

Guidelines for developing a National Children's Participation Strategy or a Participation Strategy within a National Children's Rights Strategy



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Strengthening National Child Participation Frameworks and Action in Europe – CP4Europe

Guidelines for developing a National Children’s Participation Strategy
or a Participation Strategy within a National Children’s Rights Strategy

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CONTENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR	7
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	9
ACRONYMS	11
SECTION 1 – INTRODUCTION	13
Background information	13
Aim and objectives of the guidance document	13
Policy context for developing participation strategies	14
Example of Ireland’s National Children’s Participation Strategy	14
Development of participation policy as part of a national children’s rights strategy	14
Finland’s National Child Strategy	14
Portugal’s development of a National Strategy on the Rights of the Child	15
Slovenia’s development of policy and guidelines for enhancing children’s participation	16
SECTION 2 – BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NATIONAL CHILDREN’S PARTICIPATION STRATEGY	17
Introduction	17
Background information and rationale	17
International policy context	17
Strategy objectives	18
Definition of child participation	19
Models of child participation in decision-making	19
Lundy Voice Model Checklist for Participation	20
Principles of participation	21
Rationale for developing a National Children’s Participation Strategy:	22
SECTION 3 – PROCESS OF DEVELOPING A NATIONAL CHILDREN’S PARTICIPATION STRATEGY	25
Introduction	25
Key stages and steps in developing a children’s participation strategy	25
Irish National Participation Strategy Timeline	26
1. Establishment of a National Thematic Group	26
2. Literature review of children’s participation	27
3. Evidence-based approach	27
4. Consultation with children	28
5; Public Consultation	30
6. sEstablishment of a cross-government strategy sub group	30
Process of the development of National Children’s Participation Strategy	31
SECTION 4 – SUPPORTING IMPLEMENTATION OF A NATIONAL CHILDREN’S PARTICIPATION STRATEGY	33
Introduction	33
Supporting implementation of a national children’s participation strategy	33
Legal supports	33
National policy supports	33
European and international policy supports	34
Key national infrastructure:	34
Supporting implementation of a national children’s participation strategy	37

SECTION 5 – NATIONAL CHILDREN’S PARTICIPATION STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS: ACTION PLANS, ANNUAL IMPLEMENTATION REPORTS, MID-TERM REVIEWS AND REVISED ACTION PLANS	39
Introduction	39
Development of an action plan for a national participation strategy	39
Implementation reports	41
Mid-term review of implementation	42
Phase Two Action Plan	42
Development of a phase two action plan	42
Structure of a phase two action plan	42
SECTION 6 – ADDITIONAL INFORMATION AND RESOURCES	45
Introduction	45
Central Union for Child Welfare	45
CP4Europe	45
Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth	45
EU Children’s Participation Platform	46
Eurochild	46
Hub na nÓg	46
Instituto de Apoio à Criança (The Child Support Institute)	46
SALTO	46
Slovenian Association of Friends of Youth	46
Youth Wiki	46

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- ▶ Ombudsman for Children Panel of Researchers and Policy Specialists

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Acronyms

- ▶ **CNCJ** – National Council of Children and Young People in Portugal
- ▶ **CNPDPCJ** – National Commission for the Promotion of the Rights and the Protection of Children and Young People in Portugal
- ▶ **COE** – Council of Europe
- ▶ **Comhairle na nÓg** – Child and youth forums in Ireland
- ▶ **CP4 Europe Project** – Child Participation for Europe Project
- ▶ **CPAT** – Council of Europe Child Participation Assessment Tool
- ▶ **CYPF** – Children and Young People’s Forum
- ▶ **Dáil na nÓg** – National Youth Parliament in Ireland
- ▶ **DCEDIY** – Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
- ▶ **DCYA** – Department of Children and Youth Affairs
- ▶ **EU** – European Union
- ▶ **HIQA** – Health Information and Quality Authority in Ireland
- ▶ **HSE** – Health Service Executive
- ▶ **Hub na nÓg** – National Youth Hub in Ireland
- ▶ **OMCYA** – Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs
- ▶ **SAFY** – Slovenian Association of Friends of Youth
- ▶ **SALTO-YOUTH** – Support, Advanced Learning and Training Opportunities for Youth
- ▶ **UCC** – University College Cork
- ▶ **UN** – United Nations
- ▶ **UNCRC** – United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Section 1

Introduction

Background information

The EU-COE Joint Project “CP4 EUROPE – Strengthening National Child Participation Frameworks and Action in Europe” aims to contribute to the promotion of children’s rights to participation at national and pan-European levels in accordance with Council of Europe standards and tools in this area. These include, in particular, the [Council of Europe Child Participation Assessment Tool \(CPAT\)](#) which has already been used in 10 countries and the [Handbook on children’s participation for professionals working for and with children](#).

The main expected impact of the project is that children across Europe find multiple and innovative opportunities to participate in decision-making processes through stronger child participation mechanisms. The CP4 EUROPE project is being implemented over 24 months (01 April 2021-31 March 2023) in five partner countries: the Czech Republic, Iceland, Portugal, Slovenia and Finland and at the European level. The CP4 EUROPE project is coordinated by the Children’s Rights Division of the Council of Europe (CP4 EUROPE team) in partnership with the five partner countries.

Deliverables of the project at a national level include national assessments of national mechanisms, the development of model national strategies, handbooks, checklists and training materials aimed at building capacities on collective and individual child participation. All partners of the project will support the establishment of a “Child participation leadership network”, to benefit from mutual peer support to address the challenges of child participation in various challenges.

Aim and objectives of the guidance document

The aim of this guidance document is to develop guidelines/guidance notes addressed to national authorities of Council of Europe member states to provide them with the possible or necessary ‘ingredients’ for effective child participation strategies within a national children’s participation strategy or within a children’s rights strategy.

The objective of the guidelines is they should be adaptable to all countries using examples from other countries and should notably:

- ▶ promote the importance of having a strategic approach to child participation with a national strategy/ action plan by highlighting good practices stemming from the implementation of national strategies;
- ▶ support member states with the development of such strategic framework with possible expected results, examples of timeframes with specific milestones, examples of structures (working groups, child advisory groups) and consultation processes to facilitate the development process;
- ▶ guide member states in establishing a monitoring process to review the level of implementation of national strategies with evaluation indicators and periodicity as well as follow up;
- ▶ highlight good practices stemming from national strategies.

Policy context for developing participation strategies

The UNCRC Committee in its concluding observations to countries recommends that they develop national child rights strategies. In addition, the [EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child](#) also recommends its member states to develop such strategies and include child participation in these: *“The Commission calls on EU Member States to develop, where not yet available, robust and evidence-based national strategies on the rights of the child, in cooperation with all relevant stakeholders, including children; and in synergy with other relevant national strategies and plans”*.

Example of Ireland’s National Children’s Participation Strategy

This guidance document draws strongly from the example of Ireland’s experience of the development of a [National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-Making \(2015 – 2020\)](#) to provide guidance and examples of best practice. Ireland was the first country in Europe to have a dedicated Strategy for the Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-Making.

The National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-Making builds on developments and achievements under Goal 1 of the National Children’s Strategy (2000) which stated:

“Children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.”

The Irish National Participation Strategy was also one of the key strategies under ‘Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures’, the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (2014-2020), in which the voice of the child is a core principle and transformational goal.

The vision of the National Policy Framework is:

‘For Ireland to be one of the best small countries in which to grow up and to raise a family and where the rights of all children and young people are respected, protected and fulfilled; where their voices are heard and where they are supported to realise their maximum potential now and in the future.

The Irish National Participation Strategy aims to give children and young people a voice in their individual and collective everyday lives:

- ▶ in their communities,
- ▶ in formal and non-formal education,
- ▶ on their health and wellbeing and,
- ▶ in the courts and legal system.

All Government Departments and State agencies in Ireland have commitments in this Strategy and are expected to involve children in decision-making on policy, legislation, research, services and practice.

Development of participation policy as part of a national children’s rights strategy

While Ireland is the only European country currently with a specific national children’s participation strategy, other countries have developed or are in the process of developing a child participation policy through a national children’s rights strategy. One such example is Finland’s National Child Strategy which is described below.

