

# EVALUATION OF THE INTEGRATION OF A YOUTH PERSPECTIVE IN COUNCIL OF EUROPE WORK



Final Report  
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### **Disclaimer**

The evaluation was managed by a senior evaluator under the supervision of the Director of Internal Oversight and implemented by Ecorys. The views expressed in this report are those of the review team members from Ecorys.

### **Key contributors to the evaluation**

#### *External expertise and report authors*

Ecorys represented by:

Laurie Day, Team Leader

Flavia Colonnese, Deputy Team Leader and Thematic Expert

Aleksandra Skoczylas, Researcher

Andrzej Żurawski, Researcher

Selina Komers, Researcher

Tom Garth Jones, Researcher

Alexandra Green, Researcher

Laura Sala Franch, Researcher

*Directorate of Internal Oversight – Evaluation division*

Robert Stryk, Director

Malcolm Cox, Evaluation manager

Marta Borkowska, Evaluation assistant

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## Abbreviations

<b>ADI-SOGIESC</b>	Committee of Experts on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics
<b>CCJ</b>	Advisory Council on Youth
<b>CDADI</b>	Steering Committee on Anti-Discrimination, Diversity and Inclusion
<b>CDBIO</b>	Steering Committee for Human Rights in the fields of Biomedicine and Health
<b>CDEJ</b>	European Steering Committee on Youth
<b>The Congress</b>	Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe
<b>CMJ</b>	Joint Council on Youth
<b>CPJ</b>	Programming Committee on Youth
<b>DGI</b>	Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law
<b>DGII</b>	Directorate General of Democracy and Human Dignity
<b>EYC</b>	European Youth Centre
<b>EYF</b>	European Youth Foundation
<b>GEC</b>	Gender Equality Commission
<b>GR-C</b>	Rapporteur Group on Education, Culture, Sport, Youth and Environment
<b>GREVIO</b>	Group of Experts on Action against Women and Domestic Violence
<b>INGO</b>	International Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>PACE</b>	Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
<b>PEYR</b>	Pool of European Youth Researchers
<b>SOGIESC</b>	Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics

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## Executive summary

1. As part of the work programme for 2024-27, the Directorate of Internal Oversight appointed Ecorys to carry out an evaluation of the integration of a youth perspective in Council of Europe work.

### Purpose, objectives and scope

2. The evaluation aimed to assess the existing level of integration of a youth perspective in all relevant areas of Council of Europe work; to appraise the opportunities and challenges, and to make recommendations for future development in the context of the “Reykjavík Declaration – United around our values” (the Reykjavík Declaration).<sup>1</sup>

3. The evaluation covered the time period from 2020 to the end of August 2024. It concerned the actions taken to integrate a youth perspective in the work of the Council of Europe, its institutions and services, and member states across the functions of the Organisation.

4. The evaluation was conducted in parallel to, and with due consideration of, the ongoing work led by the Youth Department to develop a reference framework, with key definitions, guiding principles and practical measures for the integration of a youth perspective in response to the Reykjavík Declaration.

### Methodology

5. A mixed-methods approach was adopted. This included desk research; key-stakeholder interviews; surveys of staff, political delegations and youth; and focus groups with youth. The data were coded and analysed, and five examples of practices were developed as deep-dive case studies.

6. The approach was compliant with guidelines from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s Development Assistance Committee<sup>2</sup> and facilitated an assessment against the five key criteria: relevance, coherence, efficiency, effectiveness, and gender mainstreaming and a human rights-based approach, underpinned by a matrix and key research questions (see Appendices).

### Findings and recommendations

7. The thematic analysis identified six key areas under which the study evidence is presented, and in relation to which the evaluators have made six key recommendations.

#### 8. **Operationalising a youth perspective across a large and complex organisation:**

- Efforts to integrate a youth perspective have evolved in a somewhat unco-ordinated way.
- There are different needs and approaches across the core functions of the Organisation.
- Interinstitutional co-operation is improving, but is not yet Organisation-wide.

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1. <https://rm.coe.int/4th-summit-of-heads-of-state-and-government-of-the-council-of-europe/1680ab40c1>.

2. [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/dac-guidelines-and-reference-series\\_19900988.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/dac-guidelines-and-reference-series_19900988.html).

- The Reykjavík Declaration has raised awareness, but there is a gap between this high-level mandate and its operationalisation.

**Recommendation 1:** To adopt an overarching strategic approach to ensure the integration of a youth perspective across the Council of Europe. This strategic approach should be implemented through the reference framework, as the principal mechanism for implementing the youth elements of the Reykjavík Declaration.

#### 9. **Building upon willingness to engage with youth:**

- There is considerable room to strengthen political support across the Organisation, despite the broad recognition of youth's potential contribution to policy work and deliberations.
- Integration is held back by a reluctance to recognise youth as legitimate, competent and equal partners in the work of the Organisation, and by a lack of direct experience of working with youth beyond the youth sector or youth-specific initiatives.
- There is a priority to build trust through informal dialogue with youth, to build trust, familiarity and understanding, outside the context of “high-stakes” consultations and deliberations.

**Recommendation 2:** To support and encourage opportunities for mutual learning between Council of Europe staff, representations, and youth through existing human capital.

#### 10. **Enhancing results through the integration of a youth perspective:**

- Youth perspectives tangibly impact the quality and consistency of Council of Europe work. This impact is generally the most apparent in formalised processes linked to policy making.
- Pilot projects have served as an opportunity to experiment and innovate, by allowing sectors to test the waters and engage with youth through individual, one-off consultation opportunities.
- However, the involvement of young people and representative structures is often reactive, with sectors and bodies reaching out to or engaging with youth on a pre-established agenda.
- The participation of youth in Council of Europe work has been more impactful where:
  - Youth are selected to match the aims and expertise for the matter in hand.
  - Youth are involved in framing and developing policy and strategy work from the outset.
  - Time is allowed for preparatory work and for adaptations to environments and proceedings.
  - There is an emphasis on mutual learning and exchange, avoiding generic advocacy.

**Recommendation 3:** To strengthen quality assurance and access to supporting tools and materials, recognising the central role of the Youth Department in this regard, and guidance to operationalise the reference framework.

**11. Monitoring and feedback to support long-term impact:**

- A current lack of feedback and monitoring represents a real challenge to assessing impact.
- Lack of efforts to gather feedback from youth involved in consultation processes and other opportunities for engagement undermine organisational learning and capacity building.
- There are currently no established tools or approaches to monitoring or evaluation where a youth perspective is sought across the work of the wider Organisation.
- A more systemic approach to both gathering feedback from youth and ensuring information on whether and how input from youth is being used is necessary to improve existing practices.

**Recommendation 4:** To establish a principle of 360-degree feedback, enabling youth representatives to share their views and experiences and supporting the Organisation to communicate the outcomes to youth.

**12. Synergies with gender mainstreaming and the human rights-based approach:**

- There is a clear political mandate to mainstream gender and youth perspectives across the Organisation. This mainstreaming requires similar intersectional approaches.
- Nevertheless, examples of a youth perspective being included within gender mainstreaming and human rights-based work are more limited. These remain somewhat compartmentalised.
- Existing initiatives to involve youth across deliberations and sectoral work do not yet guarantee that diverse voices and experiences are heard, including from marginalised youth.
- Key barriers relate to accessibility, knowledge of or access to youth organisations beyond the youth sector, resources, and expertise to engage youth with additional needs.

**Recommendation 5:** To establish the needs of diverse youth and to support an evidence-based approach towards reaching and engaging youth in the context of gender mainstreaming and the human rights-based approach.

**13. Ensuring the equitable and efficient use of available resources:**

- The Organisation faces a resource-constrained environment within which to embark on a new transformation programme. A phased approach is likely to be needed, to respect variations in levels of engagement between institutions and to pilot ways of working before taking them to scale.
- There is a need for better cross-organisational alignment on youth, a more equitable distribution of resources and reducing duplication where institutions have developed individual approaches.
- There is currently a degree of under-utilisation of the human resources available within the networks affiliated to the Organisation, which might be addressed through closer work with member states and a more flexible mechanism for brokering expertise through the co-management system.

- The evaluation finds a good case for continuing to implement the Reykjavík Declaration goals relating to the integration of a youth perspective, underpinned by a clear action plan.

**Recommendation 6:** To develop an action plan for implementing the priorities in the reference framework, and to ensure that roles and responsibilities are agreed within the Organisation.



## 1. Introduction

14. This report presents the key findings from an evaluation of the integration of a youth perspective in Council of Europe work. The evaluation is part of the Directorate of Internal Oversight's work programme for 2024-27.<sup>3</sup> The report assesses the extent to which and how a youth perspective has been integrated across all strands of Council of Europe work and Council of Europe bodies.

### 1.1. Purpose

15. The purpose of the evaluation is to provide the Council of Europe with evidence and lessons learned on the integration of a youth perspective in the Organisation's intergovernmental work and other deliberations, in order to inform the meaningful, efficient and effective integration of a youth perspective in all relevant areas of Council of Europe work.

16. There are two key sets of primary users for the evaluation: the Council of Europe youth sector in its role to support the integration of a youth perspective across the Organisation; and all services within the standard setting, monitoring and co-operation of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities ("the Congress"), the Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights, the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law (DGI) and the Directorate General of Democracy and Human Dignity (DGII).

### 1.2. Objectives

17. The evaluation has the following three primary objectives:

- to assess the existing integration of a youth perspective in all relevant areas of Council of Europe work;
- to identify and evaluate the different opportunities and challenges to integrating a youth perspective in Council of Europe work;
- to identify good practices and optimal approaches to cater for the full range of intergovernmental work and other deliberations.

### 1.3. Context

#### **Description of the Council of Europe**

18. The Council of Europe has a long history of working with and for youth. Not only does youth participation respond to the core values of the Organisation – human rights, democracy and the rule of law, but youth engagement also represents a recurring theme within strategic documents and frameworks, as well as policy work across departments, institutional bodies and individual initiatives.

19. The Council of Europe is composed of statutory bodies (i.e. the Committee of Ministers and PACE) and other institutions (e.g. the Congress, the Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) and the Commissioner for Human Rights) that set the strategic direction of

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3. GR-PBA(2024)5, <https://search.coe.int/cm?i=0900001680aea25c>.

the Organisation, as well as several intergovernmental committees providing thematic expertise. The Council of Europe Secretariat supports the Organisation to achieve its statutory objectives by supporting the development and implementation of standards and programmes, monitoring their implementation and co-operating with other outside partners and stakeholders. The Secretariat also includes a Youth Department where expertise on youth engagement is homed.

20. The following sections provide a brief overview of how the integration of a youth perspective relates to this complex institutional landscape, starting with the work of the Youth Department, followed by a summary of the state of play beyond the youth sector.

### **The role of the Council of Europe's youth sector and its co-management system**

21. As part of the DGII, the Youth Department contributes to advancing youth policies at European, national and local levels, by elaborating guidelines, programmes and legal instruments, providing funding and educational support for international youth activities, and by disseminating expertise and knowledge on the views, life situations, aspirations and ways of expression of young Europeans. In this context, the Youth Department has been playing a crucial role in strengthening a youth perspective in Council of Europe work since the establishment of the department. The current Youth sector strategy 2030 stresses that good governance and youth participation, as well as youth mainstreaming and cross-departmental co-operation within the Organisation, are essential for the achievement of youth priorities.<sup>4</sup>

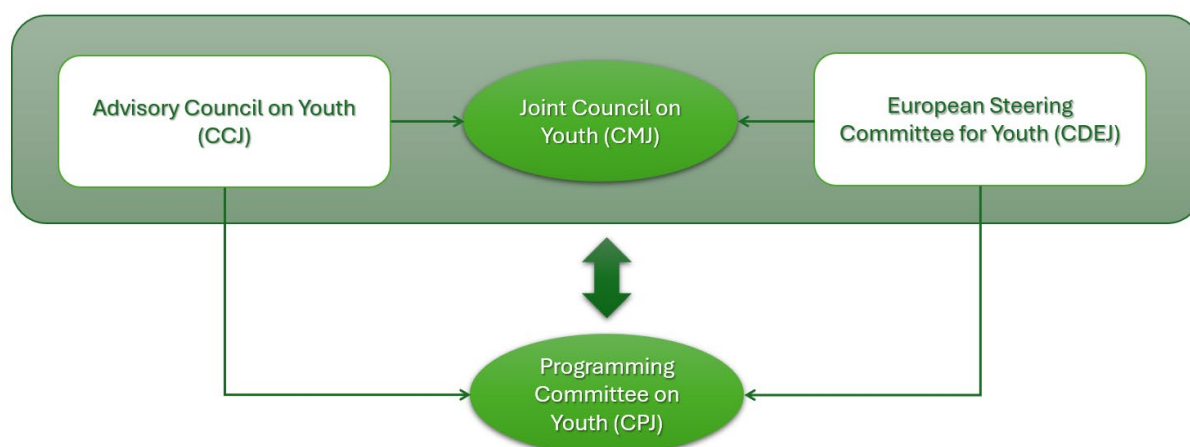
22. Within the youth sector, a well-established co-management system brings young people and government representatives together to take decisions (see Figure 1). This system allows for a decision-making process based on consensus between members of the Advisory Council on Youth (CCJ) comprising 30 representatives of non-governmental youth organisations and networks<sup>5</sup> – and the European Steering Committee for Youth (CDEJ), which brings together representatives of ministries or bodies responsible for youth matters.<sup>6</sup>

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4. Resolution CM/Res(2020)2 on the Council of Europe youth sector strategy 2030, <https://rm.coe.int/0900001680998935>.

5. [www.coe.int/en/web/youth/advisory-council-on-youth](http://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/advisory-council-on-youth).

6. [www.coe.int/en/web/youth/cdej](http://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/cdej).

**Figure 1: Youth sector co-management system**

23. The CCJ and CDEJ come together as part of the Joint Council on Youth (CMJ)<sup>7</sup> and the Programming Committee on Youth (CPJ).<sup>8</sup> While the CMJ is tasked with defining the youth sector's priorities, objectives and budgets, the CPJ establishes and monitors the programme of the European Youth Foundation (EYF)<sup>9</sup> and the European Youth Centre (EYC)<sup>10</sup>. The latter complement the work of the youth-focused statutory bodies as the two EYC venues (in Strasbourg and Budapest, respectively) provide spaces for training, meetings and other youth sector activities, and the European Youth Foundation (EYF) provides financial and educational support for European youth activities.

24. The CPJ is a body consisting of eight government representatives and eight representatives from non-governmental organisations. The CPJ supports the work of the EYF and the EYC by assessing grant applications from non-governmental organisations and deciding which activities will be hosted by the centre. As such, the CPJ represents a space where youth representatives can have a tangible influence on how Council of Europe resources are being invested.

25. While the co-management system primarily focuses on the youth sector and youth policy priorities, it represents a key reference point for the whole Organisation to access knowledge on youth rights, tools to foster youth participation, as well as a pool of youth representatives (through the CCJ) who can support the integration of a youth perspective across different sectors and bodies.

26. Lastly, the EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership<sup>11</sup> – a long-term co-operation programme between the European Commission and the Council of Europe – while primarily oriented at fostering synergies in the youth field between the two institutions, also generates knowledge through a European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy (EKYP), providing support for evidence-based youth policy making, and a Pool of European Youth Researchers (PEYR) with expertise on youth policy and youth work.<sup>12</sup>

7. [www.coe.int/en/web/youth/joint-council-on-youth](http://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/joint-council-on-youth).

