

19-21 Broad Street | St Helier
Jersey | JE2 3RR

Office of the Children's Commissioner,
Attn of Tom Hughes – Advisor to the Children's Commissioner for Jersey.
By email

28th April 2020

Dear Tom,

Re: Addressing Jersey's Children & Young People about COVID-19

Thank you for your correspondence, I am grateful for the views expressed and the opportunity to respond.

Firstly, it is important for me to reiterate that the Coronavirus pandemic has done nothing to dilute my commitment, and the Government's priority, to put children first. Whilst not all the thinking and planning is in view, I can assure you that both elected and appointed officials, working with partners, are making every effort to ensure that the best interests and rights of children, young people and families are at the forefront of the response. A huge amount of work has already been undertaken and is becoming embedded – the setting up of the Children and Families Hub and the provision of childcare and school places for the children of critical workers and the most vulnerable children to name but two. But I am not complacent: every day, I meet (virtually) with other Ministers and the most senior officials to ensure that we are doing all we can to anticipate and put in place the full range of information, advice, guidance and support that are needed now and, in the future, to mitigate the well-publicised and understood challenges that prolonged disruption to our daily lives is bringing.

So, the time is perfect for some direct engagement with children and young people and I am pleased to advise that both the Education Minister and I undertook the first of a series of Q&A sessions with children and young people. The timing of this was important as it coincided with the launch, earlier in the day, of a cross-Government safeguarding campaign designed to remind Islanders of how they can help one another in these difficult times, highlighting the range of services available across a wide spectrum of need. This campaign has the full backing of the whole of Government and, specifically, has been driven by the Departments for Children, Young People, Education and Skills, Justice and Home Affairs, Health and Community Services and the States of Jersey Police. I am keen to get involved in further engagement directly with children and young people. I will be working with the Youth Service on regular question and answer sessions, I am equally keen to work alongside your office if you wish to arrange anything further.

Teachers, social workers, youth workers and many, many others across by the Department and Government more widely have their ears to the ground listening to the views expressed by children and young people and using them to shape our responses. And we will continue to listen as the Stay At Home requirement becomes more demanding of us all and our responses need to

change as a consequence. I am personally committed to ensuring the planning undertaken here in Government is shaped by the experiences of our children and young people and my officials are equally clear about and supportive of this intention. I will ensure that there are regular public-facing opportunities to answer questions, hear about issues, take away suggestions and, wherever possible, respond by flexing and/or enhancing our service responses.

To your point about the Office of the Children's Commissioner being involved in the emergency planning arrangements. I am advised by the officials leading the response that it would not be appropriate to include the Commissioner. The Strategic Coordinating Group (SCG), chaired by the Director General for Justice and Home Affairs, is overseeing the Island response to the pandemic. The SCG is accountable to the Council of Ministers, Competent Authorities, Emergencies Council and the States Assembly and it is a formal body with defined membership, roles and responsibilities set out in Jersey and UK law and practice guidance. Whilst the Commissioner's role is not required to be part of this arrangement, the interests of children and young people are strongly represented on this body by the Director General for Children, Young People, Education and Skills. There is equally strong representation at the Tactical Coordinating Group level through the Director for Children's Safeguarding and Care.

I am reassured that the Commissioner has been in dialogue with both the Director General for Children, Young People, Education and Skills and the Director for Children's Safeguarding and Care about how best to contribute to and keep informed about our planning and responses and there is a mechanism now settling into place for giving the Commissioner a 'heads-up' about relevant matters. The Commissioner is also receiving the daily COVID-19 summaries produced by the Chief Minister's communications officer which give a useful view of Government-wide activity. I will ask the Director for Children's Safeguarding and Care to ensure that we are being proactive in raising relevant matters with the Commissioner, especially those where a right-based focus is particularly significant.

I have reflected on your point about the use of the phrase 'social distancing' and concur that it may, inadvertently, be giving an unhelpful message. However, it is the view of public health professionals that it is now too well embedded in the lexicon of the pandemic to be changed at this stage. To combat the concern that the use of the word 'social' may discourage human interaction, the messaging from Government – evidenced, for example, in the guidance recently issued by the Jersey Youth Service (and worked up by young people themselves) – will be clear that people are actively encouraged to keep in contact with family and friends regularly and in whatever ways keep them safe and healthy. So, please be reassured that we are doing all we can to promote sustained communication between Islanders of all ages within the bounds of essential, life-saving, public health guidance.

Like you, I see this also as a time of great, unprecedented uncertainty. What I can assure you of is two things. The priority of putting children first remains just that: a priority both for me and for Government. Secondly, my door is always open (albeit virtually at this time) and I welcome both your challenge and support in helping to ensure that the voice and rights of children and young people continues to inform our response to the pandemic, along with our longer-term ambition for Jersey to be the best place to grow up in.

Please contact me if you wish to discuss any matters that have been raised in this letter. I am conscious that due to COVID 19 my regular meetings with the commissioner have not been taking place. I am more than happy to meet virtually to discuss issues and concerns you may have.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sam Mézec', written in a cursive style.

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