Finland’s National Child Strategy

Finland published the [National Child Strategy](#) in February 2021. The preparation of the National Child Strategy was launched with a report entitled ‘Child’s Time 2040’. The Child Strategy is “based on fundamental and human rights treaties, and its vision is a genuinely child- and family-friendly Finland that respects the rights of the child”. The first implementation plan for the Child Strategy was published in October 2021.

The purpose of the Finnish National Child Strategy is to direct the preparation of an implementation plan for each government term. Every government is responsible for drawing up and executing a detailed Implementation plan for the Child Strategy policies during its term of office. The Implementation plan for the Strategy sets out the objectives and measures, and the resources available for these, either for the duration of a government term or for a shorter period of time.

Several parties such as authorities, NGOs and other organisations were consulted during the early preparation stages of the Child Strategy. Children, young people and adults have also been an integral part of building the Child Strategy by offering a perspective of the public. For more information see: <https://www.lapsenoikeudet.fi/en/campaign/national-strategy-for-children/participate/>

There is a chapter in the Child Strategy about Children's right to be heard and informed. It has three goals:

- ▶ Children's participation, right to be heard and access to information will be addressed systematically in decision-making and activities that affect them directly or indirectly. The content and significance of children's views will be detailed in the justifications of decisions.
- ▶ Efforts will be made to ensure that all adults working with children have sufficient understanding and competence related to supporting children's participation and agency.
- ▶ Children's participation, right to be heard and access to information will be further improved through cross-administrative work and by strengthening good practices in structures and as part of children's everyday lives. Special attention will be paid to those children whose views are currently overlooked.

Some of the key challenges related to the development of the National Child Strategy included:

- ▶ The development of the National Child Strategy took a long time. The strategy was first recommended by the UNCRC committee in 2011 but preparation only began in 2018.
- ▶ The strategy wasn't prepared in parliamentary cooperation initially.
- ▶ The first implemented plan for the strategy was developed after the strategy was completed. As a result, the implementation plan could be considered fragmented with a large number of individual measures and a short timeframe for implementation.
- ▶ While a coordinating unit for the Child Strategy has been established, its funding is only guaranteed until 2023.

For more information on Finland's National Child Strategy see: <https://www.lapsenoikeudet.fi/en/campaign/national-strategy-for-children/participate/>

For more publications and news on the National Child Strategy see: <https://www.lapsenoikeudet.fi/en/campaign/national-strategy-for-children/publications/>

Portugal's development of a National Strategy on the Rights of the Child

Portugal is currently in the process of developing a National Strategy on the Rights of the Child. The [National Commission for the Promotion of the Rights and the Protection of Children and Young People \(CNPDPJ\)](#) is responsible for coordinating this strategy and its related action plans, assisted by a technical commission for follow-up and monitoring and by an advisory commission. A new step forward was taken by Portugal through Resolution of the Council of Ministers No. 112/2020, of December 18, which approves the National Strategy on the Rights of the Child for the period 2021-2024.

The Strategy is based on the definition of an integrated and comprehensive vision that aims to contribute to building the foundations of a new planning cycle for children and youth with an innovative approach in Portugal, namely by involving the participation of children. In this regard, it is noteworthy to highlight that the elaboration of the Strategy itself comprised a consultation with children, additionally to the regular public consultation process. Four children from the National Council of Children and Young People are part of the Technical Commission for Follow-Up and Monitoring, composed of public and private entities. More information on the National Council of Children and Young People can be found on page 29.

This Strategy is based on five main pillars, one of which concerning child participation includes:

- ▶ Promoting well-being and equal opportunities for all children and young people;
- ▶ Supporting families and parenting;
- ▶ Promoting access to information and participation for children and young people;
- ▶ Preventing and combating violence against children and young people; and
- ▶ Promoting the production of tools and scientific knowledge to enhance a global vision of children and young people's rights.

Slovenia's development of policy and guidelines for enhancing children's participation

Slovenia has recently developed strategic guidelines for enhancing children's participation. In the case of Slovenia, NGOs such as the [Slovenian Association of Friends of Youth \(SAFY\)](#) have played an important role in the promotion of development of children's participation policy. In 2019, SAFY organised a conference, entitled 'Citizens of the Future', in order to enable child participation and a greater commitment to children's rights, with attendees including Slovenian Ministers and NGOs. The conference was supported by Eurochild as a national-level advocacy event.

The event was organised to mark the 30th anniversary of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child and the 30th anniversary of the Children's Parliaments in Slovenia. Children and young people were invited to participate at the conference, as well as high-level decision makers, including the Slovenian Minister for Education, Science, and Sport, the Minister for Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, and President of the National Committee for Children's Parliaments. Interested members of the public also attended. As many as 200 participants gathered from all over the country, including 150 young people aged 13-17.

The event was divided into three parts, each of which included a dialogue between young participants and decision makers. In the first part, child participation and children's parliaments as a form of exercising a child's rights to freedom of expression and participation took centre stage. The second part focused on examples of best practice e.g., presentation of Eurochild's Child Participation Strategy. The final part of the conference focused on a long-term goal: the development of coherent strategic guidelines for enhancing children's participation. The key messages of the conference concerned the genuine implementation of children's ideas into decision making, the voicing of children's opinions, how child participation leads to an environment where children can be heard, involved, and become more responsible.

In order to realise these messages, and achieve coherent strategic guidelines for enhancing child participation, the decision-makers in attendance signed a letter of cooperation on children's participation. The letter confirmed their dedication to ensuring 'the development and implementation of child participation in matters of concern to them and to pursue the objectives of the Convention on the Rights of the Child'. The decision-makers and leaders that signed the letter were the Slovenian Minister for Education, Science, and Sport, the Minister for Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, the President of the National Committee for Children's Parliaments and the President of the Slovenian Association of Friends of Youth.

The letter highlighted the importance of enabling children to make decisions: 'the participation of children in decision making on the individual, family and organisational level as well as in politics and society, is essential for the exercising of children's rights'. The letter signals a strong political commitment to the protection of children's rights.

Slovenia has subsequently adopted [The Program for Children 2020-2025](#) in 2020, the Action Plan for the implementation of Program for children 2020-2025 in 2021, the Child Guarantee in 2021 (as Council Recommendation on the establishment of a European guarantee for children) and The Proposal for Action Plan on Child Guarantee.

The aim of the Program for Children 2020 – 2025 is to raise the level of children's well-being, provide all children with the same opportunities and rights, strengthen protection, and improve the opportunities for children's inclusion and participation. The defined priority areas of the program are interconnected and include:

- ▶ equal opportunities for all children in the areas of family environment and housing deprivation, health, inclusive pre-school and school education, culture and cultural and artistic education, and the most vulnerable groups of children;
- ▶ participation of all children;
- ▶ life without violence and the safety of children in the digital environment;
- ▶ child-friendly procedures.

In 2021 and 2022, SAFY implemented a project title "Our opinion Counts" (Erasmus+). The purpose of the project was to create, together with children and other stakeholders, the "SAFY White Book on the Realization of Children's Right to Participation", which will also include concrete proposals from children to improve their participation i.e., a document that will lay the foundations for quality participation of children in all matters that are important to their lives. SAFY has sent the White paper in e-version to all relevant ministries and published it on their website, which they also informed all young participants about. They have also sent a hard copy of the White Book to the relevant ministers and the prime minister to remind them of the importance of adopting the National Strategy on Children's Participation.

Section 2

Background and Rationale for the development of a National Children's Participation Strategy

Introduction

This section examines the background and rationale for the development of a national children's participation strategy. This includes the importance of key international and national policy contexts for children's participation in decision-making.

Background information and rationale

A national children's participation strategy should include background information and the rationale for developing the strategy. This should include an outline of the key international and national policy context related to children's right to have a voice.

The rationale for developing a national children's participation strategy should include key international children's rights/child participation related policies including:

- ▶ United Nation's Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC);
- ▶ EU Charter of Fundamental Rights;
- ▶ EU Youth Strategy (2019-2027);
- ▶ Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022 – 27) + CM/Rec (2012)2 on the participation of children and young people under the age of 18.