8. [www.coe.int/en/web/youth/programming-committee](http://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/programming-committee).

9. [www.coe.int/en/web/youth/european-youth-foundation1](http://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/european-youth-foundation1).

10. [www.coe.int/en/web/youth/mission-and-mandate](http://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/mission-and-mandate).

11. <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/about-the-eu-council-of-europe-youth-partnership>.

12. <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261113/Youth%20Partnership%20leaflet%202024-2025.pdf/41c1224c-3de0-cdcb-7111-de6aa82ad5cc?t=1712669652889>.

## Youth perspective beyond the youth sector

27. Youth engagement is also present across policies, structures and initiatives developed by Council of Europe institutions and structures, beyond the youth sector.

28. At the strategic level, explicit references to promoting the meaningful involvement of young people in the work of the Council of Europe date back to the 1980s, with a 1985 PACE recommendation calling on the Committee of Ministers to promote efforts to engage with youth representatives within intergovernmental work.<sup>13</sup> In 1992, the Standing Conference of Local and Regional Authorities, forerunner to the Congress, developed the European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life, which was then revised in 2003, when the Committee of Ministers also adopted a recommendation on the participation of young people in local and regional life.<sup>14</sup>

29. The history of the Council of Europe includes calls to further integrate youth and/or take into account youth dimensions. A 2008 Resolution by the Committee of Ministers identified the youth dimension as a priority for all sectors of the Council of Europe to act upon.<sup>15</sup> The Strategic Framework of the Council of Europe adopted in 2020 calls for a stronger role for youth in decision making to ensure “future generations’ commitment to the protection and promotion of human rights, democratic values and the rule of law”.<sup>16</sup> The Secretary General’s Roadmap on the Council of Europe’s Engagement with Civil Society 2024-2027 also puts an emphasis on “enhancing the participation of youth civil society in view of the relevance of what a youth perspective can bring to current societal challenges”.<sup>17</sup>

30. Since 2020, consecutive presidencies of the Council of Europe have all included youth as a priority, and youth participation and engagement as core values. The German presidency (November-May 2021) referred to involving young people in future-oriented debates and deliberations as a cross-cutting theme.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, in its document outlining priorities for its presidency of the Council of Europe (May-November 2022), Ireland stated that “Ireland’s second Presidency priority is rooted in an abiding belief in the power of deliberative democracy and the necessity of youth participation”.<sup>19</sup>

31. In terms of engagement with youth and their representatives, to date, the youth presence within the Council of Europe has taken two main forms (see figure 2):

- young people as contributors to political deliberations;
- youth as contributors to intergovernmental work.

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13. Recommendation 1019 (1985), <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=15053&lang=en>.

14. CM/Rec(2004)13, <https://rm.coe.int/168071b4d6>.

15. CM/Res(2008)23, <https://search.coe.int/cm?i=09000016805d2245>.

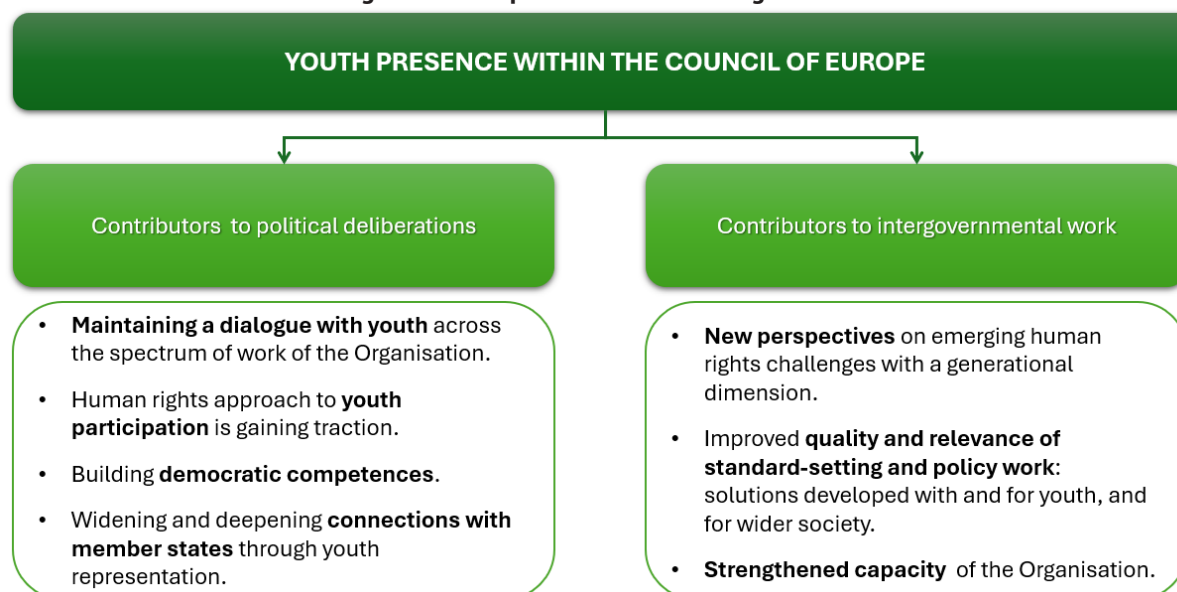
16. SG/Inf(2020)34, <https://rm.coe.int/strategic-framework-of-the-council-of-europe/1680a07810>.

17. SG/Inf(2023)28, <https://search.coe.int/cm?i=0900001680ac8ded>.

18. CM/Inf(2020)23, <https://rm.coe.int/1680a05b5f>.

19. CM/Inf(2022)14-rev5, <https://search.coe.int/cm?i=0900001680a67bc2>.

Figure 2: Youth presence within the Organisation



32. Numerous initiatives have been implemented to ensure youth representation in deliberations across different bodies. In 2014, the Congress launched the Rejuvenating Politics initiative, which gives the opportunity to one young delegate per member state each year to participate in Congress sessions and other Congress committee meetings and side events. In 2018, the Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations adopted a new Roadmap for youth participation,<sup>20</sup> which led to a call for two youth delegates representing member organisations to join plenary sessions as part of a wide range of actions to strengthen youth engagement. Lastly, the European Youth Ambassador programme, a joint initiative of the European Union and the Council of Europe, connects youth in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership regions for them to share skills and ideas and to promote European values and opportunities.<sup>21</sup>

33. Co-operation between youth representatives and PACE has gained momentum in recent years. Recent examples include consultative meetings held by committees (e.g. the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy, the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights and the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media) to provide insights for the development of reports on climate change, human rights violations and the rule of law, and the role of young people in conflict resolutions. In addition, CCJ members and youth organisations are regularly invited to take part in and contribute to PACE hearings.

34. Engagement in democratic processes is gaining traction as a fundamental right, with political bodies standing as crucial forums to promote youth participation and support active citizenship. The Rejuvenating Politics initiative is a long-standing commitment to engage with youth from across member states, foster their direct involvement in policy making and promote youth participation at European and national level. Youth are given speaking time in plenary sessions, and they provide comments and propose amendments to ongoing work. Co-operation between the CCJ

20. Roadmap for youth participation (2018-2021), <https://rm.coe.int/road-map-youth-150618-en/16808b5fbb>.

21. <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/partnership-governance/work-with-young-european-ambassadors>.

and PACE, and PACE's work towards establishing a youth participation mechanism<sup>22</sup> in particular, are also important steps forward in strengthening democratic dialogue.

35. As for other institutions, engagement with youth primarily revolves around participation in events and conferences where young people are often invited to deliver speeches to share their perspective (e.g. the Committee of Ministers), or in meetings for lobbying opportunities to share data on the impact on youth of selected issues (e.g. the Commissioner for Human Rights). Examples of interaction between youth and the European Court of Human Rights exist, albeit sporadic. These provide important precedents that might encourage further engagement and/or result in action at the national level.<sup>23</sup>

36. The work of the intergovernmental committees is also gradually becoming a focal point for engagement with youth on sector-specific work, with recognition that youth perspectives have significant actual and potential value for needs assessments, policy formulation and drafting of strategies. While levels of awareness and engagement differ among committees, there has been a clear groundswell of interest in the potential value of a structured dialogue with youth to enhance the work of the sectors. This is especially true in areas where a human rights-based approach requires explicit attention to a generational dimension (e.g. digital transformation, media, mental health), and where societal issues stand to have a current or future impact on youth (e.g. climate change).

37. The evaluation has found examples of youth involvement in at least half of the existing committees and across a broad range of sectors and topics, including beyond youth-specific issues. As with political bodies and institutions, engagement in intergovernmental work has taken different forms – from events to formal consultations, involving different groups of young people (e.g. individual youths, representatives from youth organisations, and CCJ members).

### **The Reykjavík Declaration and the reference framework: new momentum for a youth perspective**

38. While the Council of Europe has a long history of promoting youth engagement through strategic documents, policies, strategies and initiatives, the “integration of a youth perspective” represents a new, broader approach, encompassing youth mainstreaming and youth participation. This specific phrase featured for the first time in the Reykjavík Declaration, which was adopted in 2023 as the key outcome of the 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe.<sup>24</sup> The Reykjavík Declaration sets out a novel approach to the work of the Council of Europe by calling on the Organisation to include a youth perspective in its intergovernmental and other deliberations, to promote open dialogue leading to improved effectiveness of public policies and strengthened democratic institutions.

39. The Reykjavík Declaration created new momentum for a youth perspective within the Organisation. The Programme and Budget 2024-2027<sup>25</sup> states that a specific focus within the

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22. <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/29115/html>.

23. [www.coe.int/en/web/european-social-charter/processed-complaints/-/asset\\_publisher/5GEFkJmH2bYg/content/no-150-2017-european-youth-forum-yfj-v-belgium](https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-social-charter/processed-complaints/-/asset_publisher/5GEFkJmH2bYg/content/no-150-2017-european-youth-forum-yfj-v-belgium).

24. <https://rm.coe.int/4th-summit-of-heads-of-state-and-government-of-the-council-of-europe/1680ab40c1>.

25. Programme and Budget 2024-2027, <https://rm.coe.int/0900001680adec99>.

broader area of youth will be on integrating a youth perspective in the work of intergovernmental bodies and other Council of Europe deliberations as a follow-up to the Reykjavík Declaration. While the Programme and Budget 2024-2027 also foresees the possibility to reinforce the integration of a youth perspective as a priority action over the period 2024-2025,<sup>26</sup> there is no indication that extra resources will be made available for this strand of work in the coming years, and any changes to budget allocations will need to be weighed against other organisational priorities and approved by the Committee of Ministers.<sup>27</sup>

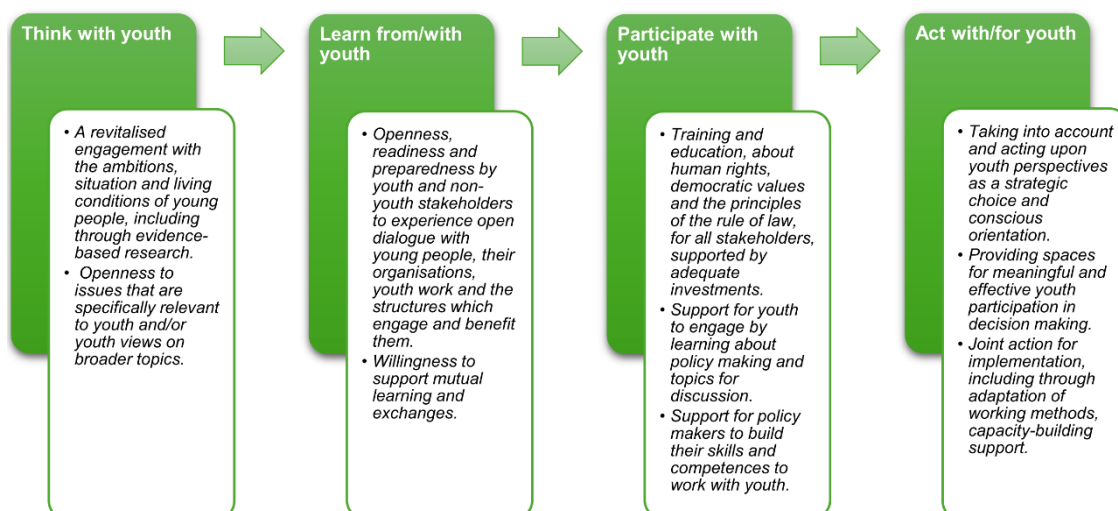
40. The Committee of Ministers endorsed the development of a reference framework for the integration of a youth perspective by the Youth Department. The scope of the reference framework was further extended during the 133rd session of the Committee of Ministers to cover both the Council of Europe and its member states, going beyond the expectations set out by the Reykjavík Declaration.

41. Led by the Youth Department, the reference framework aims to translate the Reykjavík Declaration goals into an Organisation-wide approach to support the integration of a youth perspective and to realise its potential in achieving strategic Council of Europe objectives. It serves three main purposes:

- To establish relevant definitions and concepts: these will include defining what constitutes a youth perspective, in relation to youth mainstreaming and youth participation.
- To develop guiding principles for the integration of a youth perspective: these are set to cover institutional ownership across the Council of Europe; the role of civil society; a human rights-based approach to a youth perspective; and intersectionality and approaches.
- To provide practical guidance on how a youth perspective can be integrated: these will include examples from existing practices and what should and what should not be done.

42. While the draft reference framework is under development at the time of writing, the Youth Department has identified four pillars for the integration of a youth perspective (see Figure 3). These pillars articulate both the value of a youth perspective and the conditions for its realisation.

**Figure 3: Key pillars for the integration of a youth perspective**



26. Ibid.

27. [www.coe.int/en/web/about-us/budget](http://www.coe.int/en/web/about-us/budget).

43. A working group was established in 2024 to oversee the development of a reference framework. This group includes representation from the CCJ, the CDEJ, and the European Youth Forum. Over the course of 2024, the working group oversaw the drafting of key working documents, including a draft policy paper and a road map for implementation. The group also undertook preliminary work to map the progress of implementing a youth perspective in the work of the intergovernmental committees and organised a consultative meeting in September 2024 to gather feedback from Council of Europe sectors and services on a draft table of contents for the reference framework. The drafting process took place between November 2024 and March 2025, with the finalised strategy document to be adopted and presented in the second half of 2025.

### **Relationship of the reference framework to the evaluation**

44. The work on the reference framework is being led by the Youth Department and is separate from this evaluation, which is entirely independent and carried out by Ecorys as a specialist research organisation. However, both processes have many areas of overlap and share the aim to identify possible ways forward for the integration of a youth perspective in the work of the Organisation.

45. As explained in detail in the Key Findings chapter below, the evaluation presents five key themes and relative areas for action. These have been informed by the ongoing work on the reference framework, while being rooted in the evidence gathered through the research. A key area of convergence between the evaluation and the reference framework revolves around the need for a strategic approach to the integration of a youth perspective, to cater for the diversity and complexity of the Organisation while establishing a common understanding of the way forward. As such, the reference framework has the potential to provide this strategic guidance, in particular by:

- promoting shared definitions of integrating a youth perspective;
- clarifying roles and responsibilities across the Organisation;
- providing guidance to services and sectors.

