public toilets
- Littering

Emerging Themes

These consistent themes emerged from the Investigation.

The importance of relationships built on

Trust

Throughout the Investigation children highlighted the importance of trusting relationships and having one or more trusted adults they can talk to when they feel unhappy, upset or when seeking advice on issues that affect them.

To children, a trusting adult should be:

Nice

Kind

Understanding

Fun to be with

Friendly

Caring

Honest

Gentle

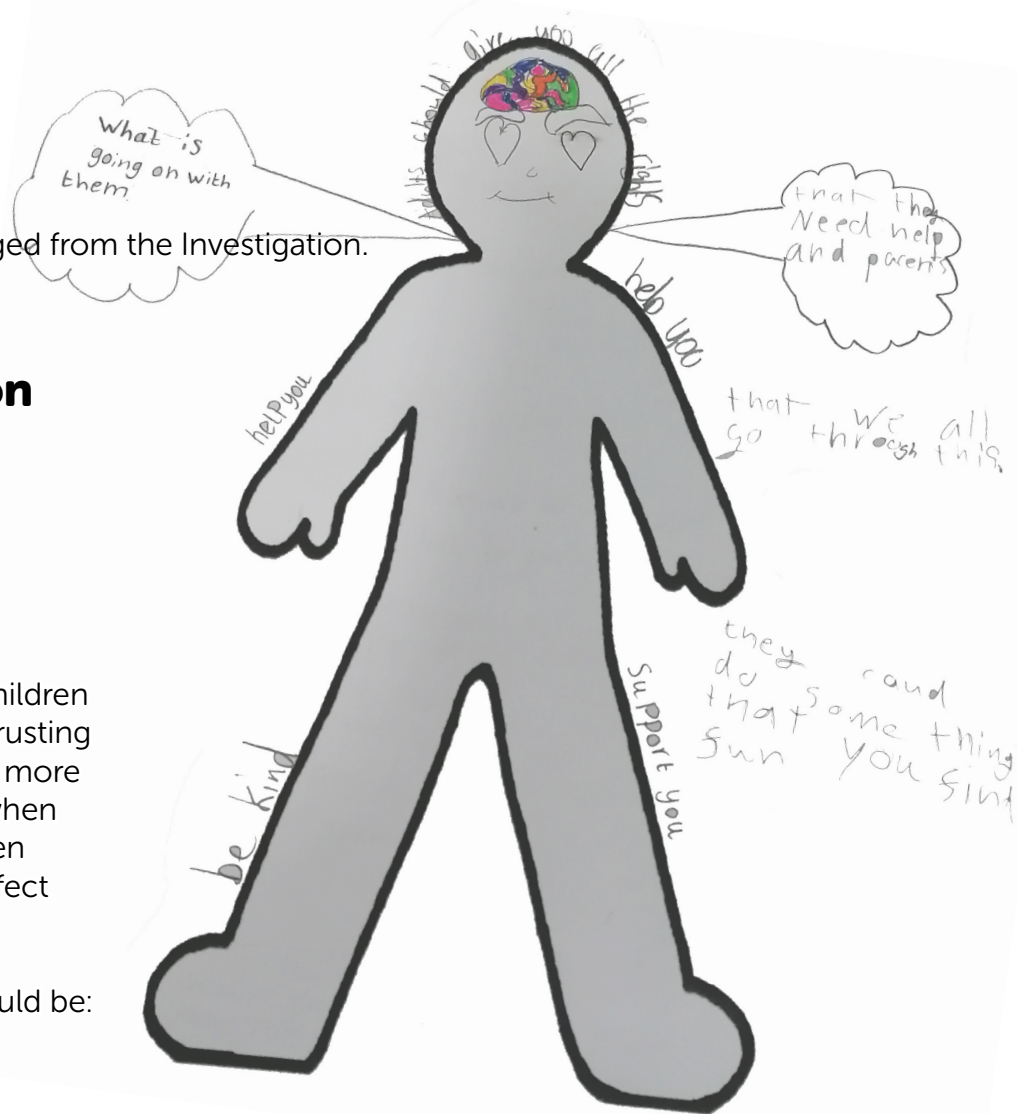
Loyal

Reliable

Children emphasise how important it is to have a trusted adult who sees things from a child's perspective. Children want to be believed in, and not doubted by adults when they disclose things. In order to feel listened to, valued and understood, children need adults to:

- Actively listen to them by making eye contact
- Take children seriously
- Be willing to help children and offer advice
- Respect children's right to privacy
- Not interrupt
- Put away their phones
- Give their full attention
- Keep promises so that "things that you [adults] say happen"

- MCP, age 9, Barra



"I think that children would feel more respected, valued and taken seriously if you listen to what they are saying do not mock them and when they're talking, look at them."