International policy context

Children's right to have a voice in matters that affect their lives is embedded in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 12 of the UNCRC states:

- ▶ States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
- ▶ For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

Article 24 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, on 'The rights of the child', states:

- ▶ Children shall have the right to such protection and care as is necessary for their well-being. They may express their views freely. Such views shall be taken into consideration on matters which concern them in accordance with their age and maturity.
- ▶ In all actions relating to children, whether taken by public authorities or private institutions, the child's best interests must be a primary consideration.
- ▶ Every child shall have the right to maintain on a regular basis a personal relationship and direct contact with both his or her parents, unless that is contrary to his or her interests.

Promoting children's rights to participation is a priority of the Council of Europe new [Strategy for the Rights of the Child \(2022-2027\)](#) "Children's Rights in Action: from continuous implementation to joint innovation". Child participation was also a priority of the previous [Strategy for the Rights of the Child 2016-2021](#). The implementation of the CP4Europe project feeds into the range of actions taken to satisfy this priority both at European and national level, in accordance with the Council of Europe standards.

Strategy objectives

Strategy objectives are a core part of a national children's participation strategy. Strategy objectives should build on the achievements and challenges of any past children's strategies and policies related to children's participation in decision-making.

Ireland's National Participation Strategy Priority Objectives

The priority objectives of the Irish National Participation Strategy were based on the everyday lives of children and young people who make up a large percentage of the Irish population. Importantly, the strategy was also developed due to the large population of children and young people. At the time of the development of the strategy, the latest census of the population statistics (Central Statistics Office, 2011) showed children under 18 years of age amounted to 25% of the population. A further 9% of the population were aged 18 – 24 years.

The Irish National Participation Strategy identifies the everyday spaces where children and young people live their lives include "at home, in communities, in childcare, in schools and other education settings, in clubs and organisations". It also acknowledges that some children and young people have experience of growing up in care, living with disabilities, being in detention or interacting with the health, mental health, child protection or homelessness services. Therefore, the strategy recognises that "children and young people's voices should be heard in all of these significant settings and they should be facilitated to be active participants in decisions that affect them, in accordance with their age and maturity".

It is also a key priority of the strategy that "seldom-heard children and young people are enabled to take part in decision-making and this is particularly critical in the case of children living in the care of the State or in receipt of child protection and welfare services".

The Priority Objective of the Irish National Participation Strategy are:

1. Children and young people will have a voice in decisions made in their local communities.
2. Children and young people will have a voice in decision-making in early education, schools and the wider formal and non-formal education systems.
3. Children and young people will have a voice in decisions that affect their health and well-being, including on the health and social services delivered to them.
4. Children and young people will have a voice in the Courts and legal system.

Additional objectives:

1. Promoting effective leadership to champion and promote participation of children and young people.
2. Development of education and training for professionals working with and on behalf of children and young people.
3. Mainstreaming the participation of children and young people in the development of policy, legislation and research.

Finland's National Child Strategy

In Finland, the key objective of the [National Child Strategy](#) is *“to lay a sustainable, consistent and lasting foundation for national child and family policies”*. The aim of the strategy is *“to develop decision-making, cooperation and practices related to children and families, ensuring that fundamental and human rights obligations are met comprehensively and systematically in all administrative branches and at every level”*.

The parliamentary committee defined the content of their National Child Strategy according to three main ideas.

1. The strategy will create a genuinely child and family friendly Finland where the rights of the child are respected.
2. Children's rights and status will be mainstreamed, ensuring that children are consistently taken into consideration in all policies and activities alongside with other members of society and that they are informed of their rights.
3. The status of vulnerable children will be secured, and their needs will be recognised better.

In relation to child participation, the Finnish National Child Strategy states: *“children's participation, right to be heard and access to information will be addressed systematically in decision-making and activities that affect them directly or indirectly. The content and significance of children's views will be detailed in the justifications of decisions”*.

Finland's National Child Strategy also draws on Article 12 of the UNCRC as well as its own legislation on the rights of the child to be heard, *“under section 6 (3) of the Constitution of Finland, children shall be treated equally and as individuals and they shall be allowed to influence matters pertaining to themselves to a degree corresponding to their level of development”*.

Definition of child participation

A national children's participation strategy should include a definition of child participation. According to CP4 Europe, child participation means that *“children, any person under the age of 18 years old, individually or in groups, have the right, the means, the space, the opportunity and, where necessary, the support to freely express their views, to be heard and to contribute to decision making on matters affecting them”* and *“their views should be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity”*. Child participation is an opportunity to listen to children, to take into account their views and opinions and to involve and engage them in the processes that lead to decisions that affect them.

Ireland's National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making (DCYA, 2015: 20) defines children and young people's participation in decision-making as *“the process by which children and young people have active involvement and real influence in decision-making on matters affecting their lives, both directly and indirectly”*. This definition is based on a number of definitions within the literature including: [Checkoway, 2011](#); [Couch & Francis, 2006](#); [Council of Europe, 2008](#); [Save the Children, 2005](#)).

Models of child participation in decision-making

A national children's participation strategy can also use a model of child participation in decision-making as a structure for the basis of the development of the strategy. There are several models of child participation in decision-making in literature. For example, [Hart's Ladder of Participation](#)¹, [Treseder's Degrees of Participation](#)²; [Shier's Pathways to Participation](#)³; [Kirby et al's Model of Participation](#)⁴ and [Lundy's Model of Participation](#)⁵.

1. Arnstein, S.R. (1969) 'A Ladder of Citizen Participation', *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, Vol. 35, No. 4, pp. 216-24.
2. Treseder, P. (1997) *Empowering children and young people*. London: Save the Children.
3. Shier, H. (2001) 'Pathways to participation: Openings, opportunities and obligations. A new model for enhancing children's participation in decision-making in line with Article 12.1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child', *Children and Society*, Vol. 15, pp. 107-17.
4. Kirby, P., Lanyon, C., Cronin, K. and Sinclair, R. (2003) *Building a culture of participation involving children and young people in policy, service planning, delivery and evaluation*. Nottingham: Department for Education and Skills and National Children's Bureau.
5. Lundy, L. (2007) 'Voice is not enough: Conceptualizing Article 12 of the UNCRC', *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 33, No. 6, pp. 927-42.

In Ireland, the National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-Making (2015) is underpinned by Lundy’s Model of Participation (see figure 1 below). The rationale for the Irish government choosing the Lundy’s Model of Participation was it was deemed to be the most appropriate model to achieving the strategy’s objectives. Another key reason for choosing the Lundy Model of Participation was it is grounded in the UNCRC and focused on a rights-based approach to involving children in decision-making. Similarly, the first Irish [National Children’s Strategy](#) (2000) was also grounded by the UNCRC with Goal 1 being based on Article 12 of the UNCRC. The National Participation Strategy therefore follows on from this first National Children’s Strategy. As can be seen below, there are four key elements to the Lundy Model of Participation which should be used in chronological order: space, voice, audience, influence.



This model provides a way of conceptualising Article 12 of the UNCRC which is intended to focus decision-makers on the distinct, albeit interrelated, elements of the provision. The four elements have a rational chronological order:

- **SPACE:** Children must be given safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their view
- **VOICE:** Children must be facilitated to express their view
- **AUDIENCE:** The view must be listened to.
- **INFLUENCE:** The view must be acted upon, as appropriate.

Figure 1: Lundy’s Model of Participation

Lundy Voice Model Checklist for Participation

As part of the development of the Irish National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-Making, Professor Laura Lundy also worked in consultation with a strategy development sub-group comprised of representatives from various Government departments and agencies to develop a ‘Voice Model Checklist for Participation’ (see figure 2 below). The Voice Model Checklist for Participation “aims to help organisations, working with and for children and young people, to comply with Article 12 of the UNCRC and ensure that children have the space to express their views; their voice is enabled; they have an audience for their views; and their views will have influence.” This model provides guidance to member states on how to implement Article 12 of the UNCRC.



Figure 2: Lundy's Voice Model Checklist for Participation

Principles of participation

A national children's participation strategy should be based on principles of participation. This can include principles such as Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Council of Europe's 2012 *Recommendation on participation in decision-making of children and young people under the age of 18* and Priority Area 5 of the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child, *'Giving a voice to every child.'*

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has written a list of conditions that help those supporting children in creating the best possible environment for children to participate and realise their unique potential. These conditions are based on the General Comment No. 12 and are called 'Basic requirements for the implementation of the right of the child to be heard.'