46. Links between the recommendations from this evaluation and the ongoing work on the reference framework are highlighted in the key findings. Moving forward, these areas for convergence will support the Organisation in gaining efficiencies and further strengthen co-ordination.



## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Scope

47. The evaluation covers the time period from 2020 to the end of August 2024. It concerns the actions taken to integrate a youth perspective in the work of the Council of Europe, its institutions and services, and member states across the functions of the Organisation. It pays specific attention to:

- the standard setting, monitoring and co-operation work of:
  - the institutions: PACE and the Congress;
  - the two operational directorates general: DGI and DGII;
- other Council of Europe deliberations;
- the work carried out by intergovernmental committees as well as permanent and steering committees, as relevant and feasible.

48. While the Youth Department is part of DGII and is tasked, inter alia, with supporting the integration of a youth perspective in the work of the Organisation, the focus of this evaluation is on processes and institutional bodies other than the youth sector. The work of the youth sector is being assessed separately through the CMJ's mid-term review of the Youth Strategy 2030.

### 2.2. Definitions

49. For the evaluation, a youth perspective in Council of Europe work is defined as follows.

"A dynamic process which places the needs, interests and experiences of young people at the centre of collective processes and seeks their increased legitimacy. A youth perspective cannot be achieved through individual actions or tools. It requires recurring reflection and evaluation of the ways of working, and adaption to fit the needs of young people affected in the context. Including a youth perspective can require different tools and approaches (to think, learn, participate, act) to be successfully facilitated."

50. Considering its holistic nature, the definition of a youth perspective is considered to include both youth mainstreaming and youth participation and incorporate the following elements:

- the structures and processes for youth dialogue, whether timebound or permanent, and including youth representation in committees, rapporteurs, advocacy and outreach;
- the working methods, languages, and environments within which youth dialogue takes place, and their adaptation to facilitate inclusion;
- projects and activities initiated by, with and for youth;
- the integration of diverse youth views and priorities into standard-setting, monitoring and consultation;
- the provision of support, guidance and training, and commissioning and dissemination of research both to raise awareness of best practices among organisations and institutions, and to support young people to gain a better understanding of the work of institutions and organisations;
- the integration of youth views and priorities in policy and strategy work;

- the mechanisms for reporting and accountability for actions taken by, with and on behalf of youth.

Appendix 2 includes further details on the operational definitions for this evaluation, as aligned with the ongoing work on the reference framework for the integration of a youth perspective.

### 2.3. Evaluation criteria and questions

51. This evaluation assesses the integration of a youth perspective in Council of Europe work and deliberations across five evaluation criteria, based on guidelines by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee. The detailed evaluation matrix (see Appendix 1) sets out the evaluation questions, sub-questions, indicators, and data sources. The main evaluation questions under the evaluation criteria are outlined below:

- **Relevance:** To what extent is the integration of a youth perspective in the work of the Council of Europe appropriate to fulfil the needs of the Organisation and its member states and of youth?
- **Coherence:** To what extent is the integration of a youth perspective in the work of the Council of Europe aligned across the Organisation and are time and resource expectations proportionate to the commitment of the Organisation and member states?
- **Efficiency:** To what extent is the integration of a youth perspective in the work of the Council of Europe implemented in the best way?
- **Effectiveness:** To what extent and in what ways is the integration of a youth perspective in the work of the Council of Europe enhancing results, including in terms of its own effects?
- **Gender mainstreaming and human rights-based approach:** To what extent does the integration of a youth perspective in the work of the Council of Europe contribute to gender mainstreaming and the human rights-based approach?

### 2.4. Evaluation approach

52. The evaluation was conducted using a mixed-methods approach, and in accordance with the Council of Europe Evaluation Guidelines and the Council of Europe Code of Conduct for Evaluation. It included three phases: inception, data collection and analysis, and reporting.

#### Sampling

53. The evaluation team ensured the objectivity of the report by capturing both favourable and critical positions of different stakeholders. To this end, the consultations included both stakeholders close to the youth sector (e.g. the Council of Europe Youth Department) and interlocutors not directly connected to this specific field but involved in relevant work. To the extent possible, purposeful sampling was used in the context of the interviews, surveys and case studies to ensure balanced views across consultation activities. Further details on the methodological approach can be found in Appendix 2.

#### Data collection

54. The following research methods were deployed:

- Desk research: a review of documentary evidence, with a focus on reports, deliberations, meeting minutes and transcripts relevant to the time period of the evaluation (2020–2024).
- Interviews: semi-structured interviews conducted with a wide range of stakeholders both internal and external to the Council of Europe. The interviews covered both institutional and civil society representatives, as well as stakeholders within and beyond the youth sector.
- Surveys: an online survey of Council of Europe staff members and political delegations, and a further online survey directed at youth representatives.
- Focus groups: three focus groups targeting youth with experience of engaging with the Council of Europe, including youth structures both within and external to the Organisation.

55. A total of 229 stakeholders were consulted, of whom 55 participated in the interview programme (including stakeholders interviewed for the case studies), 158 stakeholders participated in the surveys, and 16 took part in the focus groups. The document review gathered 52 documents, with 28 being screened and analysed.

56. The full set of data mapped against evaluation criteria is available in Appendix 3.

### **Data analysis**

57. Quantitative and qualitative data sources were analysed in their own right and then synthesised to arrive at balanced key findings and recommendations. Wherever possible and relevant, findings have been disaggregated by gender, proximity to youth, and stakeholder category.

### **2.5. Governance structure and quality assurance**

58. The evaluation process was guided by a reference group, who provided comments on draft documents relating to the evaluation, discussed the evaluation approach and explored the feasibility of the recommendations. The reference group was consulted on the scope of the evaluation, the approach and the methodology. Oral and written comments were provided for the evaluation inception report and the draft evaluation report.

59. The reference group consisted of representatives of the following bodies and departments:

- Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law
- Directorate General of Democracy and Human Dignity
- Directorate of Communications
- Directorate of Programme and Budget
- Secretariat of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities
- Secretariat of the Committee of Ministers
- Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe
- Private Office of the Secretary General and the Deputy Secretary General.

60. The Council of Europe adopts a rigorous quality assurance process. The inception report and the final draft report were controlled for quality by the reference group. Each draft underwent an internal quality review by the Directorate of Internal Oversight.

## 2.6. Data limitations

61. The evaluation team identified potential limitations within the evaluation approach and developed mitigation measures, as outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1: Limitations and proposed mitigation measures**

Limitations	Mitigation measures
Documentary data do not always provide detailed information on the extent to which the views of young people have been included or youth involved, and how.	Data extraction from the desk review was complemented by evidence gathered through the consultation activities to further investigate and gather information on whether and how a youth perspective was integrated.
Participation in the focus groups was lower than expected because of last-minute cancellations and a tight timeline.	The possibility of providing written inputs to the focus group questions was offered to participants who could not attend the focus groups. Both written inputs and documentary evidence were gathered.
The survey of youth representatives and youth organisations reflects a predisposition of these stakeholder groups towards advocating for greater youth inclusion and engagement.	The sources of evidence were carefully labelled and coded during the analysis, allowing to identify instances when feedback from youth was included in the report. The data were triangulated with other sources to provide a balanced overall account.
There is as yet little information on the impact of the Reykjavík Declaration on the integration of a youth perspective across different bodies and areas of work of the Council of Europe.	While the Reykjavík Declaration was only adopted in 2023, the evaluation assessed developments within a longer timeframe (2020-2024), as stated in the terms of reference for this study.

### 3. Key findings

62. This chapter is structured around five key themes, which were identified through a triangulation of the evaluation data sources and formed the basis of a presentation of emerging findings to the reference group at the end of the data collection phase. Each theme corresponds with distinct challenges and opportunities that are presented for the integration of a youth perspective in Council of Europe work, with an associated set of recommendations, culminating in a recommendation on future sustainability.

63. The thematic analysis also attends to the five evaluation dimensions. The list below identifies where these dimensions are afforded a priority focus within the report:

- operationalising a youth perspective across a large and complex organisation (relevance, coherence, effectiveness)
- building upon willingness to engage with youth (relevance, effectiveness)
- enhancing results through the integration of a youth perspective (coherence, effectiveness, efficiency)
- synergies with gender mainstreaming and a human rights-based approach (gender mainstreaming and human rights-based approach)
- future sustainability and resourcing (efficiency, effectiveness)

64. Overall, the evaluation finds a high level of stakeholder recognition of the importance and value of integrating a youth perspective in Council of Europe work, and data gathered from interviews and documentary sources attests to the ongoing efforts to engage with young people across bodies, structures and sectors. The following sections highlight main strengths and areas for improvement.

65. As the Reykjavík Declaration was only adopted in 2023, it is too early to assess steps taken to address the call to strengthen the integration of a youth perspective in Council of Europe work. While mindful of changes and/or new impetus triggered by the Reykjavík process, the evaluation examines the extent to which and how youth views have been integrated across Council of Europe bodies and sectors, beyond the Youth Department, and the impacts of this work, from 2020 onwards.

#### 3.1. Operationalising a youth perspective across a large and complex organisation

66. While there is much exemplary work on youth across the Council of Europe, a number of challenges can be observed relating to the operationalisation of a youth perspective across the Organisation. These are both horizontal: relating to co-ordination between institutions and functions, and vertical: between high-level strategies and their implementation, as explained below.

#### **Efforts to integrate a youth perspective have evolved in a somewhat unco-ordinated way**

67. The Council of Europe is a complex organisation, where different functions (standard setting, monitoring and co-operation) co-exist across and within a large variety of political and technical

bodies. Because of the diversity of structures, entities and functions, there are corresponding variations in how different sectors and bodies of the Council of Europe engage with youth and interpret the integration of a youth perspective. Beyond the Youth Department and its co-management system, engagement with youth has taken many different forms – from specific programmes to include youth representatives, to involvement in ad hoc consultations and lobby meetings, and participation in hearings and events.

68. At one level, this pluralism offers many advantages. The Organisation is in a position of relative strength regarding examples of engagement with and for youth across functions, sectors and human rights issues. At the same time, however, size and complexity pose challenges for alignment in work to integrate a youth perspective. There is not currently a unifying strategic approach to guide the integration of a youth perspective in Council of Europe work, outside of the context of the youth sector. Indeed, this situation has been acknowledged in view of the Reykjavík Declaration and the ongoing work to scope the development of a reference framework to establish guiding principles for the Organisation.

69. A particular challenge is that the integration of a youth perspective in the work of the wider Organisation has often been ad hoc rather than systematic or sustained. In most cases, the institutions and committees have engaged with youth on individual pieces of work. It is true that exemplars can be found where such pilot projects have elicited promising results (see box 1). However, the reliance on individual institutions to identify a need for, and to initiate, a youth dimension to their work has resulted in variations in the precedent for a youth perspective across the work of the wider Organisation. This model has also relied to a disproportionate extent on voluntarism, placing an over-reliance on individual institutions or committees to instigate action and resulting in an uneven representation of youth in strategic documents and plans across the work of the Organisation.

Box 1. Promising examples of youth engagement and participation include:

- The Pilot Youth Forum on artificial intelligence in healthcare organised by the Steering Committee for Human Rights in the fields of Biomedicine and Health (CDBIO) in 2023 aimed to bring the voices of youth into discussions on human rights and biomedicine. This work provided a platform for CDBIO to formalise and expand its work on youth, including co-operation with the youth sector for the development of CDBIO's upcoming new action plan, and nominating a youth rapporteur to work towards increased co-ordination with the youth sector.
- The Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics Unit (SOGIESC) collaborates extensively with INGOs representing people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex (LGBTI),<sup>28</sup> in particular those INGOs who are observers to the Committee of Experts on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics (ADI-SOGIESC). For example, regular (formal and informal) consultations with the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and Intersex (LGBTQI) Youth & Student Organisation are held. These are seen as important exchanges to ensure that the perspective

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28. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/sogi>.

of these organisations, and those of their demographics, is taken on board in SOGIESC and ADI-SOGIESC activities.

70. While less commonly found, there are also examples where actions to engage youth have been adopted in a more sustained manner. These relate primarily to work within the Organisation where youth representatives have been engaged and supported on a retained basis as part of an ongoing work programme (e.g. the Congress since 2014). Within the Congress, the Rejuvenating Politics initiative has provided a long-standing model for recruiting and training youth delegates to provide visible and co-ordinated contributions to deliberations, while connecting to civil society initiatives in their country. The advantages of such an embedded model are clear. Between 2020 and 2023, at least half of the resolutions adopted by the Congress were either directly or indirectly related to youth and/or youth-relevant issues. Furthermore, the local or regional projects developed by Congress youth delegates contribute to further widening and deepening connections between the Council of Europe and member states, by creating stronger links with promoting civic engagement at the national and local level.<sup>29</sup>

71. Youth organisations are involved in the Conference of INGOs as members, and steps have been taken to further enhance the level of youth participation in decision making (e.g. through appointing youth delegates). More recently, the Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights initiated a dialogue with youth organisations, opening up new avenues for potential influence, focused on lobby meetings and opportunities to share data on the situation of youth.

### **There are different needs and approaches across the core functions of the Organisation**

72. A further result of a youth perspective having evolved in different ways across the work of the Organisation is that the extent and level of integration varies between the core functions. To date, standard-setting has stood out as the more productive ground for the integration of youth perspectives. Conversely, monitoring and co-operation are seen as presenting additional challenges, primarily arising from their often legalistic and politically sensitive nature.

73. There is growing interest in engaging with youth in sectoral work, as evidenced by the many examples of youth involvement across a broad range of sectors and topics, including beyond youth-specific issues. Among the 20 intergovernmental committees examined, there is evidence of youth engagement in at least half, although this most commonly takes the form of individual consultative activities or events.<sup>30</sup> Evidence shows that approaches to how youth and their representative structures are involved largely vary depending on the individual committee and can broadly be grouped as follows.

- **Participation in committee meetings:** these invitations are mostly directed at CCJ members and aim to support cross-sectoral working by identifying opportunities for co-operation.

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29. Youth delegates - Rejuvenating politics, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/congress/youth-delegates>.

30. Desk research: analysis of consultative documents.

- **Engagement through observer status:** the evaluation found evidence of youth organisations obtaining observer membership in three committees,<sup>31</sup> with evidence of hesitation from other committees to grant observer status to youth civil society due to the relevance of their contribution being questioned by committee members.
- **Involvement in consultations:** managed either through formal processes or through lobby meetings and ongoing communication with relevant Council of Europe divisions and units. Depending on the specific sector, this is either the result of lobby meetings or a well-established partnership and ongoing communication, or the result of lobby meetings with relevant divisions and units. In these instances, engagement is primarily driven by the possibility to access youth organisations with specialised topical expertise that is relevant to the work of the committee. These organisations tend to then become a reference point for the relevant committee.

74. At the level of the Committee of Ministers, opportunities for youth engagement are rather more selective, with a focus on participation in events and conferences, and lobby meetings. Rapporteur groups rarely engage directly with youth organisations or representative structures (i.e. the CCJ), so participation in meetings is anecdotal and mostly confined to groups whose mandate explicitly covers youth (i.e. GR-C: education, culture, sport, youth and environment). In these instances, engagement is managed by the Secretariat of the Committee of Ministers but prompted by the Youth Department, which provides mostly written input to debates to respond to relevant agenda items.