MCP, age 11, Lewis

Getting support when you need it

Support

Children understand that there are times and circumstances when children require additional support from adults.

Reflecting on the types of support children may need from parents/carers, the school, or the community, children shared why some children might struggle to access the support they need.



"You might be stopped from getting help when your parents, family and friends are too busy, or when you're too scared or embarrassed to say anything."

MCP, age 11, South Uist

All children agree that trusting relationships are key for children to engage with adults and when accessing support. If children feel they cannot trust someone they are likely to not seek support or talk about their worries and what is going on in their lives. Children highlighted the importance of feeling loved, not judged, cared for so they are able to speak openly.

Children are aware that sometimes children might need encouragement to express their views and feelings when talking to adults or seeking support. Acknowledging that sometimes children might find it difficult to express their feelings and views verbally, children suggest that trusted adults could support children by doing activities together. Here, children share their suggestions for what adults can say when they are looking to support a child:

"I'm sorry about what happened."



"I'm here to protect you."

"I'll see if I can help you."



"It will get better."

"Don't worry, you can trust me."



"I'll find you support."



"What can get in the way? Parents aren't caring or looking after them [children], maybe problems like money or parents that can't drive."

MCP, age 10, Lewis



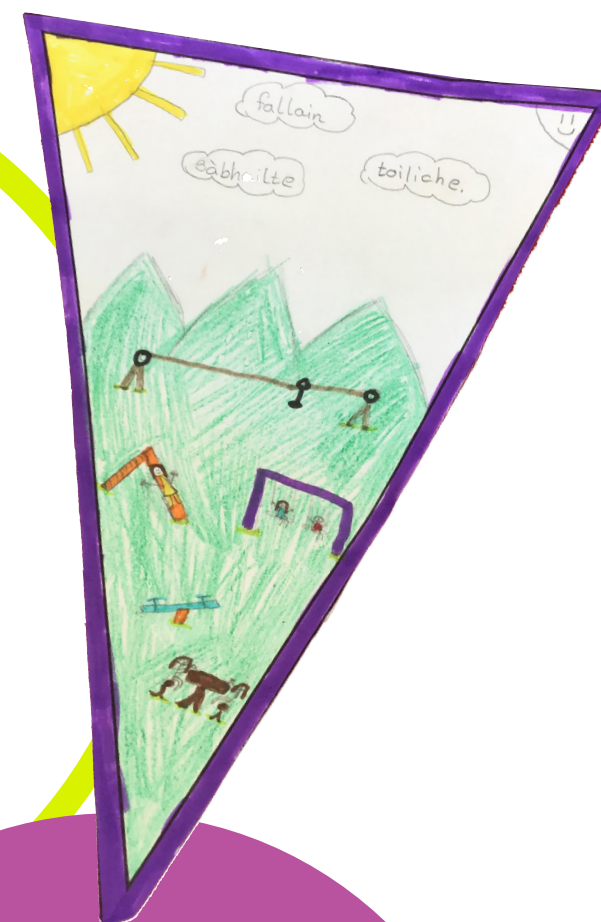
Being outdoors, being active and

Playing

A strong theme throughout the Investigation was the link that the MCP Investigators made between mental health and the ability to be in, and engage with, the natural world, to be outdoors, be active at school and free to play. These opportunities can clearly contribute to efforts that are focusing on early intervention and prevention.

"What we want, even for just one term, is a specialist PE teacher. We keep being told that in order to have good mental health, it's really important to stay active."

MCP, age 11, Lewis



"I live on the Isle of Lewis. It is a lovely place to live. We have wonderful beaches and lots of open space and fresh air. We have a sports centre and swimming pool. Lots of tourists come to the Western Isles. The Callanish Stones is a big attraction. In the summer, we have the HebCelt festival in the Castle Grounds."