In summary, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child states that child participation must be:

1. Transparent — There is clear and complete information available
2. Free (voluntary) — It happens out of children's free will
3. Respectful — Everyone gives due consideration to what is expressed
4. Relevant — It makes sense for children why they are participating
5. (Child) Friendly — Experience is adapted to the needs and interests of each child
6. Inclusive — Everyone should feel they can participate, in their own way

7. Safe — Children feel protected from any harm
8. Supported — Everyone involved feels they are prepared
9. Responsive (Accountable) — Children must know what is done with their views

For more information see Eurochild's and Learning4WellBeing [Child Participation Toolbox 'We Are Here'](#).

Example of Ireland's children's participation strategy principles

Ireland's children and young people's participation strategy adopted the principles of the Council of Europe's 2012 Recommendation on participation in decision-making of children and young people under the age of 18 61 and Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The principles refer to both the context for participation and the process of participation (DCYA, 2015:23):

- ▶ There is no age limit on the right of the child or young person to express her or his views freely. All children and young people, including those of pre-school age, school age and those who have left full-time education, have a right to be heard in all matters affecting them, their views being given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.
- ▶ The right of children and young people to participate applies without discrimination on any grounds, such as race, ethnicity, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, disability, birth, sexual orientation or other status.
- ▶ Consideration needs to be given to the notion of the evolving capacities of children and young people. As children and young people acquire more capacities, adults should encourage them to enjoy, to an increasing degree, their right to influence matters affecting them.
- ▶ Particular efforts should be made to enable participation of children and young people with fewer opportunities, including those who are vulnerable or affected by discrimination, including multiple discrimination.
- ▶ Parents and carers have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and the development of the child and, as such, play a fundamental role in affirming and nurturing the child's right to participate, from birth onwards.
- ▶ In order to be able to participate meaningfully and genuinely, children and young people should be provided with all relevant information and offered adequate support for self-advocacy appropriate to their age and circumstances.
- ▶ If participation is to be effective, meaningful and sustainable, it needs to be understood as a process and not a one-off event, and requires ongoing commitment in terms of time and resources.
- ▶ Children and young people who exercise their right to freely express their views must be protected from harm, including intimidation, reprisals, victimisation and violation of their right to privacy.
- ▶ Children and young people should always be fully informed of the scope of their participation, including the limitations on their involvement, the expected and actual outcomes of their participation, and how their views were ultimately considered.
- ▶ In line with the General Comment on Article 12 of the UNCRC, all processes in which children and young people are heard should be transparent and informative, voluntary, respectful, relevant to children's lives, in child-friendly environments, inclusive (non-discriminatory), supported by training, safe and sensitive to risk, and accountable. Member States should integrate these requirements into all legislative and other measures for the implementation of this recommendation.

Rationale for developing a National Children's Participation Strategy:

What works well:

- ▶ A strong political commitment to children's participation is essential to develop a national children's participation strategy or a children's rights strategy.
- ▶ The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child Concluding Observations to State Parties can form a strong motivation for State Parties to develop a national children's participation strategy or children's rights strategy as well as for NGOs advocating for the development of strategies.

- ▶ The rationale for developing a national children’s participation strategy should include key national and international children’s rights and child participation policy including the UNCRC, the EU Youth Strategy (2019 – 2027) and the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027).
- ▶ A national children’s participation strategy should be underpinned by the UNCRC, in particular Article 12 on the right of the voice of the child to be heard.
- ▶ Non-government organisations (NGOs) can play an important role in promoting and lobbying governments to develop a national children’s participation strategy or a children’s rights strategy.
- ▶ NGOs can be effective in gaining commitments from governments to developing a national children’s participation strategy e.g., example of the letter of cooperation on children’s participation from government ministries and child and youth associations in Slovenia.
- ▶ The strategy objectives of a national participation strategy should build on the achievements and challenges of previous child’s rights and participation strategies and policies.
- ▶ A national children’s participation strategy can use a model of child participation to frame the structure of the development of the strategy.

What doesn’t work well:

- ▶ Governments who do not prioritise child participation and children’s rights.
- ▶ Traditional cultural attitudes towards children and perceptions of child participation e.g., ‘children should be seen and not heard’ or children being viewed as adults of the future rather than important citizens with their own rights.

Section 3

Process of developing a National Children's Participation Strategy

Introduction

This section sets out the key stages and steps in the process of developing a national children's participation strategy.

Key stages and steps in developing a children's participation strategy

The process of developing a children's participation strategy can be divided into two stages as outlined below. The key steps in the development of a strategy are set out below, and are based on best practice in Ireland but could be adapted to different national realities:

Stage 1:

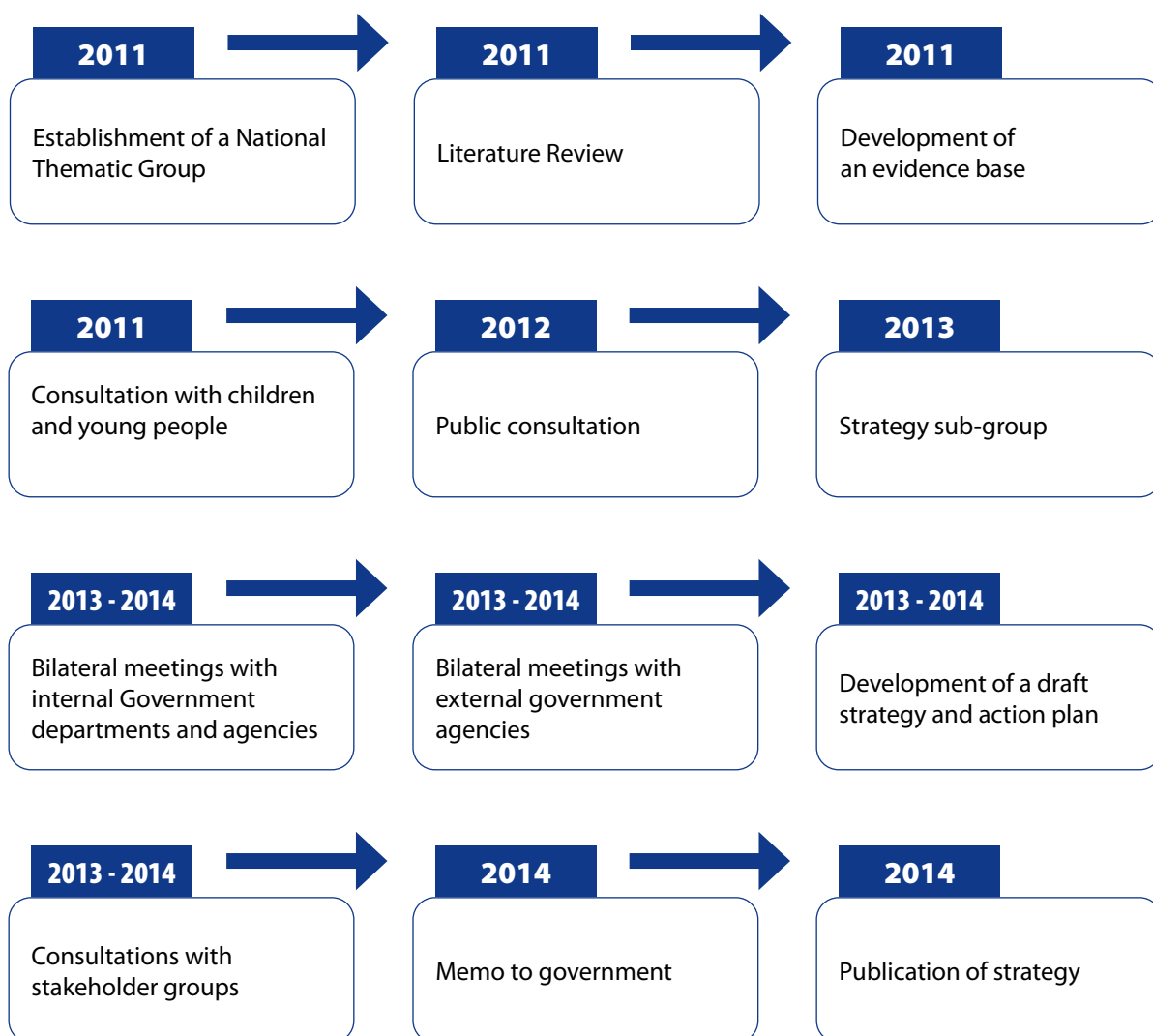
1. Establishment of a thematic group on children's participation
2. Literature review on children's participation
3. Development of an evidence base in children's participation
4. Consultation with children
5. A Public Consultation

Stage 2:

1. Development of a cross-government strategy sub group
2. Bilateral meetings with internal Government departments and agencies
3. Bilateral meetings with external government agencies
4. Development of a draft strategy and action plan
5. Consultations with stakeholder groups
6. Memo to government
7. Publication of strategy

Irish National Participation Strategy Timeline

Timeline for the development of the Irish National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making was as follows:



Stage 1

1. Establishment of a National Thematic Group

Stage 1 of the strategy development process should begin with the establishment of a National Thematic Group. A National Thematic Group on children's participation is a group concerned with the theme of children's participation. A National Thematic Group on children's participation could include representatives from relevant government departments and agencies alongside academics with expertise in the area on children's participation.