Box 2. In 2021, the Rapporteur Group on Education, Culture, Sport, Youth and Environment held a thematic discussion on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in the fields of education, culture, heritage, environment and youth. The meeting saw the involvement of the chairpersons of several DGII steering committees, as well as the CDEJ and the CCJ to bring in a youth perspective to the discussion and raise the awareness of the GR-C and other sectors of the Organisation.<sup>32</sup>

75. Different forms and levels of integration across the functions of the Organisation are not necessarily problematic. As shown above, the matching of mode to context is important to ensure that participation is appropriate. Nonetheless, the breadth of this work illustrates the need for careful prioritisation to hear youth voices at key decision-making points.

### **Interinstitutional co-operation is improving, but is not yet Organisation-wide**

76. Alongside youth engagement being somewhat ad hoc and timebound, challenges arise from a lack of co-ordination (or indeed collaboration) and knowledge transfer between different parts of the Organisation. Limited co-ordination has somewhat constrained the impact of positive efforts to integrate a youth perspective, e.g. through pilot projects and test beds, hampering innovation and limiting the possibility to scale-up and sustain good practices. Stakeholders commonly reported a low level of awareness of work undertaken to integrate a youth perspective

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31. Steering Committee on Education (CDEDU), ADI-SOGIESC, and the Reykjavík Committee on Environment and Human Rights.

32. [www.coe.int/en/web/youth/-/committee-of-ministers-debates-on-covid-19-impact-on-youth-with-cdej-and-ccj-chairs](https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/-/committee-of-ministers-debates-on-covid-19-impact-on-youth-with-cdej-and-ccj-chairs).



in other parts of the Organisation, with missed opportunities to build on what has gone before and a risk of duplicated effort.

77. There are signs of movement towards greater co-ordination, albeit selectively and relating mostly to the work of institutions that have an established agenda for the integration of a youth perspective, but these interinstitutional efforts are not supported by an overarching strategic approach.

Box 3. Positive examples of interinstitutional co-operation on youth include:

- Co-operation between the Congress and youth organisations and representative structures (i.e. the CCJ), with youth delegates being the first point of reference for this institution.
- Congress members and youth delegates, CCJ members, and selected youth organisations collaborating on an ongoing review of the European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life.<sup>33</sup>
- PACE has a long history of engaging with the youth sector through the CCJ. This engagement has focused on a wide range of topics, both specific to youth (e.g. education) and non-youth specific (e.g. migration, environment, inequalities). However, the recent resolution goes a step further with proposals for a PACE youth participation mechanism. This follows exchanges with the CCJ over the past three years to establish a joint programme of work.<sup>34</sup>

78. A further dimension relates to the concentration of expertise for youth matters within specific institutions. This has resulted in a somewhat uneven distribution of youth expertise across the Organisation, meaning that not all Council of Europe bodies or committees outside of the youth sector are aware of the types of guidance, support and training that are available, or how to access it.

79. Not all sectors or institutions engage with young people, youth organisations or the Youth Department and its co-management system. This has drawbacks both in terms of meeting needs and in maintaining quality and consistency of Council of Europe work with youth, in cases that have not benefited from specialist oversight. It was noted that support from the Youth Department is typically instigated by request, meaning that prior motivation is necessary and that those institutions who already see the value of youth engagement are more predisposed to seek specialist input. It was proposed that more clearly communicated offers of expertise and support might have a wider appeal across the Organisation, alongside more readily available non-technical materials and guidance documentation.

80. At the same time, there is a need to avoid placing unsustainable demand on the Youth Department, and to ensure that the latter is adequately supported to lead the integration of a youth perspective across the Organisation, including through its co-management system. The Youth Department is clearly seen as the driving force for the integration of a youth perspective in the

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33. Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life, <https://rm.coe.int/1680702379>.

34. <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/29115/html>.

Organisation. Other sectors look at the Youth Department to receive guidance, access to relevant youth representatives to engage with, and tap into expert knowledge on how such engagement should take place. However, the onus is often on the youth sector to identify spaces for engagement, making it difficult for the Youth Department to prioritise opportunities across all sectors, in the context of a large and complex organisation. It was recognised that this model is set to come under further strain with any potential scaling-up of efforts to integrate a youth perspective across the wider Organisation. This raises a need to address both how expertise is sought, and the respective roles of the Youth Department and other parts of the Organisation with youth expertise (e.g. the Congress, PACE) within a strategic approach.

### **The Reykjavík Declaration has raised awareness, but there is a gap between the high-level mandate and its operationalisation**

81. The Reykjavík Declaration and the subsequent work on the development of the reference framework has clearly reinforced interest in a youth perspective across Council of Europe sectors and institutions. This is evidenced by the corresponding increase in requests for Youth Department support and more opportunities for youth representatives to engage in events and consultations. For instance, a meeting of all the chairs of intergovernmental committees was held in early 2024 to discuss the integration of a youth perspective, building upon the impetus brought by the Reykjavík Declaration. Stakeholders interviewed for the evaluation were generally aware of these developments.

82. In other cases, the greater prioritisation of a youth agenda signalled in the Reykjavík Declaration has helped to validate work already in progress and to build momentum. For example, PACE's aspirations to strengthen a youth perspective in the work of the Assembly started in 2021, with a first motion for a resolution on establishing a "youth partner" status initiated by the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media.<sup>35</sup> While this pre-dates the 4th Summit, the declaration has undoubtedly provided significant additional political support. The net result has been the adoption of a PACE resolution calling for a mechanism aimed at ensuring that "a youth perspective is systematically taken into account in its [Council of Europe's] deliberations".<sup>36</sup> The resolution proposes a range of measures to be implemented, ranging from nominating youth rapporteurs within general committees, with the responsibility to raise a youth perspective in relevant discussions and liaise with the youth sector.

83. The drafting process for the reference framework has also acted as a space for sectors beyond the Youth Department to start gaining a better understanding of what youth participation and mainstreaming entails, as well as an opportunity to showcase existing work across the Organisation. The guiding principles in the framework are central to the integration of a youth perspective across the Organisation. Moreover, there was considerable interest in peer learning in the wake of successful test cases for the integration of a youth perspective, which have served to demonstrate what can be done in the more technical work of committees and sectors.

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35. PACE (2021), Establishment of a "youth partner" status with the Parliamentary Assembly, <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/29115#trace-1>.

36. PACE (2024), Strengthening the youth perspective in the work of the Parliamentary Assembly, <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/33634>.

84. Nonetheless, interviewees showed an awareness that the momentum provided by the Reykjavík Declaration is somewhat fragile. The declaration embodies a high level of political aspiration that is as yet unmatched at an operational level across the Organisation given the uneven historical development of work to integrate a youth perspective. Efforts to galvanise support for an Organisation-wide approach have centred on a core group of institutions and committees offering their support to the working group tasked with the development of a reference framework, but the realisation of the objectives in the framework are dependent on the ability to galvanise a wider base of support.

**Recommendation 1:** For the Council of Europe to adopt an overarching strategic approach to ensure the integration of a youth perspective across the Organisation. A strategic approach should:

- articulate a shared understanding of the role and value of a youth perspective, building on the goals outlined within the Reykjavík Declaration;
- address different contexts and mandates, with attention to proportionality;
- identify the roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders within the Organisation.

This strategic approach should be implemented through the reference framework as the principal mechanism for implementing the youth elements of the Reykjavík Declaration.

#### **Explanation/rationale:**

The evidence illustrates the scale and complexity of youth perspectives in Council of Europe work and the barriers this can pose to a coherent Organisation-wide response to youth. A strategic approach would address this challenge by establishing a set of shared values and objectives that overarch the work of different departments and committees, while respecting the need for differentiation in the specific contexts and methods used to engage youth across the Organisation (e.g. research, advocacy, consultations, task groups, and contributions to deliberations or strategy development).

A strategic approach should also remove ambiguity around roles and responsibilities of different key stakeholders within the Organisation. A proportionality principle would ensure that expectations are guided by rights and best interests of youth, while avoiding tokenism; for example, by acknowledging that youth views should be sought in proportion to the legal and technical nature of the work in hand, and in accordance with responsibilities afforded within representative processes and deliberations.

A strategic approach has clear advantages in building directly on the reference framework as a mechanism for the integration of a youth perspective as set out within the Reykjavík Declaration. While the full implementation of the framework is beyond the scope of this evaluation to assess, the evidence indicates that the draft concepts and principles have largely been well received and should continue to guide this work at an Organisation level beyond the current working group mandate.

#### **Resource dimensions:**

The availability of human and financial resources for the implementation of a strategic approach must be determined by the Council of Europe within the means of the Organisation. The resource implications should be established ahead of the 2025 Programme and Budget mid-term review.

As it would not be feasible for the Youth Department to take sole responsibility for implementing a strategic approach, a broad base of support is required from across the Organisation. In particular, careful consideration should be given to responsibilities for governance and strategy-setting, beyond the current mandate of the CMJ working group on the integration of a youth perspective.

### 3.2. Building upon willingness to engage with youth

85. In general terms, the integration of a youth perspective as a long-term goal of the Council of Europe is widely supported by the secretariat, political bodies and member states. Stakeholders recognised the importance of engaging with youth in a meaningful way, through processes and approaches that can bring added value both to the work of the Organisation and young people themselves.

86. However, despite this broad acknowledgement of the relevance and importance of the integration of a youth perspective in Council of Europe work, reservations persist. These are rooted in political, co-ordination and legitimacy concerns, which affect buy-in from across the whole Organisation. They also relate to varying levels of direct experience of engagement with youth. These factors are also compounded by the limited resources available to integrate a youth perspective.

#### **Need for political support across all levels within the Organisation**

87. Within the secretariat, as outlined above, existing examples of engagement with youth across sectors, while widespread, often are dependent on championing from individuals within departments and units. Single initiatives have often proven successful, resulting in increased support for the integration of a youth perspective and new opportunities for engagement. However, long-term change within secretariat practices beyond the youth sector is seen by stakeholders as requiring buy-in and a strong mandate from the leadership of the Organisation, namely the Private Office of the Secretary General and the Deputy Secretary General, down to heads of departments. It is at this level that services can be instructed to carry out more proactive work to integrate a youth perspective, aligned with departmental strategic priorities and with resources assigned through the Programme and Budget.

Box 4. In January 2024, the Private Office of the Secretary General and the Deputy Secretary General organised a meeting of the chairs of all the steering committees across the Organisation. This was a space for the former CCJ chair to engage with other non-youth focused structures. It provided an important opportunity to raise awareness and initiate or strengthen dialogue between the CCJ and the other steering committees.

88. Across political bodies, there is good support for youth engagement, as the work of elected representatives intrinsically concerns youth. This has led to greater space for voices within parliamentary processes. The youth delegate model has grown over the past 10 years and is considered as a good practice across the Organisation. There is an ongoing push from the Congress to expand the reach of the youth delegates by encouraging their participation in events and meetings beyond the Congress. Furthermore, this model is inspiring other political bodies, as

evidenced by ongoing discussions on a youth participation mechanism in PACE, which could potentially include a delegate programme.

89. However, this is less evident within national delegations, where the place for youth is not fully defined. For instance, while youth delegates are regularly given speaking time during Congress sessions and their involvement is appreciated and supported, the degree of their involvement in their respective delegations varies depending on the approach of each individual country. Without guidance on how youth views are sought and included, the extent to which youth delegates can meaningfully contribute is heavily dependent on both the willingness and openness of delegation members, and on approaches to youth participation at the member-state level. To tackle this diversity in approaches to the involvement of youth delegates, in 2025 the Congress Bureau started gathering good practices to share with all national delegations.

90. Similarly, different understandings and approaches to youth participation and mainstreaming across member states might present challenges to the operationalisation of a youth perspective. The Reykjavík Declaration shows that youth is an uncontested priority, and a group of supportive member states has driven and continues to drive the youth agenda forward within the Council of Europe. However, general support for youth engagement translates into different interpretations with regards to the extent to which and how youth should be involved in the Council of Europe's work (e.g. as opposed to the national level) and how (e.g. with regards to the different stages of policy making, or topics that would benefit from a youth perspective).

91. Furthermore, the inclusion of a youth perspective beyond the youth sector exposes other related political sensitivities which may affect support. For instance, engaging with youth is intrinsically related to not only safeguarding but also ensuring appropriate civic space for their representative structures (i.e. youth organisations). Integrating youth views in policy making may also mean tackling politically sensitive issues that are commonly championed by youth, such as the climate crisis and sexual and reproductive rights.

92. Lastly, even among those who are most supportive of the inclusion of a youth perspective, a concern is that increased engagement with youth might generate unattainable expectations among young people with regards to the extent to which their views can be mainstreamed in policies and strategies. This sometimes acts as a deterrent, fuelling scepticism towards providing further opportunities for engagement because of the risk of perceived tokenism in instances where expectations cannot be met.

Box 5. Some stakeholders noted that engagement through the European Court of Human Rights can be potentially risky, as negative outcomes of complaints might discourage further engagement. Complaints submitted by youth to ensure member states are held accountable for violating their rights have the potential to provide visibility to a youth perspective on specific topics. However, in instances where these cases are not deemed admissible or not decided in favour of youth, there is a risk of a negative impact on youth's willingness to bring forward further applications.

For example, the case of *Duarte Agostinho and Others v. Portugal and Others*<sup>37</sup> had considerable resonance in the media as an example of youth activists calling on governments to take adequate

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37. Application No. 39371/20, <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-233261>.

measures to tackle the climate crisis as an issue affecting current and future generations of youth. The case was ultimately deemed inadmissible by the Court, causing disappointment among youth civil society.

### Recognising youth as legitimate, competent and equal partners

93. There is broad support within the whole Organisation to engage with youth. Young people and youth organisations are generally considered to bring positive contributions to debates and consultations. Their input is seen as helpful to better understand the impact of specific issues on their lived experience, as well as to promote intergenerational perspectives and assess the potential impact of policies on youth and what this impact could look like. Youth representatives' calls for increased opportunities for youth participation are also recognised as crucial to ensure youth continue to have a seat at the table.

94. Nonetheless, institutional views about the relevance, competency and legitimacy of youth perspectives have quite strongly shaped opportunities for young people to have a voice.

95. Young people are not always perceived as legitimate actors, as concerns arise around their:

- **Representativeness:** the extent to which young people involved in Council of Europe work in different capacities (i.e. individual young people, youth organisations, youth representatives) can represent the voice of youth is sometimes questioned. For example, in the context of political work, youth's place in contributing alongside elected members (e.g. within the Congress or PACE) may sometimes be questioned by individual members, albeit not across the board. Within sectoral work, the extent to which youth voices can represent the diversity of youth remains an area of concern, as some stakeholders point out that engagement opportunities are usually taken up by young people who are already involved in policy making in some capacity.
- **Technical knowledge:** greater scepticism towards the value of a youth perspective can also be found in relation to young people's technical knowledge and competences. This predominantly relates to the work of intergovernmental committees which focuses on specific topics (e.g. anti-corruption, justice, data protection), where technical expertise is deemed as a stricter requirement to contribute. For example, this was seen as being the case for the Committee of Legal Advisers on Public International Law, whose work is seen as highly technical because of its legal focus,<sup>38</sup> the Committee on Counter-Terrorism as its deliberations are not open to the general public and cover matters predominantly under the competence of specialised national authorities,<sup>39</sup> and the Committee of Experts on Criminal Asset Recovery, given its topical focus which is not considered directly relevant for youth.<sup>40</sup>

96. To address these challenges, it is necessary to establish context. A lack of perceived legitimacy for a youth presence alongside elected members can be countered with reference to the democratic deficit. Youth do not hold voting rights beyond the co-management system and their exclusion from decision making runs contrary to the fundamental democratic principles of the Organisation.