MCP, age 11, Lewis

Calls to Action

Gathering all the views and ideas shared by the wider group of children, the 15 MCP Investigators developed the following **Calls to Action**. The children hope that Comhairle nan Eilean Siar will take these actions forward in its work to improve children's mental health and wellbeing services across the Western Isles.

1 Bullying is a serious problem for many children and has a damaging impact on mental health and wellbeing. Children want adults to support them to build relationships with their peers and to tackle bullying and cyberbullying. Children feel that awareness-raising and training for adults about bullying and its impact on children's mental health and wellbeing could help.

2 Children want access to a trusted adult and time to talk when feeling upset or anxious.

3 Children want specialist teachers in each school providing creative subjects, especially the arts and physical education. Children believe that these active, creative educational opportunities will support mental health and wellbeing.

4 Children want to find out more about art, music, outdoor sports and sport clubs that are available to them. They also want to know what services and groups are available that support children's mental health and wellbeing.

5 Recognising that children have the right to a healthy, clean environment, children want to see more bins and recycling facilities, and education for children and adults on how to use them properly. Children want there to be places in every community where families can access support, food and clean water, if they are struggling with money. Children welcome the Council's commitment to change the school meal plan to provide healthier options and wish to be involved in its design.

6 Many children recognise the positive impact nature and being active outdoors has on their mental health and wellbeing. At school, they would like more outdoor learning and more spaces to play, run around and be active. Children recognise the negative impact vandalism and broken equipment in playparks and public facilities has on their safety, mental health and wellbeing. Children want to be involved in the repair and redesign of these spaces.

1. Help children put a stop to bullying, cyberbullying and feelings of exclusion

2. Make sure every school and community has a safe, private space where children can talk to an adult if they are worried, upset or having a difficult time

3. Have specialist art and PE teachers for every school and nursery

4. Create child-friendly information and knowledge on what activities, services and support children are able to access, the benefits of it and how to get involved

5. Make sure our communities are healthy, clean environments where everyone has access to clean water and healthy food - especially those with little money

6. Create, repair and improve play and outdoor spaces – and more learning outdoors!

7. Create more activities, clubs and places where children can go to hang out, play, learn new skills and make new friends

8. Make a commitment to involving children in decisions that affect them

8 Children want to be involved and work together with adults to improve their lives at home, in school and in the community. This requires adults to recognise their responsibilities as duty bearers in fulfilling and promoting children's human rights, and to actively involve children in decisions that will impact their lives.

7 During this investigation children raised their concerns that there are not sufficient clubs and activities or community events available for them. Often numbers are limited, so all children interested cannot participate. Many clubs or centres have long waiting lists. Children talked about how that can leave a child feeling excluded or bored, especially over the summer holidays or after school, and particularly in winter when, due to weather conditions, it is harder to meet with friends outdoors.

Although these are the children's final messages and Calls to Action, it is their hope that this is the beginning of their journey working together with Comhairle nan Eilean Siar. As stated at the beginning of this report:

Tha sinn a' coimead air adhart ris na beachdan agaibh a chluinntinn.

We look forward to hearing your views.

MCP Investigators

About Children's Parliament

Established in 1996, Children's Parliament is Scotland's centre of excellence for children's participation and engagement. Our mission is to inspire greater awareness and understanding of the power of children's human rights and to support implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) across Scotland.

Through our children's human rights-based, creative practice, we provide younger children up to 14 years of age from diverse backgrounds across Scotland with opportunities to share their experiences, thoughts and feelings so that they can influence positive change in their lives at home, in school and in the community. We use creative, participatory methods to support children to meaningfully engage in decision-making processes.



Children's Parliament- Sandra



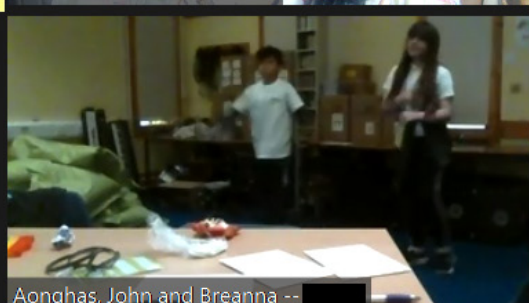
Jess - Children's Parliament



Stuart



Katie -- Children's Parliament



Aonghas, John and Breanna --



Ellie, Billy and Kara --



Katie, Alana and Fraser --



Chiara, Alexia and Sam --



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