Example of the development of a National Thematic Group in Ireland

An example of the development of a National Thematic Group in Ireland was the development of Ireland's Voice of the Child Thematic Group on children and young people's participation as part of the development of the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making. The Voice of the Child Thematic Group included representatives from key Irish Government Departments (for example the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Department of Education, Department of Justice) and agencies and five academics with expertise in the area.

2. Literature review of children's participation

The next step in the development of a national children's participation strategy includes undertaking an extensive literature review of children's participation to examine current national participation structures and initiatives. The literature review should ideally be conducted by an external independent research institution, university or researcher.

A literature review should:

- ▶ provide an overview of implementation of children's participation in current government policy;
- ▶ identify strengths, weaknesses, gaps and areas for further development in the area of children's participation with a focus on policy, legislation, structures, practice and evidence;
- ▶ can be published as a reference document alongside a children's participation strategy.

Example of a Policy and Literature Review in Ireland

As part of the development of the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People in Ireland (from which the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making evolved), the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) commissioned a [Policy and Literature Review of Goal 1 of the National Children's Strategy, 2000-2010](#). Goal 1 of the National Children's Strategy stated, '*Children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity*'.

The policy and literature review was commissioned by the DCYA in 2001 "to assist with the review of the first National Children's Strategy and to document some of the learning in advance of the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People". The authors of the report were from the School of Law and the School of Applied Social Studies in University College Cork (UCC).

The aim of the policy and literature review was to identify from the policy and literature:

- ▶ developments on implementation and progress under Goal 1 of the National Children's Strategy;
- ▶ challenges and gaps emerging from implementation of Goal 1;
- ▶ national and international best practice on children and young people's participation.

The conclusion of the policy and literature review discusses:

- ▶ key lessons for the development of the National Participation Strategy e.g., the law and policy base, leadership and support;
- ▶ key structures to enable participation e.g., local and national child and youth councils;
- ▶ the importance of education and information e.g., to ensure effective implementation of child and youth participation, create awareness of child and youth participation, develop communication strategies, dissemination of information;
- ▶ challenges to be addressed in the development of National Participation Strategy e.g., mainstreaming of child and youth participation;
- ▶ the importance of evaluation and achieving impact for child and youth participation;
- ▶ the importance of inclusive participation e.g., to ensure the voice of seldom-heard and vulnerable children and young people are included in decision-making.

3. Evidence-based approach

Ensuring there is an evidence-based approach in the development of a national children's participating strategy is also very important. An evidence-based approach to the development of policy is in keeping with international best practice. An evidence-based approach may include the following:

- ▶ Conducting an audit of children's participation in decision-making nationally to document the levels of participation in different sectors of society;
- ▶ Monitoring and evaluating current national child participation initiatives, structures and consultations;
- ▶ Using relevant research e.g., government funded research of child participation.

Example of an audit of children’s participation in decision-making in Ireland

In 2011, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs published [An Audit of Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-Making](#). This report was an audit of children and young people’s participation in decision-making in the statutory and non-statutory sectors. The methodology used for the audit included the development of four separate online surveys. The first survey was aimed at Comhairle na nÓg (child and youth councils) and other organisations that work with or on behalf of children and young people, the second at the HSE (Health Service Executive) and HSE-funded services, the third at young people on Student Councils and the fourth at Student Council Liaison Teachers.

The audit found that organisations, services and structures that have involved children and young people in decision-making activity generally reported positive experiences, benefits and outcomes with regard to such activity. However, levels of participation activity and effectiveness varied among respondents. There was a much higher rate of participation activity among children and young people involved in Comhairle na nÓg and other organisations compared with the HSE and HSE-funded services.

4. Consultation with children

The next step involved in developing a national children’s strategy involves conducting a national consultation with children. A national consultation with children is essential in order to identify the key issues which are important to children which will feed into the development of a national participation strategy. A national consultation with children should be underpinned by Article 12 of the [United Nation’s Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (UNCRC), which involves respecting children’s views and using child-centred research methods. A national consultation with children should provide an opportunity for the maximum number of children in a country to express their views. For example, a national consultation with children could target all children enrolled in the national education system.

An Oversight Committee can also be established to work in partnership with the lead children’s government department in developing and implementing a consultation process. An Oversight Committee plays a role in advising on the most effective way to conduct a consultation process. An Oversight Committee could include representatives from the department responsible for children, the department of education, national associations of school teachers and principals, national parent associations, student council co-ordinators, children from child and youth forums and other key stakeholders.

Consultations with children can also be conducted on an ongoing basis as part of the development of a national children’s participation strategy. This can include the establishment of a national children’s council to support the development of a national strategy. Such an example from Portugal is outlined below in relation to the establishment of the National Council of Children and Young People.

Example of a National Children’s Consultation in Ireland

In 2010, a national consultation with children was conducted in Ireland with a total of 66,705 children and young people. The national consultation was conducted to inform the development of the Children and Young People’s Policy Framework ([Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures](#)) by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, which set out key policy objectives. The resulting report was: [Life as a Child and Young Person in Ireland: Report of a National Consultation](#).

As part of the children and young people’s consultation methodology, children and young people in every school and [Youthreach](#) (education programme for early school leavers) in Ireland were invited to complete short questionnaires containing three open questions. The questions for children were developed at a consultation with children aged 7 – 12 years conducted by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA).

The three questions devised by children for children aged 7 – 12 years were:

1. What’s the best thing about being a child in Ireland?
2. What’s the worst thing about being a child in Ireland?
3. What one thing would you change in Ireland for children to be happy?

The questions for young people were developed by a Children and Young People's Forum (CYPF) which was established by the OMCYA. The Children and Young People's Forum was made up of 35 young people aged 12 – 18 years from across Ireland. Young people were nominated to the CYPF through Comhairle na nÓg (child and youth forums) and organisations representing seldom-heard children and young people.

The three questions devised by young people for young people aged 12 – 18 years were:

1. What do you think is good about being a young person living in Ireland?
2. What do you dislike about being a young person in Ireland?
3. If you were leader of the country, what one thing would you change for young people?

Example of the National Council of Children and Young People (CNCJ) in Portugal

Portugal is currently in the process of developing a National Strategy on the Rights of the Child. The promotion of children's participation is one of the priorities of the National Strategy. The National Commission for the Promotion of the Rights and Protection of Children and Young People (CNPDPJ) has developed the National Council of Children and Young People (CNCJ) as part of the process of the development of the National Strategy.

The National Council of Children and Young People is composed of children and young people aged between 8 – 17 years 17 from all areas in Portugal. In the 2020 edition, 103 children and young people - 51 girls and 52 boys - aged between 8 and 17 years were selected nationwide: North (31), Center (20), Lisbon and Tagus Valley (33), Alentejo (6), Algarve (6), Autonomous Region of the Azores (5) and Autonomous Region of Madeira (2).

The first edition of the National Council of Children and Young People was publicly presented on November 20, 2019, alongside the launching of a call for applications. The first session of the National Council was held on July 20, 2020, in online format. The activities of this first edition finished at the end of 2021.