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38. [www.coe.int/en/web/cahdi](http://www.coe.int/en/web/cahdi).

39. [www.coe.int/en/web/counter-terrorism/cdct](http://www.coe.int/en/web/counter-terrorism/cdct).

40. [www.coe.int/en/web/cdpc/pc-rac](http://www.coe.int/en/web/cdpc/pc-rac).

97. Questions of representativeness also require attention to who or what is being represented. In the context of the Congress, representativity is achieved through the inclusion of 46 youth delegates, with the selection panel seeking to ensure a wide range of backgrounds within each cohort. In the context of policy development on specific issues, youth may hold legitimacy by way of their prior expertise (e.g. engagement with youth from the International Association of Young Lawyers in deliberative work to inform the Convention on the Protection of Professional Lawyers), or their lived experience (e.g. the European Committee on Legal Co-operation consulted with children and youth who had gone through parental separation to inform work on parental separation in court proceedings).

98. Stakeholders identified an important distinction in this regard between youth representing civil society, young professionals, and young politicians, including youth who may be employees within the Council of Europe. These designations of youth each have specific needs and potential contributions to make to Council of Europe work. Matching the context for participation with the right profile and briefing for youth is therefore critical. Quite often, these successful cases have positively challenged expectations as the box below serves to illustrate. Conversely, instances where inputs from youth were deemed too generic have sometimes resulted in a setback and reinforced negative perceptions. These cases were often preceded by a lack of groundwork to brief participants, mismatching, and/or tokenism.

Box 6. The Steering Committee for Human Rights oversaw a consultative exercise to inform a programme of work on human rights and the environment. Committee members included senior legal experts with decades of experience in relation to the European Court of Human Rights. While a youth perspective was not initially sought, the contributions of youth representatives at a seminar on human rights and the environment resonated with the committee. It was recognised that the intergenerational dimension was highly significant. Following this interaction, youth representatives were invited to provide inputs ahead of drafting.

### **A priority to build trust through informal dialogue with youth**

99. There are contrasting motivations to engage with youth across the Organisation, from politicians and diplomats to members of the secretariat. While some of these differences arise from the nature of the work and professional roles, others are more firmly rooted in organisational culture. As noted above, the Organisation is yet to achieve a systematic integration of the youth voice with youth perspectives being sought through different modalities and approaches. Despite this diversity, one unifying element is that opportunities for engagement rarely provide spaces for youth and their adult counterparts to reflect and discuss how to work together to meet both youth and organisational needs.

100. Beyond the youth sector, where opportunities to exchange with youth and their representatives are provided on a regular basis both in a variety of formal and informal settings (e.g. co-management system, training opportunities, events, consultations, youth-led projects), engagement with youth mostly happens through formal processes.

101. More specifically, both the desk research and the consultations have highlighted that exchanges are primarily held either through highly administrative and bureaucratic processes (e.g. participation in formal committee meetings as observers; speeches in plenary settings or hearings;

written or oral contributions to consultations) or high-level events and conferences. While these provide important platforms for youth to share their views, they are not necessarily conducive spaces for trust and partnership building, as they do not allow adults and youth to familiarise with each other and exchange ideas on how to work together.

102. However, there is also evidence that, where these exchanges have been possible, they have contributed to building stronger co-operation by supporting both Council of Europe structures and bodies, and youth, to build a stronger understanding of their respective needs and how to address these. For example, this has been the case for the Congress, where the youth delegate programme, perceived with scepticism by some members not accustomed to working with young people when the initiative was first launched in 2014, is now considered a good practice to be potentially scaled up or replicated across the Organisation. Similarly, initiatives such as the CDBIO's pilot youth forum, beyond providing a space to exchange with youth on specific topics, stand out as milestones in gaining an understanding of the value of integrating a youth perspective and how to best work with youth.

Box 7. The Gender Equality Commission (GEC)'s 2024 Annual Conference acted as a space for the commission to learn about youth priorities related to its work, leading to a renewed commitment to co-operate with youth.

A follow-up meeting between the GEC and the CCJ took place after the conference to explore potential opportunities for collaboration. This included the participation of the CCJ chair in the 26th GEC plenary meeting, as well as an opportunity for the CCJ to provide feedback on the deliverables included in the GEC terms of reference 2024-2027, to identify areas that would benefit from a youth perspective and propose ways to include youth voices. The possibility was also discussed to include a youth perspective in the biennial review of the implementation of the Gender Equality Strategy with CCJ involvement.

Since this meeting, both committee and secretariat members have actively participated in events organised by the CCJ, while CCJ representatives have been present in all meetings of the GEC's subordinate bodies.

103. As such, these opportunities to directly exchange with young people can strongly shape stakeholders' views on young people's capabilities to meaningfully and effectively contribute to policy making. Providing increased opportunities for mutual learning by creating spaces for intergenerational work plays a key role in the formation of attitudes towards young people and in debunking assumptions about their interests and capabilities. Furthermore, having access to opportunities for engagement also benefits youth and their representative structures as it helps them gain a better understanding of policy making, and ways of working across the Organisation, helping to better manage expectations.

**Recommendation 2:** To support and encourage opportunities for mutual learning between Council of Europe staff, representations and youth through existing human capital, including:

- scaling non-formal opportunities to listen and exchange with youth;
- developing closer links with grass-roots projects in member states.



**Explanation/rationale:**

The evaluation underlines the importance of intergenerational work in the formation of attitudes towards youth and assumptions about their interests and capabilities. Outside of the Youth Department, experiences of youth engagement and dialogue vary considerably. This poses an obstacle to setting appropriate expectations for both Council of Europe staff and for youth, and places undue pressure on “high stakes” moments of engagement in formal consultative exercises.

Creating and supporting opportunities for non-formal engagement in and around the work of the wider Organisation has the potential to lay the foundations for more meaningful and sustained dialogue with youth, while also calibrating young people’s expectations of Council of Europe work. This is consistent with the reference framework guiding principles: Think with Youth, Learn with Youth, Participate with Youth, and Act with Youth.

**Resource dimensions:**

Non-formal learning opportunities should not be viewed as a substitute for the more resource-intensive work of engaging youth in formalised standard-setting and consultations. However, as a means of building skills and capacities for participation, the Organisation is uniquely placed with the reach it has with member states and into established platforms. As such, the creation of non-formal learning opportunities is obtainable largely within existing resources and at the discretion of the institutions.

The evaluation shows tangible opportunities for non-formal learning in and around the appointment of elected parliamentarians to engage in dialogue with youth and understand their needs and perspectives, and to widen participation by staff from institutions and departments outside of the Youth Department in existing opportunities such as the Together Have Your Say! 50:50 training-seminar – Youth; the Summer University organised by the Steering Committee on Youth, and events with a strong youth advocacy presence such as the World Forum for Youth. This work could be supported by voluntary contributions (in kind) in the form of staff time for interested parties.

Further steps might be taken to connect the work of the Council of Europe in intergovernmental forums with equivalent actions in member states. The youth delegates model provides an example of twinning youth participation in Council of Europe deliberations with the execution of grass-roots projects at a national or sub-national scale. These principles might be deployed in other areas of Council of Europe work to explicitly connect with member-state agendas and to bring a wider tier of stakeholders into view, capitalising on the networks overseen by the Advisory Council on Youth.

**3.3. Enhancing results through the integration of a youth perspective**

104. Overall, the integration of a youth perspective is considered to positively contribute to improving the quality and consistency of the work of the Council of Europe, as well as on the reputation of the Organisation as a frontrunner in promoting youth participation and engagement compared to other European and international institutions.

**Impact on the quality and consistency of Council of Europe work**

105. Impact on the work of the Council of Europe can be observed in different contexts, leading to different results for youth and for the Organisation.

106. The evidence of impactful work is generally clearer in those instances when youth are involved in formalised processes (e.g. working groups, in-person and online consultations) linked to policy making (e.g. for the development of a resolution, a recommendation or a strategy). In these instances, contributions are provided in the context of a specific initiative, with a clear purpose, and leading to a specific outcome. Consultations are also an opportunity for young people and their representative structures and organisations to provide specific input, data and evidence on a given topic, allowing them to further tailor their contribution. This also helps the Organisation to build trust and confidence in youth as experts, beyond the youth sector. In this sense, it is within intergovernmental work that the integration of a youth perspective is proving most effective.

Box 8. Examples of consultation processes that have seen co-operation between youth and sectors beyond the Youth Department include the following.

- The development, in 2023, of the Committee of Ministers Recommendation on the active political participation of national minority youth,<sup>41</sup> for which youth representatives, as well as young people from a minority background, were given the opportunity to work with the Steering Committee on Anti-Discrimination and Inclusion (CDADI) to provide input through focus groups.<sup>42</sup>
- The development of the Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence,<sup>43</sup> which saw the involvement of CCJ members in the drafting process, together with the Committee on Artificial Intelligence.
- As part of the monitoring of the European Charter of Regional or Minority Languages,<sup>44</sup> commenced in 2019, the Committee of Experts of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages adapted consultation materials to include questions investigating a youth perspective on the promotion of regional minority languages. This was a learning opportunity for the committee to evaluate the potential implications of the charter for youth, particularly in balancing the needs of younger and older generations, especially in the media field, and to understand the importance of involving youth organisations as key stakeholders in monitoring processes.

107. Instances of positive results are also apparent where youth organisations have assumed observer status in committees. Youth representatives greatly value the opportunity to exchange, and committee members acknowledge the contribution of youth in tailoring policy outputs. For example, the CDEDU's ongoing engagement with youth organisations that have a specific expertise on students' rights and mobility was an important factor in the development of the Education Strategy 2024-2030.<sup>45</sup> Through regular involvement in committee work, youth organisations with overlapping constituencies and shared expertise also have the opportunity to better align their messaging, resulting in greater influence.

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41. Council of Europe (2023) Recommendation CM/Rec(2023)9 adopted by the Committee of Ministers,

<https://rm.coe.int/recommendation-cm-rec-2023-9-of-the-committee-of-ministers-to-member-s/1680acfc8>.

42. [www.coe.int/en/web/committee-antidiscrimination-diversity-inclusion/-/member-states-should-facilitate-the-active-political-participation-of-national-minority-youth-says-new-recommendation](https://www.coe.int/en/web/committee-antidiscrimination-diversity-inclusion/-/member-states-should-facilitate-the-active-political-participation-of-national-minority-youth-says-new-recommendation).

43. Council of Europe (2024), Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law, <https://rm.coe.int/1680afae3c>.

44. Council of Europe (1992), European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, <https://rm.coe.int/1680695175>.

45. Council of Europe (2023), Education Strategy 2024-2030 – “Learners first” Education for Today's and Tomorrow's Democratic Societies, <https://rm.coe.int/education-strategy-2024-2030-26th-session-council-of-europe-standing-c/1680abee81>.

108. Furthermore, pilot projects have served as an opportunity to experiment and innovate, by allowing sectors to test the waters and engage with youth through individual, one-off consultation opportunities. These have served as test beds to assess the value of youth views, test methodologies and engagement approaches and evaluate outcomes at an organisational and sectoral level. Moreover, these projects have provided opportunities to learn with youth on a smaller scale in the work of particular committees or sectors. These exercises have worked well to demonstrate the potential value of a youth perspective in context, serving as a catalyst for further engagement tailored to the sector in question and strengthening the capacity of the Organisation to do so. Generally, these forms of engagement have borne positive fruit for:

- the sector involved through gaining new understanding of youth perspectives;
- participating young people by feeling involved and having their views valued;
- the Organisation as a whole, by providing an opportunity for capacity building and upskilling.

109. Lastly, regardless of how engagement with youth takes place, the integration of a youth perspective is considered important to further democratise policy making and ensure an intergenerational approach towards human rights issues and policy work more broadly. Solutions developed with and for youth are generally considered to better resonate with the needs of citizens and therefore more likely to have a direct impact on society as a whole.

110. However, the involvement of young people and representative structures is often reactive, with sectors and bodies reaching out to or engaging with youth on an established agenda or priority topics. In this sense, it is only within the Youth Department, through its co-management system, that young representatives have a direct influence on policy making from conceptualisation to implementation.

111. For instance, youth delegates are regularly given speaking time, and their contribution to the Congress is generally appreciated and considered to provide added value to debates and exchanges in plenary sessions and committees. However, their input on agenda-setting processes could be further increased in the future as examples of youth delegates' involvement in driving the agenda of the Congress are not as common. There is a need for further bilateral lobbying, particularly within political bodies and delegations, to ensure youth agendas become more prominent.

Box 9. In 2023, youth delegates were invited by the Congress' Social Inclusion Committee (former Current Affairs Committee) to prepare a document outlining topics of relevance to youth, to be discussed at future sessions of the Congress. This led to the drafting of a report on affordable and adequate housing (including for young people), one of the topics identified by the youth delegates.

112. Stakeholders noted the potential for further bilateral lobbying, particularly within political bodies and delegations, to ensure youth agendas become more prominent. Further potential was also identified to co-ordinate lobbying efforts between existing youth structures (e.g. the CCJ) and PACE, where formal mechanisms to ensure ongoing engagement with youth are not yet in place, to pool expertise and to maximise impact. This could include planning of meetings around PACE plenary sessions to ensure more direct opportunities for co-ordination and input. The current lack

of engagement in the early stages of new political cycles represents a missed opportunity, as youth tend to be consulted when priorities have already been formulated and space to exert influence is limited. Early engagement, when newly elected representatives might be more open to championing new topics, was identified as a priority to establish a dialogue from the beginning and influence programmes before these are set in stone.

113. In most instances, the integration of a youth perspective is sought through engaging with young people and youth organisations through events, meetings and conferences. These act as important spaces for sectors across the Organisation to further build their understanding of youth lived experiences, and of the role and value of integrating youth views. In this context, while the integration of a youth perspective is still in its infancy, events and conferences have a positive impact on awareness raising, with the potential to lead to greater collaboration and more concrete results in the medium to long term.

Box 10. Examples of the impact of the involvement of youth in events and conferences include the following:

- 18th Conference of Ministers Responsible for Sport: <sup>46</sup> member states' delegations participating in the conference were given the opportunity to include a youth delegate. Furthermore, a youth side event was organised to provide a space for young people and representatives to discuss priorities and views related to sport. <sup>47</sup> This was a learning experience for both youth and ministerial representatives leading to a greater understanding of youth views and the importance of youth engagement.
- 14th meeting of the Collaborative Platform on Social and Economic Rights: <sup>48</sup> the events allowed participants to explore the potential of the European Social Charter and other human rights instruments in safeguarding young people's social and economic rights. This was a first opportunity for the Social Rights Department to engage with youth, which led to increased awareness of the potential of the European Social Charter to promote and protect young people's social rights.

114. While representing a promising step, involvement in events and conferences is generally less impactful in terms of concrete results and outcomes related to policy making. Many young people see these as interesting spaces for discussion and an important opportunity for visibility but question their impact as they are often attended by those who are already championing the youth cause, undermining the potential for longer-term results. Similarly, some consulted stakeholders see events and conferences as potential avenues for more tokenistic approaches, as they provide a space where young people are often seen, but not always heard.

115. Yet, despite their perceived limited effectiveness, events and conferences currently represent the majority of opportunities for engagement with youth across the Organisation, beyond the youth sector. This may lead to young people feeling that their views are not sufficiently taken into account. In addition, it risks doubling efforts as low impact at events means that youth and their organisations may need to invest additional resources to organise lobby missions to Strasbourg.

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46. [www.coe.int/en/web/sport/18th-conference-of-ministers](http://www.coe.int/en/web/sport/18th-conference-of-ministers).

47. <https://rm.coe.int/msl18-02rev2-draft-programme-8-10-october-2024/1680b13809>.

48. [www.coe.int/en/web/european-social-charter/coe-fra-ennhri-equinet](http://www.coe.int/en/web/european-social-charter/coe-fra-ennhri-equinet).

Lobby missions are seen as a comparatively more effective means to advocate for youth towards institutions and political delegations.

116. On balance, a number of factors can be identified that facilitate meaningful participation of youth in Council of Europe work, as actions have been more impactful where:

- youth are selected to match the aims and expertise for the matter in hand, including whether this requires lived experience, specific thematic expertise, or whether their views are sought in the capacity of representing an organisation or constituency;
- youth are involved in the framing and development of policy and strategy work from the outset and they have a meaningful contribution to the agenda and themes for discussion, in dialogue with staff, in instances where their views are sought;
- moments of engagement are preceded by preparatory measures to build trust and familiarise participants, while suitable adaptations are made to the environment within which engagement takes place and to the conduct of proceedings;
- the conduct of work with youth puts an emphasis on mutual exchange and intergenerational dialogue, avoiding a reliance on testimonials or generic advocacy.

**Recommendation 3:** To strengthen quality assurance and access to supporting tools and materials, including:

- an enhanced quality assurance and brokerage role for the Youth Department, in particular with regards to supporting intergovernmental work;
- collated examples of tools and materials for institutions and departments to support the integration of a youth perspective as relevant, and to operationalise the reference framework.

#### **Explanation/rationale:**

The evaluation underlines the importance of high-quality work to engage youth and to integrate a youth perspective, alongside the risk of doing harm where actions are tokenistic or poorly planned. There is high demand among stakeholders for guidance materials, contextualised examples and access to peer support to integrate a youth perspective at an operational level where relevant.

An overarching strategic approach to high-quality work with and for youth also requires suitable oversight arrangements. Notwithstanding finite capacity (see Theme 5 below), the Youth Department is well placed to continue to offer support and alternatives with respect to “quality” across the wider Organisation, and signposting to good practices, while respecting the expertise held within institutions that have developed a specific approach in their context (e.g. PACE, the Congress).

#### **Resource dimensions:**

- a) An enhanced quality assurance and brokerage role for the Youth Department

This role might include continuing steps to offer advice bilaterally at the request of committees or institutions requiring advice or feedback, while working with the Advisory Council on Youth to broker access to youth and youth organisations providing specific expertise. Periodic meetings,

such as those convened in the consultation phase for the reference framework, might also prove cost effective in bringing likeminded key stakeholders together multilaterally.

Given the challenging financial circumstances faced by the Organisation approaching the mid-term Programme and Budget review, the evaluation evidence indicates that it may fall to the Youth Department to determine what level of support is possible in the absence of additional funds secured.

#### b) Guidelines for institutions and departments

The CMJ working group on the integration of a youth perspective has overseen initial work to map available research and guidance and to cross-reference key materials within the reference framework. Looking ahead, a repository might be created to include resources available from the Youth Department and EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership<sup>49</sup> alongside research and case studies produced by member states to provide inspiration and practical tools for the wider Organisation. Over time, this might be augmented (on a voluntary basis) with case study examples drawn from the different sectors.

### Monitoring and feedback to support long-term impact

117. A current lack of feedback loops and monitoring processes represents a real challenge to assessing impact. The lack of efforts to gather feedback from youth involved in consultation processes and other opportunities for engagement undermines organisational learning and capacity building. There are limited means for sectors and bodies to identify what works well and what does not, to improve practices in an iterative way and to share lessons learned across the Organisation. Conversely, examples where feedback has been gathered show that this has an instructive role in validating a youth perspective.

Box 11. As part of its pilot youth forum, the CDBIO gathered feedback from the young participants involved, to identify strengths and areas for improvement. The outcomes of this feedback-gathering exercise were included as part of the report from the event.<sup>50</sup> For each stage of the preparation and delivery of the forum, the report outlines the steps taken for the needs of young consultees as well as lessons learned for the CDBIO secretariat.

For example, in the preparatory stage, the need to recruit diverse organisations to guarantee variety in participation, share clear information and resources, as well as providing opportunities for young participants to select topics of interest are highlighted as key success factors. The report also includes reflections on key elements to take into account for future iterations of the Forum, including better defining the purpose and the key objectives of the events at the conceptualisation stage; selecting topics in co-operation with youth but ensuring a closer link to the committee's work programme; and managing expectations of youth representatives.

49. For example, the Youth Knowledge Book *Youth perspectives in policy making*.

50. CDBIO (2023), Report on the pilot youth forum, <https://rm.coe.int/steering-committee-for-human-rights-in-the-fields-of-biomedicine-and-h/1680ae8aa5>.

118. Similarly, there are currently no established tools or approaches to monitoring or evaluation where a youth perspective is sought across the work of the wider Organisation. There is limited evidence of consultation outcomes being communicated to youth stakeholders nor of feedback on how their input is being used or integrated or reasons for its exclusion. In turn, this risks fuelling a feeling of tokenism among youth and understates the value and impact of actions to engage youth. Examples include instances where youth delegates were consulted to provide feedback on and propose amendments to resolutions developed by the Congress, however information on how their proposals were integrated was only shared upon specific follow-up by the youth delegates themselves. In some instances, this led to youth delegates finding out that feedback had been gathered ex post, when documents had already been finalised. To avoid creating the impression that engagement with youth is sometimes seen as a box-ticking exercise rather than meaningful consultation, more consistent feedback should be provided to youth delegates in the future.

119. Additional challenges that likely contribute to undermining monitoring efforts relate to costs and time implications of following up with youth to share the outcomes of consultative processes. Lack of financial and/or human resources stands out as a key obstacle across stakeholder groups, paired with insufficient knowledge and access to guidance and tools. This potentially indicates that existing evaluation tools and materials developed within the youth sector to assess the impact of youth policy directed at youth-focused programmes and topics have not been sufficiently disseminated or adapted to support evidence gathering within other sectors or bodies.

120. Lastly, there is currently a general lack of effort in making use of the evaluation expertise available within the Council of Europe. The Directorate of Internal Oversight, as well as the Pool of European Youth Researchers and the Youth Department all hold knowledge of effective evaluation, which can be shared further across the Organisation. For example, the EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership has developed guidance on the evaluation of youth policy which could be adapted to other sectors.<sup>51</sup>

121. A more systemic approach to both gathering feedback from youth and ensuring information on whether and how input from youth is being used is necessary to improve existing practices and demonstrate impact. Measuring policy outcomes also has the potential to improve implementation, as it would provide evidence of the extent to which policies respond to needs expressed by youth, potentially providing a stronger argument for their roll out at the national level. More impactful practices and monitoring results would then allow for a more effective use of resources and provide evidence of return on investment.

### **Impact on the external visibility of Council of Europe work**

122. Compared to other international and European-level institutions, the Council of Europe is widely acknowledged as a frontrunner in terms of quality youth engagement both by youth and non-youth stakeholders within and outside the Organisation. Other institutions look to the Council of Europe as a best-practice example, often inspiring organisational change within other institutions. For example, the Council of Europe's youth sector and its proven role in effectively "integrating

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51. <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/68652422/YOUTH+POLICY+EVALUATION.pdf/7e4d17d9-aa40-175c-5085-ac9ee1b19acf?t=1594806315000> and <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/68652422/Evaluation-poster.png/598b7ffc-727f-3000-37d8-3908c4479190?t=1694590896145>.

youth participation into policy making” is included as an inspiring example in a recent study commissioned by the European Economic and Social Committee as part of a series of steps to further mainstream youth in their work.<sup>52</sup> Youth stakeholders also consider the Council of Europe as a champion of youth participation and value existing opportunities for engagement. The European Youth Forum, for instance, mentions the Council of Europe’s approach to youth participation as a “living example of participatory democracy”.<sup>53</sup>

123. In this sense, steps taken to integrate a youth perspective in the work of the Council of Europe have had a positive impact on the visibility, reputation and reach of the Organisation. Yet, this positive feedback predominantly relates to the work of the Youth Department and its co-management system. External stakeholders are generally not aware of how and the extent to which the rest of the Organisation integrates a youth perspective. Evidence-gathering exercises showcasing how youth perspectives are being integrated across other sectors would further strengthen the position of the Council of Europe as the gold standard for youth engagement among institutions at international and European levels.

124. Lastly, there is confidence among stakeholders that the integration of a youth perspective is playing a crucial role in addressing the need for increased visibility and external reach of the Organisation, towards youth, member states and society as a whole. This is, for example, reflected in ongoing efforts to increase the involvement of youth in fields such as environmental policy, gender mainstreaming, sexual and reproductive rights and bioethics. Youth engagement beyond traditionally youth-specific topics (e.g. education, youth work) allows the Council of Europe to refocus its work and tackle issues that are relevant to the needs of current and future generations of young Europeans, and to apply an intergenerational lens to its work. However, stronger evidence on how youth perspectives are being taken into account in these policy discussions could further improve the reach of the Organisation towards citizens, and youth in particular.

**Recommendation 4:** To establish a principle of 360-degree feedback to improve an understanding of youth perspectives by:

- enabling youth representatives to share their views and experiences of participation in Council of Europe consultative activities or deliberations;
- enabling the Organisation to communicate the outcomes of integrating a youth perspective to youth.

#### **Explanation/rationale:**

The evaluation shows that many good practices can be observed in Council of Europe work, but feedback is not systematically gathered to support continuous improvement. A more routine practice of gathering feedback would therefore contribute to building a better understanding of the extent to which opportunities are inclusive and supportive, the suitability of adjustments

52. European Economic and Social Committee (2024). Structured and Meaningful Youth Participation in Policy and Decision-Making Processes - Mapping Local, National, EU, and International Good Practices:

[www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/publications-other-work/publications/structured-and-meaningful-youth-participation-policy-and-decision-making-processes-mapping-local-national-eu-and](http://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/publications-other-work/publications/structured-and-meaningful-youth-participation-policy-and-decision-making-processes-mapping-local-national-eu-and).

53. <https://tools.youthforum.org/policy-library/youth-participation/>.



made to facilitate the contributions of youth, and satisfaction with the outcome or results of their participation.

A 360-degree approach would mean that the views of youth participants are systematically sought, as well as institutions and committees “reporting back” to youth on what was done, to ensure accountability. It would also be beneficial to use this feedback to support continuous improvement and to validate the effectiveness of different participation mechanisms used across the Organisation. To this end, the Youth Department might periodically gather and analyse feedback collected across the Organisation within its role overseeing quality assurance and providing support and alternatives.

#### **Resource dimensions:**

Feedback gathering should be proportionate and make use of tools that can be administered straightforwardly and without creating a burden or requiring high levels of technical expertise. The expertise of the Youth Department should be sought in adapting or creating such tools, building on the surveys, participatory exercises and tools already used within the youth sector:

- For the wider Organisation, time taken for feedback and reflection stands to optimise the value of a youth perspective for the work of the Organisation and for youth by ensuring that efforts are well targeted and impactful. It is also foundational to the reference framework (the four pillars of thinking, learning, participating and acting with and for youth);
- For the Youth Department, gathering and reviewing feedback from across the Organisation would complement the proposed role in supporting the wider Organisation with quality assurance (Recommendation 3) and in fostering a culture of learning (Recommendation 2).

#### **Going further:**

Beyond routine use of feedback, more formal evaluation methods would considerably strengthen the ability to evidence outcomes from Council of Europe work (e.g. pilot projects or proofs-of-concept and pre-/post-surveys to measure changes in attitudes, awareness, and impacts on policy work). Such work carries a higher resource burden and would likely require the alignment or offsetting of research budgets (e.g. at the disposal of the Directorate of Internal Oversight, the Youth Department, and/or the EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership). It might also entail voluntary contributions by member states on a case-by-case basis.

### **3.4. Synergies with gender mainstreaming and the human rights-based approach**

#### **Co-ordinating mainstreaming agendas across the Organisation**

125. Despite mainstreaming being at the top of the political agenda and existing efforts to set up structures and guidance to ensure these dimensions are taken on board across the work of the whole Organisation, challenges either to the operationalisation of competing mainstreaming agendas and co-ordination between mainstreaming perspectives remain.

126. Both youth and gender equality feature among the five mainstreamed perspectives for the 2022-2025 period, together with children’s rights, the rights of persons with disabilities, and Roma

and Travellers<sup>54</sup> issues.<sup>55</sup> Links between gender and youth mainstreaming are also present within strategic documents at sectoral level.

Box 12. The Gender Equality Strategy 2024-2029 includes gender mainstreaming as a priority area and not only calls for co-operation with feminist civil society organisations to build knowledge of specific challenges faced by women exposed to intersectional discrimination such as young women and girls, but also identifies youth-led organisations as key partners.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, the Youth Sector Strategy 2030 includes gender and existing policies on gender equality as foundational elements to take into account for the implementation of the strategy.<sup>57</sup>

127. Furthermore, the Directorate for Programme and Budget provides general guidance on mainstreaming agendas with a focus on intergovernmental work and the contribution that committees can provide in these specific areas.<sup>58</sup> For instance, it calls on committees to nominate rapporteurs to act as “mainstreaming ambassadors” and requires that all steering and ad hoc committees take due account of the five perspectives to be mainstreamed, including gender and youth.

128. There is a clear political mandate to mainstream gender and youth perspectives across the Organisation. This is paired with a general acknowledgement that youth and gender mainstreaming require similar intersectional approaches, recognising that personal characteristics or backgrounds affect lived experiences, situations, and access to human rights; and that, as such, there are synergies to be built between youth and gender perspectives. This acknowledgement however does not automatically translate into the day-to-day work of bodies and structures, with progress on building links between youth and gender being uneven within and across sectors.

129. For instance, the youth sector has clearly carried out extensive work to not only integrate a gender perspective into its outputs, but also to provide guidance and tools on how and where these synergies can be built. For example, gender equality is included within educational resources developed by the Youth Department, and it is supported through awareness-raising actions implemented by the youth sector (e.g. the No Hate Speech Movement youth campaign, which included a strong gender dimension<sup>59</sup>). Furthermore, the youth sector has developed assessment tools and guidelines to support gender equality and mainstreaming within its activities and outputs.

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54. The term “Roma and Travellers” is used at the Council of Europe to encompass the wide diversity of the groups covered by the work of the Council of Europe in this field: on the one hand a) Roma, Sinti/Manush, Calé, Kaale, Romanichals, Boyash/ Rudari; b) Balkan Egyptians (Egyptians and Ashkali); c) Eastern groups (Dom, Lom and Abdal); and, on the other hand, groups such as Travellers, Yenish, and the populations designated under the administrative term “Gens du voyage”, as well as persons who identify themselves as Gypsies. The present is an explanatory footnote, not a definition of Roma and/or Travellers.