Besides consisting of a forum where children and young people are given voice and empowered to express their experiences, concerns, needs and expectations, the National Council of Children and Young People also acts as a tool to establish bridges between its members and their local communities and is, thus, expected to produce impact on public policies and on social transformation.

The main aims of the National Council of Children and Young People are to:

- ▶ Promote the access of children and young people to new social and political participation spaces;
- ▶ Develop the communicational, interpersonal relationships and critical reflection competences of children and young people;
- ▶ Provide opportunities for dialogue between children, young people and policy-makers;
- ▶ Train and raising the awareness of the participants towards the matters dealt with by the National Commission, namely the rights of the child; and
- ▶ Promote the exchange of experiences between children and young people from all over Portugal.

One of the actions of the National Council of Children and Young People was to select, among all the participants, a group of 20 children and young people (plus their substitutes), to represent their peers at a national level. The children and young people produced short videos in a pitch format, to express their ideas and perspectives on the requirements they recognised in themselves for the function to be performed, as well as the issues and rights they considered to be more relevant to discuss and/or work through the National Council. A total of 24 representatives were then nominated by children and young people. These 24 councillors currently constitute the National Council for Children and Young People.

The advisory council has participated in several initiatives including:

- ▶ contribution to the Council of Europe's Strategy on the Rights of the Child 2022-2027;
- ▶ contribution to the National Strategy for Children's Rights 2021-2024;
- ▶ the public consultation of the European Commission on how to adapt Europe's digital decade to children and young people;
- ▶ a meeting with the Portuguese Minister of Education; and
- ▶ the hearing session of the Commission for the Integrated Analysis of Juvenile Delinquency and Violent Crime, coordinated by the Ministry of Home Affairs.

For more information on the National Council of Children and Young People see: <https://www.cnpdpj.gov.pt/the-national-council-of-children-and-young-people>

5. Public Consultation

The next step in the process of the development of a children's participation strategy is a public consultation. Public consultations are an important component in policy development. It allows government departments to access different sources of policy relevant ideas, information and resources when developing policies. It is also important to promote active citizenship and public trust. Public consultation methods can include online consultations which are easier to disseminate and gather data and analyse compared to paper-based consultations.

Public consultations should include:

- ▶ A central government website which is a source of information for the public consultation.
- ▶ A clear summary of the purpose of the public consultation.
- ▶ An outline of the stage at which the public consultation is taking place.
- ▶ An outline of the aims, objectives, goals of the draft strategy.
- ▶ A mechanism for notifying key stakeholders to be consulted e.g., government and non-government organisations, youth work organisations, charities etc.
- ▶ A mechanism for feedback on the outcomes of submissions made in response to public consultations.

Example of a Public Consultation in Ireland

In Ireland, a public consultation was conducted in 2012 to inform the development of the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People which contained a specific question about what needs to be done to enable children and young people to have a say on issues that affect their lives. There was a total of 1,081 online and written submissions to the public consultation. Respondents included parents and people working with children and young people.

Respondents were asked to:

- ▶ make suggestions for actions by family, community and Government towards achieving each of the national outcomes;
- ▶ identify the three best and three worst things about life for children and young people in Ireland;
- ▶ how positive behaviour and citizenship can be supported;
- ▶ what actions are needed from family, community and Government to support young people to move confidently into adulthood.

The findings of the public consultation were very similar to the children's consultation, particularly on the importance of education, schools and family support. Relevant findings from the public consultation were taken into account in the development of the National Strategy for the Participation of Children and Young People.

6. Establishment of a cross-government strategy sub group

The next step in the process is the establishment of a cross-government children's participation strategy sub-group. A cross-government approach in the development of policy is considered to be best practice as it ensures a whole of government approach to help re-orientate a government system, implement changes to services and improve outcomes and services for children. For example, in Ireland a cross-government approach is a transformational goal of the National Participation Framework of which the National Participation Strategy was a key commitment. As the Irish national participation strategy states: "Giving children and young people a voice in decision-making requires a cross-Government response and initiatives and actions from all key departments and agencies."

A cross-government strategy sub group could include representatives from key government departments and agencies and academics with expertise in the area of child participation. A cross-government and interagency collaboration approach is very important in the process of the development and implementation of an effective children's participation strategy. Having buy-in across all key government departments and agencies is essential in ensuring children have a voice in the development of policy. This can often require a cultural change among some adults. For example, children being viewed as important citizens today rather than adults

of the future. A strategy sub group is also an important enabler to have oversight of and drive cross-government implementation of the strategy and can represent a keystone in the implementation infrastructure.

In Ireland the cross-government sub group worked with Professor Lundy to develop a checklist for participation (see figure 2) which was included in the national participation strategy. The checklist aims to help organisations, working with and for children and young people, to comply with Article 12 of the UNCRC and ensure that children have the space to express their views; their voice is enabled; they have an audience for their views; and their views will have influence.

Finland's Parliamentary National Child Strategy Committee

In March 2020, the Finnish Government appointed a parliamentary committee to prepare a National Child Strategy based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The strategy spanned several government departments and aimed to ensure cooperation between different administrative sectors.

The committee was chaired by the Minister of Family Affairs and Social Services, with the Minister of Education as its vice-chair. The committee had a total of nine members, each with a personal deputy, and four permanent experts.

The preparation of the strategy is based on the Child's Time 2040 project, which began in 2018. In keeping with the Government Programme, the strategy was prepared by a parliamentary committee, and several reports were produced to support it. The committee completed its work on 31 December 2020.

For more information on Finland's Parliamentary National Child Strategy Committee: https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/163977/VN_2022_16.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Process of the development of National Children's Participation Strategy

What works well:

- ▶ The process of developing a national children's participation strategy takes time e.g., the process of Ireland developing their national strategy began in 2011 and the strategy was published in 2014.
- ▶ A cross-government approach is essential in developing a national children's participation strategy.
- ▶ It is important that all relevant actors and stakeholders are included in the preparation of a national children's participation strategy.
- ▶ Consulting with children as part of the development of a national children's participation strategy is essential to ensure the key issues relevant to children are identified. This can take the form of a national consultation or ongoing consultation with national councils e.g., in Portugal.
- ▶ It is important to consult with a wide range of children and organisations working with children, including disadvantaged and seldom heard children as part of the development of a national children's participation strategy.
- ▶ The role of non-government organisations is essential in the development of participation strategies as they usually have a significant involvement in children's rights.

What doesn't work well:

- ▶ Lack of time can be a barrier to the development of a national participation of children's rights strategy e.g., parliamentary work and creating a common understanding around child participation and children's rights takes time.

Section 4

Supporting Implementation of a National Children's Participation Strategy

Introduction

This section of the report examines the key factors in the implementation of a national children's participation strategy. This includes how the implementation of a strategy can be supported through policy, legislation and child participation infrastructures.

Supporting implementation of a national children's participation strategy

The development of national policy, legislation and infrastructural mechanisms which includes children and young people's participation as a principle, action or objective is important in supporting the implementation of a national children's participation strategy. Such supports and infrastructures are critical in embedding participation practice and in ensuring successful implementation of a national children's participation strategy. (DCYA, 2015: 26)

The following areas of support are important in ensuring the voice of children is considered in areas of policy and legislation:

- ▶ Legal supports
- ▶ National policy supports
- ▶ International policy supports

Legal supports

Legal supports include the consideration of the voice of the child in the development of legal policy, legislation and infrastructure. This includes legal contexts where the voice of the child should be heard such as adoption processes, care proceedings and in the justice system.

National policy supports

National policy supports should ensure that the voice of children is included in the development of national policy, legislation and infrastructures on matters that affect children's lives. For example, in policy related to education, health, justice, recreation, children in care, youth work and social inclusion. National sets of standards, charters and frameworks should also consider the voice of the child e.g., national standards, quality standards and assessment frameworks.

European and international policy supports

There are a range of European and international legal and policy instruments (such as the UNCRC) that advocate for governments and other organisations to ensure the voice of children are included in decision-making. For example, [EU Youth Dialogue](#) is a dialogue mechanism between young people and decision makers which takes place in the framework of the EU Youth Strategy. EU Youth Dialogue ensures that the opinion, views and needs of young people and youth organisations are taken into account when defining the EU's youth policies. It supports the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 which focuses on three main core areas 'connect, engage and empower' and encourages cooperation between the EU countries in respect to all issues concerning young people.