55. Programme and Budget 2022-2025 (CM(2022)1), <https://rm.coe.int/0900001680a4d5de>.

56. CM(2024)17-final, <https://search.coe.int/cm?i=0900001680ae569b>.

57. Council of Europe (2023). YOUTH SECTOR STRATEGY 2030, <https://rm.coe.int/background-document-youth-sector-strategy-2030-english/1680a0bb33>.

58. Directorate for Programme and Budget (2022). Mainstreamed perspectives and the role of Rapporteurs in the intergovernmental structure, <https://rm.coe.int/guidance-rapporteurs/1680a5ee02>.

59. [www.coe.int/en/web/no-hate-campaign](http://www.coe.int/en/web/no-hate-campaign).

Box 13. Examples of knowledge, materials, and tools developed by the youth sector include the following.

- Research on youth and gender: Gender Matters is a website<sup>60</sup> accompanied by a manual providing information on gender-based violence affecting young people. Gender equality and youth also feature among the topics tackled by the PEYR, with studies tackling the cross-over between these dimensions.<sup>61</sup>
- EYF materials on gender equality: the EYF website includes a dedicated web page on gender equality that provides resources developed by the Council of Europe and youth civil society.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, the EYF has developed a toolbox supporting the integration of the gender perspective in the youth projects for which it provides grants.<sup>63</sup>

130. Nonetheless, examples of a youth perspective being included within gender mainstreaming work are more limited. As noted above, the GEC has just commenced its work on integrating a youth perspective through efforts to strengthen co-ordination with the youth sector. Some promising examples can be identified in the work of the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence.<sup>64</sup> The group of experts has a track record of engaging with civil society organisations representing young women and girls and can therefore provide valuable insights into the experiences of these specific cohorts and contribute to the integration of a youth perspective in gender mainstreaming and equality work.

Box 14. GREVIO's General Recommendation No. 1 on the digital dimension of violence against women acknowledges that a young age can contribute to a higher risk of being exposed to violence online, by stating that "young women aged from 18-29 years also constitute a group more at risk of violence as they are more active on the internet, including on social media".<sup>65</sup> While the specific disadvantage faced by young women and girls is not explored further, the explicit reference to the age dimension is an indication that initial considerations of a youth perspective are being sought.

131. Beyond youth or gender-focused sectors, there were mixed views towards a risk of "mainstreaming fatigue" among key stakeholders. Challenges include the following.

- Addressing parallel mainstreaming needs: while this is not a widespread challenge, some secretariat members raised concerns around having to ensure the inclusion of multiple mainstreaming perspectives and agendas. This is seen as further complicating day-to-day operations, particularly in the context of existing capacity, resources and knowledge constraints, potentially causing "mainstreaming fatigue".
- Scepticism towards the need for youth mainstreaming: some stakeholders consulted were mindful of avoiding placing a burden on departments and committees from a separate

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60. [www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters](http://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters).

61. <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/gender-equality>.

62. [www.coe.int/en/web/european-youth-foundation/resources-on-gender](http://www.coe.int/en/web/european-youth-foundation/resources-on-gender).

63. European Youth Foundation (2019). Gender perspective toolbox, <https://rm.coe.int/eyf-gender-toolbox-feb-2019/168092d199>.

64. [www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/grevio](http://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/grevio).

65. GREVIO (2021), GREVIO General Recommendation No. 1 on the digital dimension of violence against women, <https://rm.coe.int/grevio-rec-no-on-digital-violence-against-women/1680a49147>.

mainstreaming track for “youth”. In the main, this is viewed as an issue of proportionality, with a need to match the type and level of engagement to context, while acknowledging the value of an explicit consideration of the needs of youth (e.g. avoiding tokenistic measures in the case of highly technical/legal work or sensitive diplomatic negotiations). Stronger objections included where stakeholders felt that a “special” case for youth was counterproductive, risked an excessive segmentation of the Council of Europe’s work and distracted from the work of elected parliamentarians.

### **The human rights-based approach as a means to systematically capture the variety of youth perspectives and experiences**

132. The integration of a youth perspective in Council of Europe work is intrinsically linked to the implementation of the human rights-based approach to policy making. However, beyond the youth sector, the idea of ensuring youth engagement as a tool to comply with and/or support the human rights-based approach is not widely shared yet.

133. As seen above, involving young people and their representative structures is considered to contribute to making policy making more democratic while also offering an opportunity to strengthen democratic competences for young people. Young people are generally recognised as rights bearers. However, beyond the youth sector, this recognition has not yet translated into a more systematic acknowledgement of the need for youth mainstreaming and of youth participation in policy and decision-making processes as a fundamental right nor for meaningful youth engagement as a tool to foster young people’s access to their human rights.

134. The human rights-based approach also requires an understanding of the diversity of youth as a heterogeneous group, where age intersects with other personal characteristics (e.g. gender, socio-economic background, religion) that may affect young people’s access to and exercise of their human rights.<sup>66</sup> The current limited shared understanding of this diversity also poses a challenge to building synergies between the integration of a youth perspective and the human rights-based approach.

135. The youth sector plays a crucial role in generating knowledge around the situation, views and needs of specific groups of young people (e.g. through the research work carried out by the PEYR). However, this wealth of knowledge often remains confined to the youth sector, as there are no formal dissemination mechanisms to ensure other bodies and structures have access to these resources. There is potential to make further use of existing research from the youth sector and for the PEYR to further extend the scope of its research to not only investigate youth views on specific topics, but also the experience of specific groups of young people in relation to these.

136. The strengthening of a youth perspective in Council of Europe work beyond the youth sector is also seen as a means to realise potential synergies with human rights objectives such as promoting equality and diversity, but concrete examples of instances where this has happened remain limited, demonstrating a lack of a systematic approach to integrating diverse youth views. Examples

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66. European Youth Forum (2016), Policy Paper on Equality and Non-Discrimination, [https://tools.youthforum.org/policy-library/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/0099-16\\_Policy\\_Paper\\_Equality\\_Non-discrimination\\_FINAL2.pdf](https://tools.youthforum.org/policy-library/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/0099-16_Policy_Paper_Equality_Non-discrimination_FINAL2.pdf).

primarily refer to sectors already working on diversity topics (e.g. LGBTI rights) or focusing on specific groups (e.g. children), making them more accustomed to a variety of perspectives and needs.

Box 15. Examples of diverse youth perspectives in Council of Europe work beyond the youth sector include:

- the CDADI's work to secure the participation of youth with a minority background for the drafting of the 2023 Recommendation on the active political participation of national minority youth;<sup>67</sup>
- ongoing co-operation between SOGIESC and with LGBTI INGOs,<sup>68</sup> including youth-representative organisations;
- efforts of the Conference of INGOs to take advantage of its wide membership to engage with organisations representing minorities and gather their insights on topics of relevance.

137. Ensuring that young people in their diversity are included in participatory processes is a key component of the human rights-based approach to youth participation. While, as outlined above, the Council of Europe has a long-standing precedent for facilitating youth participation in decision making processes, ensuring the active involvement of diverse groups of young people remains an area for improvement. This starts with needs assessments and gathering of better-quality data on the situation of youth across member states.

Box 16. The Children's Rights Division has worked with external experts to design methodologies for child-friendly participation in areas like child-friendly justice and comprehensive sexuality education. These methodologies involve focus groups and consultations with children in multiple countries to gather their input on specific topics. An advantage of the approach is to provide a more nuanced, contextualised understanding of needs and circumstances to inform policy development.

138. Existing initiatives to involve youth across deliberations and sectoral work do not yet guarantee that diverse voices and experiences are heard, beyond young people who already have experience of engaging in policy making and political deliberations. Within political bodies, diversity is prioritised, for example, when selecting Congress youth delegates, however this is dependent on the level of awareness of jury members on the need to ensure inclusion rather than on an established selection policy. In 2024, the Congress increased its efforts to further extend the reach of its call of applications for youth delegates with the aim to ensure a more diverse pool of youth representatives. While ensuring a diversity of backgrounds is foundational to the selection of CCJ members, as stated in the latest call for CCJ members,<sup>69</sup> the onus of providing this diversity is left to the youth organisations electing their representatives to the CCJ, primarily through the European Youth Forum membership.<sup>70</sup> As engagement with youth across sectors primarily happens through

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67. <https://rm.coe.int/recommendation-cm-rec-2023-9-of-the-committee-of-ministers-to-member-s/1680acfc8>.

68. [www.coe.int/en/web/sogi](http://www.coe.int/en/web/sogi).

69. <https://rm.coe.int/call-applications-ccj-2024-25-rev-fin-2765-0463-4887-1/1680ab06ce>.

70. [www.coe.int/en/web/youth/european-youth-forum](http://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/european-youth-forum).

the Youth Department and the CCJ, there is a disproportionate burden on the youth sector to provide diversity while also ensuring representativeness.

139. Adding to these challenges, the involvement of civil society representing specific youth identities is not widespread. As noted above, there are some examples of organisations representing students or LGBTQI+ youth being involved in sectoral work, and these usually provide added value and useful insights, however obstacles remain.

- **Accessibility:** the use of technical language in official documents and the conduct of proceedings in English and French are potential barriers to youth with lower levels of literacy and can deter minority youth who do not possess the requisite language competences.
- **Knowledge of or access to youth organisations:** beyond the youth sector, knowledge of youth civil society is limited. Even where this knowledge is present, this primarily relates to umbrella organisations or platforms, rather than youth organisations at grass-roots level that may have a closer reach to specific cohorts within the youth population.
- **Resources:** involving diverse groups of young people is resource intensive as it requires additional investments to be made to ensure meaningful participation. This may include greater efforts to make sure young people are adequately supported and prepared to provide their input ahead and in the context of engagement opportunities.
- **Capacity:** engaging with young people from specific backgrounds or belonging to minority groups often requires specific competences on top of knowledge of meaningful youth participation and modalities for engagement. This can act as a disproportionate burden on the Organisation, given existing capacity and resource constraints.

140. As a result, opportunities for youth engagement often see the involvement of participation-experienced youth and organisations, while diverse voices remain under-represented.

141. Lastly, moving towards greater and more systematic engagement with more diverse youth increases the need to scope more creative modalities to integrate a youth perspective in the work of the Organisation. Stakeholders noted the somewhat formal and hierarchical nature of youth participation opportunities with an onus on bringing youth to Strasbourg, and the importance of the Council of Europe to engage youth in spaces and on their terms. Examples exist of engagement activities that have taken a more innovative approach to attract a wider group of young people. For example, the Digital Future of Justice hackathon organised by DGI involved students and researchers in identifying ideas on how to harness technology for better human rights protection.<sup>71</sup> However, these instances remain limited and do not necessarily ensure a direct link with influencing the work of the Organisation.

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71. <https://digitaljustice.tech/>.

**Recommendation 5 – To establish the needs of diverse youth, and to support an evidence-based approach towards reaching and engaging youth in the context of gender mainstreaming and the human rights-based approach.****Explanation/rationale:**

The evaluation indicates that gaps persist in understanding the range of needs among youth to inform the further integration of a youth perspective, including with regard to the gender dimension within Council of Europe work and with regard to a human rights perspective. Without better data, efforts to scale-up a youth perspective across the wider Organisation are at risk of inadvertently overlooking diverse youth, and of skewing the work of the wider Organisation towards “already-engaged” youth.

A strengthened approach to research to assess youth needs and views would allow the Organisation to complement or replace consultation processes as needed; to reflect a breadth of human rights dimensions in Council of Europe work, and to respond to different levels of readiness to engage directly with youth across the Organisation. Appropriate segmentation could and should be used to identify the needs and views of individual sub-groups (e.g. girls and young women) while acknowledging intersectionality and attending to youth facing democratic challenges in their context.

**Resource dimensions:**

There is strong potential to draw on existing resources within the Organisation to widen and deepen levels of knowledge and awareness of the needs and priorities of youth. In the first instance, this could include better dissemination of existing resources (e.g. research overseen by the Youth Department and the EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership) and by reflecting gender mainstreaming and human rights approaches in the steps taken to collate and make accessible existing research and evidence in a repository (see Recommendation 3). Equality and diversity monitoring might also be built into any 360-degree feedback process, so that experiences of Council of Europe work can be disaggregated by gender, ethnicity and other key characteristics. These actions are integral to other recommendations, meaning that the resources are to some extent already accounted for and the question is rather one of focus.

Looking ahead, there is likely to be a need for more bespoke needs assessment in relation to specific consultations where a youth perspective is sought (whether relating to gender-based violence, justice, environment and so forth). In this scenario, technical committees might be supported by the Youth Department in a more targeted way to signpost good-quality research evidence, to locate relevant experts and to signpost to grass-roots networks and organisations with links to under-represented youth.

**Going further:**

Beyond the need for research and strategic needs analysis, the evidence supports a closer alignment of measures to support the integration of a youth perspective with other mainstreaming agendas, including gender mainstreaming and the human rights-based approach. This might entail cross-referencing the reference framework objectives with relevant gender mainstreaming and human rights-based approach strategies, and closer ongoing collaboration between the Youth Department and corresponding departments and committees within the Organisation tasked with organisational priorities for gender mainstreaming and a

human rights-based approach, including the Gender Equality Commission, the Commissioner for Human Rights, the CDADI and the Children's Rights Division.

Ultimately, the realisation of youth mainstreaming within the Council of Europe is a longer-term goal, with significantly greater resource implications than not integrating a youth perspective.<sup>72</sup> There is a more pressing need for continued and expanded dialogue and engagement with organisations representing diverse youth (e.g. youth with disabilities, LGBTQI+ youth, and young people in rural areas across member states) to ensure that the implementation of the reference framework maintains a focus on quality, diversity and inclusion.

### 3.5. Future sustainability and resourcing

142. The Reykjavík Declaration establishes an agenda for the integration of a youth perspective in Council of Europe work and states a case for investing in youth participation to improve the effectiveness of public policies and to strengthen democratic functioning. The draft reference framework adds to the case with reference to the situation of youth in the context of emerging global threats to democracy.<sup>73</sup>

143. The evaluation shows a good level of support among stakeholders for the principle of investing to meet these objectives, but also finds a number of challenges regarding how this might be achieved:

- There is not yet a clear understanding of the extent of financial and human resources needed to meet the aspirations set out within the Reykjavík Declaration and the reference framework.
- The Organisation faces a resource-constrained environment within which to embark on a new transformation programme. This presents particular challenges in the short term, as current levels of demand on the youth sector from the wider Organisation are not sustainable.
- There are competing organisational priorities, and support may diminish over time. In particular, a reliance on voluntary contributions makes this work vulnerable to changes in political will.
- A phased approach is likely to be needed, to respect variations in levels of engagement between bodies and institutions, and to pilot ways of working before taking them to scale.

144. Understandings and definitions vary across the Organisation, and there are mixed views on how far a youth mainstreaming approach should go. For the majority, integrating a youth perspective equals providing opportunities for youth participation. However, the modalities and scope of this participation tend to differ. For some, participation is limited to strictly youth-specific issues, while others acknowledge the need to involve youth across all relevant issues. Similarly, while for some young people should be included in every consultation, others are more in favour of ad hoc engagement.

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72. A mainstreaming approach would presuppose the need for youth-related conditionalities and criteria for new programmes and funding, updating of instructions in rules and procedures for committee work to engage with specialised youth organisations, and so forth. These are measures that are beyond the current (financial) means and appetite of the wider Organisation to implement.

73. CMJ (2024) Updated Working Document with the first main conclusions from the consultative meeting on the preparation of a reference framework for the integration of a youth perspective (Strasbourg, 19-20 September 2024).



145. Conversely, a youth perspective is also sometimes associated with other forms of indirect engagement, such as integrating youth views through research and data gathering in support of youth mainstreaming. Lastly, a third school of thought considers the integration of a youth perspective as all-encompassing, covering youth participation, youth research and youth mainstreaming.

146. Taking these views into account, the reference framework provides a logical focal point for integrating a youth perspective. The draft framework builds on momentum during the consultation phase and offers continuity with the Reykjavík Declaration. It also offers a set of clear definitions that have been developed in dialogue with key stakeholders. There was little appetite among stakeholders to establish new structures or frameworks from scratch, although the reference framework working group membership may require updating to reflect the expertise held beyond the youth sector (in the Congress and PACE, for example).

### **Ensuring the equitable and efficient use of available resources**

147. While stakeholders responding to the evaluation identified a broad range of potential capacity-building actions to support the integration of a youth perspective, existing budget constraints within the Organisation mean that it is unlikely that additional resources will be invested in integrating a youth perspective. In this resource-neutral scenario, the Council of Europe will need to ensure an equitable and efficient use of available resources.

148. Working smarter could be part of the solution. There was a widespread view that engagement at an early stage in the policy-making process has the potential to yield higher returns. A priority was identified to secure youth perspectives to inform the work of expert groups and committees, where youth can more directly influence policy development and drafting. This was also recognised as being proportionately resource intensive, given the preparatory work required to engage and brief youth on technical subject areas, make adaptations to proceedings to accommodate youth dialogue and arrange follow-up so that participation in drafting is meaningful and not a one-off exercise.

149. More effective use of ongoing monitoring and feedback would also help to understand which approaches are the more effective and to prioritise accordingly. Pilots and proofs of concept provide an opportunity to gather feedback and track results, allowing for greater discernment in the selection of working methods that are optimal for standard-setting, monitoring and consultation.

150. The evaluation also signposted to areas where existing efforts to integrate a youth perspective could be streamlined. The main challenges are as follows.

- There is a lack of cross-organisational alignment on youth, resulting in an uneven distribution of resources, and duplicated efforts between institutions that have developed an individual approach.
- Reliance on traditional working methods means that scalability is restricted by the high costs associated with youth attending meetings and representations in Strasbourg.
- There is currently a degree of under-utilisation of the human resources available within the networks affiliated to the Organisation, which might be addressed through closer work with

member states and a more flexible mechanism for brokering expertise through the co-management system.

151. On the first of these points, discrepancies can be observed in how youth representatives are funded within different parts of the Organisation. While the youth delegates are resourced from a ringfenced budget, PACE members are paid by national parliaments. The PACE youth rapporteurs model will therefore rely on voluntary contributions from member states. A pilot project in member states where youth parliaments have been established in the past could be a potential solution for the short term, while this model has been tested. A potential scaling-up of consultative activities will require careful consideration of remuneration arrangements to ensure parity and consistency in how the time of youth is valued across the work of the Organisation.

152. Stakeholders recognised that the distinctiveness of the models of youth participation developed by different bodies and institutions has both advantages and drawbacks. While (for example) Congress, PACE, the Conference of INGOs and individual committees have developed or are in the process of developing distinct approaches that add to the richness of work to integrate a youth perspective, the level of co-ordination has not always been optimal. The absence of a forum (or forums) to facilitate peer learning and exchanges of good practice beyond the youth sector is something of a missed opportunity, and indeed stakeholders from committees seeking to engage youth reflected on the difficulty of knowing how and where to access tools, resources and advice, beyond posting requests for assistance to the Youth Department.

153. Nonetheless, there have been increased efforts to collaborate in the interests of a more efficient and impactful response across the Organisation. The enhanced strategic co-ordination between the CCJ and PACE is one example of this (see box 17 below). Stakeholders again noted the important role of the Reykjavík Declaration in seeding a more coherent Organisation-wide approach.

Box 17. The CCJ and PACE identified opportunities to strengthen co-operation to maximise their collective impact for engagement and lobbying work. This started with selective actions to co-ordinate the timing of events and representations to make the most of time spent by youth representatives in Strasbourg.

These arrangements have been further strengthened with the proposed PACE youth participation mechanism.<sup>74</sup> This will provide a joint platform for consultation between members of the CCJ and the Assembly's youth rapporteurs. Under these arrangements, the PACE youth rapporteurs will also participate in youth sector meetings and activities to maintain open channels for dialogue and exchange between youth organisations and the Assembly.

154. A further consideration relates to the fixed costs of delivering in-person activities in Strasbourg. For the Advisory Council on Youth, expenses associated with attendance reportedly have a disproportionate impact on the annual operating budget. The CCJ uses their biannual statutory meetings to weigh up resources against upcoming opportunities and to prioritise, but this arrangement places a ceiling on the number of opportunities where a representation can be made

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74. PACE (2023) Strengthening a youth perspective in the work of the Parliamentary Assembly.

with 30 members and a finite budget. Similar feedback was elicited from youth representatives from organisations external to the Council of Europe, noting that in-person attendance in Strasbourg puts many events out of reach.

155. To ensure more regular exchanges between youth delegates and their trainers, the Congress reported making use of hybrid methods systematically, whereby youth first engage online, and then attend in person for key sessions and meetings. Online tools are also used to maintain contacts between meetings throughout the year. When youth delegates do travel to Strasbourg, the Congress normally optimises their presence by having them stay longer (i.e. before and after Congress sessions) so they can prepare and/or debrief or contribute to additional opportunities for engagement. However, while online exchanges are considered efficient, an in-person presence remains important for building rapport and for dialogue in and around events, or while the work of technical committees is in progress.

156. A third key issue relating to scalability is the potential untapped human resources at the disposal of the Organisation. Increased demand on the Youth Department has prompted reflection on ways in which the CCJ might best service youth integration efforts across the Organisation without displacing capacity to observe its statutory functions. One such potential model would be for the CCJ to adopt a more strategic role in brokerage to youth expertise. Alongside direct support from youth representatives, this might entail an approach whereby the CCJ matches relevant requests for inputs on matters relating to the work of technical committees or sectors with youth experts and youth organisations holding relevant expertise through the co-management system. This model was considered both more sustainable for the Youth Department and also potentially more agile in meeting specific calls for expertise or lived experience corresponding with a given programme of work.

157. Similarly, stakeholders pointed towards the overlooked potential of youth serving as ambassadors for the Organisation in their respective countries and with regard to the reach afforded by youth through their peer networks. There were calls for the Council of Europe to review and re-prioritise more diverse forms of youth engagement alongside formal representations in committees and debates. This might include working with youth in the capacity of multipliers to connect the work of the committees and PACE with peer and professional networks of youth already engaged in equivalent work at a member-state level and to promote the external visibility of the Organisation through advocacy. The model established by the Congress to pair intergovernmental work with grass-roots engagement in projects within the youth delegates' countries provides an example of how these opportunities for dialogue can be created.

Table 2 outlines a further range of ways in which the Council of Europe might better utilise the available resources to support the integration of a youth perspective.

**Table 2: Maximising the use of existing networks and resources**

Approach	Actions for consideration
<b>Knowledge exchange and transfer</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Setting up communities of practice and/or a platform or hub for peer exchanges and knowledge sharing on steps to integrate a youth perspective in Council of Europe work.</li> </ul>
<b>Activation of networks and multipliers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Measures to connect the work of the Council of Europe in intergovernmental forums with equivalent actions and representative bodies in member states.</li> </ul>

Approach	Actions for consideration
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support for youth representatives to lead on campaigning and advocacy work with peer networks of youth, and to serve as multipliers for the work of the Organisation.</li> <li>• Asset mapping and auditing to take stock of specialist expertise within reach of the Council of Europe, including youth professional networks and associations corresponding with the technical work of the committees and sectors.</li> </ul>
<b>Alignment of existing resources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Manualising” aspects of the support offer from the Youth Department, including the creation of accessible online resources tailored to intergovernmental work, so that stakeholders can consult autonomously to appraise a range of tools and approaches.</li> <li>• Curating research and practice resources from the Youth Department, including outputs from the EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership, to improve the accessibility of information on good practices and evidence-based work in an easily navigable, non-technical format.</li> <li>• Delivering training for Council of Europe staff and for youth to build competences for intergenerational dialogue and co-operation, connecting with the work of the European Youth Centres and using the Together Have Your Say! 50:50 training model.</li> <li>• Raising awareness of non-formal opportunities for Council of Europe staff and delegates to engage and familiarise with youth; using established forums such as the World Forum for Youth and the Summer University organised by the Steering Committee on Youth.</li> </ul>
<b>Pooling of existing resources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboration between the Youth Department, the Directorate of Internal Oversight and the EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership to identify suitable methodologies to demonstrate the impact of youth mainstreaming actions. This might include utilising the established research frameworks.</li> <li>• Direct collaborations between the Pool of European Youth Researchers and youth to provide training and support for youth representatives to carry out action research, to understand lived experiences and outcomes from Council of Europe work.</li> <li>• Leveraging partnerships: a defined number of member states might collaborate on a piece of intergovernmental work on a given topic relating to the integration of a youth perspective with an agreed joint budget based on voluntary contributions.</li> </ul>

158. Notwithstanding these possible efficiencies, the Organisation will need to devise ways to meet certain necessary costs within challenging financial circumstances. In particular, this will require careful consideration of how to ensure the sufficiency of support measures associated with youth participation in Strasbourg-based meetings and deliberations, and to meet the challenges associated with addressing the under-representation of vulnerable and marginalised youth.

159. Ultimately, the evaluation underlines that the value of work to integrate a youth perspective is strongly associated with quality considerations. Where poorly planned and executed, dialogue with youth has often proven counterproductive; reinforcing views that youth perspectives lack relevance and resulting in disillusionment among youth in the lack of visibility in the results. There was a consistent view among stakeholders that participation must be meaningful and based on accepted good practices, and that quality must be safeguarded even in the context of a resource-strained operating environment.

## **A sustainable action plan for implementing the youth elements of the Reykjavík Declaration**

160. The evaluation finds a good case for continuing to implement the Reykjavík Declaration relating to the integration of a youth perspective. Given the scale and complexity of this task, it is important that the Organisation has a plan in place to set the direction for this work.

**Recommendation 6:** To develop an action plan for implementing the priorities in the reference framework and to ensure that roles and responsibilities are agreed within the Organisation.

### **Explanation/rationale:**

It is important that the Organisation has a clear and realistic implementation plan. Such a planning exercise requires the active input of key stakeholders who have committed to the implementation of the Reykjavík Declaration recommendations to date, and clarity on roles and responsibilities. It must be reiterated that the Youth Department cannot integrate a youth perspective in the work of the wider Organisation without the continuing support and co-operation of the respective committees and institutions.

### **Resource dimensions**

A phased approach might be considered that tracks the established plans for follow-up to the reference framework as closely as possible rather than layering plans upon plans.

- In the short term, there is a priority to secure the finalisation of the reference framework, reflecting clear guiding principles for the integration of a youth perspective for the wider Organisation. It would be prudent to establish the ongoing roles and willingness to participate among sectors and departments during this transitional phase;
- In the medium term, the early implementation of the reference framework should be reviewed to gauge progress, ensure commitments are realistic and achievable, and to better assess the value of integrating the youth perspective to the work of the wider Organisation. This review and reflection point would guide decisions about the longer-term strategic direction.

## 4. Conclusions

161. The Council of Europe has a long-standing tradition of youth participation and engagement, including models that are recognised as exemplars outside the Organisation. Historically, this work has evolved somewhat in parallel across the different bodies and institutions. The Organisation has a strong and well-established Youth Department and co-management structure, while the Advisory Council on Youth and European Youth Centres provide a gateway to youth organisations and networks. Among the political bodies, the Congress has pioneered a now well-established mechanism for youth participation.

162. Prior to the Reykjavík Declaration, measures to engage youth in the work of the wider Organisation were relatively non-systematic and lacked a common agreed set of guiding principles or working methods for meeting the needs and priorities of youth. The Reykjavík Declaration and ensuing work to establish a reference framework represent a clear line in the sand in the scale and extent of ambitions for the Council of Europe to adopt an Organisation-wide approach. While this to some extent reflects a logical response to emerging democratic challenges facing youth, it also embodies a specific set of circumstances – a clear political vision articulated by the Icelandic Presidency of the Committee of Ministers, followed by a rapid mobilisation by institutions with complementary aims to capitalise on the opportunity presented to advocate for youth.

163. To this extent, there is a finite window for action. As a large and complex Organisation with competing priorities, it is important for the Council of Europe to build on the Reykjavík Summit to establish levels of willingness to align resources and support for a strengthened youth perspective. The evaluation concurs that a phased approach is likely to be the most appropriate one, moving quickly to establish the costs and benefits of integrating a youth perspective to the work of the wider Organisation and to secure tangible support from the intergovernmental committees and other institutions, while affording flexibility for institutions to move at a pace that reflects different levels of prior experience of dialogue with youth and varying levels of priority afforded to a youth perspective relative to the technical or legal nature of their work.

164. While the Youth Department and the youth statutory bodies have an obvious central role to play in co-ordinating efforts, it is clear that the approach needs to be broad-based, recognising the youth expertise and experience across PACE, the Congress, the Conference of INGOs and other key stakeholders. The evaluation finds sufficient evidence of cross-organisational support to make a legitimate case for ensuring adequate investment to finalise the reference framework and to pilot the key elements on a scale that is within the means of the Organisation and to support a quality implementation of a youth perspective across the Council of Europe. At the same time, it identifies room for further efficiencies, through improved co-ordination between key stakeholders and more effective mobilisation of the expertise available at the level of member states. The co-management structure affords excellent opportunities for mutual learning between youth representatives and Council of Europe staff, which are not currently being exploited to their full potential outside of the context of the youth sector.

165. The evaluation also highlights a priority for the Organisation to challenge the status quo and embrace new and flexible modes of engagement with youth and to make more proactive use of outreach and multipliers alongside established formal representative youth structures. The ability to articulate the value of a youth perspective is also contingent on seeking and acting upon feedback

from youth as a mechanism to drive continuous improvement and to be held accountable to how or whether young people's contributions to policy making and within deliberations are heard and acted upon.

166. Finally, the Council of Europe must consider how a youth perspective sits in relation to gender mainstreaming and the human rights-based approach. The evaluation found some evidence of mainstreaming fatigue and concerns that such an approach risks siloing youth matters and creating additional structures that the Organisation neither needs nor can afford. However, this perspective obscures the more pressing issue that established models of engagement favour already-experienced youth and are not currently accessible to all. The wider Organisation is at the start of a journey of understanding the needs and circumstances of diverse youth, and steps should be taken to safeguard equality, diversity and inclusion within any road map for implementing the reference framework.

## Appendices

Link to the volume II - Appendices: <https://rm.coe.int/1680b4f676>



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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.