Key national infrastructure:

Dedicated government department

Leadership and infrastructure for children's participation in decision-making is an important component in the implementation of a national participation strategy. Therefore, a dedicated lead government department should be assigned responsibility for policy development and implementation in the area of children's participation in decision-making.

Children's participation unit

The establishment of a Children's Participation Unit (or a Children's Right's Unit) in a dedicated government department is important in the implementation of a national participation strategy or children's right's strategy. The Participation Unit should take the lead national role in ensuring the principles of Article 12 of the UNCRC are implemented i.e., children have a voice in matters that affect their lives and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.

A Children's Participation Unit should be responsible for:

- ▶ Implementing the goals of a national children's strategy.
- ▶ The development of effective structures for children's participation in decision-making.
- ▶ Conduct consultations with children on policy development and issues that affect their lives.
- ▶ Development of evidence-based policy and best practice.
- ▶ Collaborate with academic research institutions/researchers on children's participation in decision-making.
- ▶ Collaborate with other government departments, statutory bodies and non-government organisations to support them in providing opportunities for children to have a voice.

Participation Support Team

A Participation Support Team should be staffed by the Children's Participation Unit. The Participation Support Team should:

- ▶ develop best practice in the area of children's participation;
- ▶ conduct participation consultations; and
- ▶ support existing participation structures.

Children's Participation Structures

A national children's participation strategy may include information on the establishment of child participation structures. Key children's participation structures which could be established at a national, regional, local and school level as part of a national children's participation strategy objectives include:

- ▶ national child participation structures e.g., national children's parliaments;
- ▶ regional and local child participation structures e.g., child councils;
- ▶ student councils in schools.

Example of Ireland's national infrastructure

Ireland has a dedicated full government department dedicated to the needs of children and young people, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY). One of the strategic objectives of the Irish government is to ensure “children and young people participate in decisions that affect their lives.”

The government ensures that children and young people have a voice in the design, delivery and monitoring of services and policies that affect their lives, at national and local level.

This is undertaken through:

- ▶ the development of effective structures for children's participation in decision-making;
- ▶ conducting consultations and dialogues with children and young people;
- ▶ the development of evidence-based policy in keeping with national and international best practice;
- ▶ ensuring the inclusion of every child and young person in participation structures and initiatives. (<https://www.gov.ie/en/policy/e9b63e-children-and-youth/#participation>)

DCEDIY Participation Unit

The DCEDIY has a Participation Unit that ensures that children and young people have a voice in the design, delivery and monitoring of services and policies that affect their lives, at national and local level, and is committed to ensuring the inclusion of seldom-heard children and young people in participation structures and initiatives. The work of the Participation Unit is guided by Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and is directed by the belief that children and young people are the citizens of today and not just the adults of tomorrow. (<https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/dff67e-participation/>)

DCEDIY Children's Participation Support Team

The DCEDIY Children and Young People's Participation Support Team is comprised of staff from the DCYA Citizen Participation Unit, three regional Participation Officers and a Children's Participation Administrator from Foróige and Youth Work Ireland, who are contracted by the DCEDIY. The Team works on building and developing best practice, conducting participation initiatives and supporting existing participation structures.

Example of children and young people's participation structures in Ireland: Comhairle na nÓg (local child and youth councils)

[Comhairle na nÓg](#), which began in 2002, are local councils for children and young people aged 12-18 years. These councils give them a voice on the development of local policies and services. They are the recognised national structure for participation by children and young people in decision-making in all 31 local authorities. They are supported by the [Comhairle na nÓg Development Fund](#) and Participation Officers.

Dáil na nÓg (national youth parliament)

[Dáil na nÓg](#) is the national youth parliament for 12–18-year-olds. It is held every two years. Approximately 200 representatives from the 31 Comhairle na nÓg are elected as delegates. The DCEDIY funds and oversees Dáil na nÓg, which is hosted by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. The topics discussed at Dáil na nÓg are chosen by young people themselves in the 31 Comhairle na nÓg. Recommendations from Dáil na nÓg are followed-up by the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive, supported by the DCYA Participation Unit and carried through a full process of engagement with relevant influencers, stakeholders and policy makers to ensure their views are reflected appropriately and meaningfully in government decision-making.

Comhairle na nÓg National Executive

The **Comhairle na nÓg National Executive** is comprised of one representative from each of the 31 Comhairlí na nÓg (child and youth councils). Members are elected to the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive, which follows up on the recommendations from Dáil na nÓg (national youth parliament) to make changes for young people in those areas. The National Executive has a term of office of two years and meets once a month. The National Executive is facilitated and supported by the National Participation Office and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth who ensure that they get the opportunity to engage with appropriate Ministers, policy-makers, Oireachtas Committees and other decision-makers.

Hub na nÓg (Youth Hub)

Hub na nÓg is a national centre of excellence and co-ordination on giving children and young people a voice in decision-making. The establishment of Hub na nÓg was a key commitment in the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision Making (2015-2020) to support implementation of the strategy. It supports government departments, state agencies and non-government organisations to give children and young people a voice in decision-making on issues that affect their lives, with a particular focus on those that are seldom-heard. Hub na nÓg provides training, coaching, development, advice and support to organisations to more effectively listen to and act on the voices of children and young people.

National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making

In 2021, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth launched a **National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making**. The Framework is a "means of enabling the implementation of the National Participation Strategy across sectors and professional groups with a shared understanding and approach".

The Framework was developed in collaboration with Professor Laura Lundy. The Framework is underpinned by:

- ▶ The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)
- ▶ The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006)
- ▶ The National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making (2015)

The Framework aims to support government departments, agencies and organisations to improve their practice in listening to children and young people and giving them a voice in decision-making. The Framework vision is centred on 'participation with purpose'. The Framework includes a number of checklists to guide decision-makers in the use of the Lundy model and good practice principles in planning and implementing the involvement of children and young people in decision-making.

Framework checklists include:

- ▶ **Planning Checklist:** Gives guidance to departments, agencies and organisations on listening to children and young people and involving them in decision-making in the development of policies, plans, services, programmes, governance, research and legislation at national, local and organisational level.
- ▶ **Evaluation Checklist:** A tool for self-evaluation and external evaluation to be used by departments, agencies and organisations following the completion of policies, plans, services, programmes, governance, research and legislation.
- ▶ **Everyday Spaces Checklist:** Gives guidance to teachers, early learning and care and school aged childcare practitioners, social workers, youth workers, youth club volunteers, sports coaches, arts and cultural workers and other adults on listening to children and young people and giving them a voice in decision-making in everyday spaces or settings, in person or online.

The Framework also contains a number of child and youth evaluation forms based on the Lundy Model of Participation:

- ▶ Child/Youth Evaluation Form for Groups Meeting Face-to-Face
- ▶ Child/Youth Evaluation Forms for Groups Meeting Online
- ▶ Child/Youth Evaluation Form for Individuals

Finland's National Child Unit

In September 2022, the Finnish Government announced the establishment of a National Child Unit. Funding of 0.5 million euros has been allocated for the establishment of a National Child Strategy function. The aim of establishing the unit is to ensure the continuity of the work related to the National Child Strategy across government terms.

The Child Strategy Unit to be established will promote the implementation of the Child Strategy on a cross-sectoral basis through the action plans of future governments. The key duties will include:

- ▶ coordinating the work of the children's rights network for the Child Strategy;
- ▶ ensuring the parliamentary connection, implementing and monitoring the Child Strategy and reporting on it; and
- ▶ coordinating and monitoring the European Child Guarantee.

The Child Strategy Unit will also be tasked with:

- ▶ strengthening and promoting data collection on children, young people and families;
- ▶ training on the rights and inclusion of children;
- ▶ child impact assessment and child-oriented budgeting; and
- ▶ the inclusion of children.

The Child Strategy Unit will be located in the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. For more information see: <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/1271139/national-child-strategy-unit-to-be-established-in-finland>

Supporting implementation of a national children's participation strategy

What works well:

A dedicated government department or unit is important to facilitate and guarantee coordination and cooperation between government departments and organisations in monitoring implementation of a strategy.

- ▶ A cross-government approach to the implementation of a national children's participation strategy is very important.
- ▶ Parliamentary cooperation in drafting the strategy is essential so that implementation is more likely to continue from one government term to another.
- ▶ Legal, national and international policy supports must be put in place to support the implementation of a national children's strategy and ensure the voice of children is considered in all areas of policy and legislation.
- ▶ Structures such as centres of excellence can help support the implementation of a national children's participation strategy through supporting government departments, state agencies and NGOs to give children and young people a voice, providing training, advice etc., for example Hub na nÓg in Ireland.

What doesn't work well:

- ▶ Drafting an implementation plan after the drafting of a national children's participation or children's rights strategy can lead to a fragmented plan that is difficult to implement in a short timeframe. Ideally, an implementation plan should be drafted alongside the strategy.
- ▶ Implementation of a participation strategy increases the demand for children's participation in a country. Therefore, systematic planning and adequate time and resources are required for meaningful participation and to meet this increase need.
- ▶ Lack of long-term funding for an implementation plan makes it difficult to execute the measures in the plan.

Section 5

National Children's Participation Strategy Implementation Tools: Action Plans, Annual Implementation Reports, Mid-Term Reviews and Revised Action Plans

Introduction

This section of the report describes the implementation tools related to a national children's participation strategy. This includes the development of an initial action plan, annual reports, mid-term reviews and revised action plans.

Development of an action plan for a national participation strategy

A national children's participation strategy should include an action plan. An action plan is essential in terms of the implementation of a national participation strategy. An action plan can include commitments and actions related to a national participation strategy. Actions can be assigned to all government department or specific actions can be relevant to specific government departments and agencies.

Commitments and actions should be underpinned by key fundamentals such as:

- ▶ International policy and best practice on the rights of the child i.e., Article 12 of the UNCRC;
- ▶ National policy related the protection and welfare of children;
- ▶ Ensuring the inclusion of seldom-heard and vulnerable children in decision-making;
- ▶ Data collection, monitoring, and evaluation of children's participation initiatives.

Within an action plan, commitments should be assigned to relevant government departments and agencies. Commitments should be linked to specific years. Commitments can also be grouped by themes.

Example of an Action Plan in Ireland’s National Strategy for Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-Making

Commitment in <i>National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-making</i> (bold tick indicates lead Government department or agency)	DCYA	DES	DoH	DJE	DECLG	DTTAS	DAHG	HSE	Tusla	Local Gov	AGS	Others
G14.46 Submissions will be sought from Comhairle na nÓg as part of the consultation process in developing the next Statement of Strategy for the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport.						✓						
G14.47 Young people will be involved in discussion about changes to public transport fares, including LEAP card fares and urban fares.						✓						
G14.48 Opportunities will be sought to include children in the consultation phase when reviewing child/scholar public transport fares and other changes in fares for young people.						✓						

Commitment in <i>National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-making</i> (bold tick indicates lead Government department or agency)	DCYA	DES	DoH	DJE	DECLG	DTTAS	DAHG	HSE	Tusla	Local Gov	AGS	Others
G21.2 The DCYA Children and Young People’s Participation Support Team will continue to provide leadership, guidance and support for children and young people’s participation initiatives across Government.	✓											
G21.3 Guidance on engaging children and young people in decision-making in the work of Children and Young People’s Services Committees (CYPSCs) will be developed by the DCYA in consultation with CYPSCs.	✓											✓
G21.4 A Toolkit on involving seldom-heard children and young people in decision-making will be published by the DCYA and made available through the Participation Hub.	✓											✓

Example of measures related to participation in Finland’s National Child Strategy Implementation Plan

ONGOING PROJECT OR MEASURE	Government action plan category, if any	Responsible ministries	Related to combating discrimination and inequality	Related to the rights of vulnerable children	Related to protecting children from violence	Related to social and health services for children and families	Related to education and early childhood education and care	Related to income for families and reconciliation of work and family life	Related to children’s relationships with family, friends and peers	Related to children’s leisure time and hobbies	Related to child impact assessment and child-oriented budgeting	Related to children’s inclusion
The Strengthening National Child Participation Frameworks and Action in Europe (CP4Europe) project		Ministry of Justice										X
Increasing children’s involvement in research and development of activities		Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare)	X	X								X
Increasing the use of apprenticeship training to ensure that young people get their first job and as a channel for re-training and adult education. Reforming the system for determining the compensation for apprenticeship training	Finland built on trust and labour market equality	Ministry of Education and Culture	X				X					X
Increasing employment and children’s participation in early childhood education and care by reducing early childhood education and care fees (1054/2020)	Finland built on trust and labour market equality	Ministry of Education and Culture	X	X			X	X	X			
Creating a fast track for work permits in Finland for specialists, start-up entrepreneurs and their families	Finland built on trust and labour market equality	Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment						X				

Implementation reports

Annual implementation reports should be published by the leading government responsible for children’s participation in decision-making to ensure ongoing implementation of a national participation strategy.

The methodology for developing an annual implementation report may include the creation of a template based on reporting mechanisms for the strategy for individual government departments and agencies. A template can include a list of agreed actions for which each government department and agency has responsibility. A template show list the relevant partners for each shared commitment. The template should allow each government department/agency to provide details/comments on the progress made on each agreed action.

Templates should allow government departments/agencies to indicate the level of progress for actions, for example:

- ▶ Yes - If the agreed action has been completed
- ▶ No - If the agreed action has not been completed
- ▶ In Progress - If the agreed action has not yet been completed but is progressing well

Colour coding can be used to indicate the level of progress for actions, for example:

- ▶ Green Tick - indicates Action Completed
- ▶ Red Tick - indicates Action not completed
- ▶ Amber Tick - indicates Action in progress
- ▶ Black Tick - indicates no update submitted
- ▶ Grey Tick - indicates update provided by lead only

Example of implementation reports in Ireland

In 2016, the DCYA published the:

- ▶ [First Action Plan Update on the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015 – 2020](#)

In 2017, the DCYA published the:

- ▶ [Second Action Plan Update on the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015 – 2020](#)

In 2018, the DCYA published the:

- ▶ [Third Action Plan Update of the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2012 – 2020](#)

Mid-term review of implementation

A mid-term review of the implementation of a national participation strategy is advisable e.g., half way through a strategy. The aim of a mid-term review is to ensure a national participation strategy continues to be relevant, progressive and accurate in terms of the inclusion of children in decision-making and to reflect progress made by government departments and agencies in the area.

A mid-term review can be prepared by the leading government department with responsibility for child participation. The leading government department should work across government to develop an implementation plan for the remaining period of a national participation strategy. A mid-term review can include examples of good practice in the area of children's participation demonstrated by government departments and agencies in implementation of actions under a national children's participation strategy. This implementation plan can include a 'phase two action plan'.

Phase Two Action Plan

A phase two action plan of a national children's participation strategy is an implementation plan for the remaining period of time of a strategy. A phase two action plan should reflect the current infrastructure in a country in relation to children's participation in decision-making and the progress on actions for the latter period of the strategy. The aim of a phase two action plan is to set out plans for further implementation of a strategy and to set goals for the progressive improvement of participation practices across government departments and agencies.

Development of a phase two action plan

A phase two action plan can be developed using a consultative approach. For example, all government departments and agencies named in the original national children's participation strategy can be consulted through disseminating questionnaires. Questionnaires can ask government departments and agencies for feedback and updates on current and new actions in the strategy. Feedback can also be sought on how to incorporate the work of non-government organisations (NGO) sector into the strategy.

Structure of a phase two action plan

The structure of a phase two action plan may include:

- ▶ **Background information:** For example, an overview of the international and national context for the development of the children's participation strategy, the principles of children's participation for the strategy, the lead government department role in implementation of the strategy and the aim of the phase two action plan.
- ▶ **Progress Summary:** For example, an overview of progress made by relevant government departments and agencies and examples of how governments departments and agencies have successfully implemented commitments under the strategy.
- ▶ **Action Plan Update Table:** For example, the agreed actions for the remaining time period of the national children's participation strategy and the government department or agency responsible for each action.

Example of a Mid-Term Review and Phase Two Action Plan in Ireland

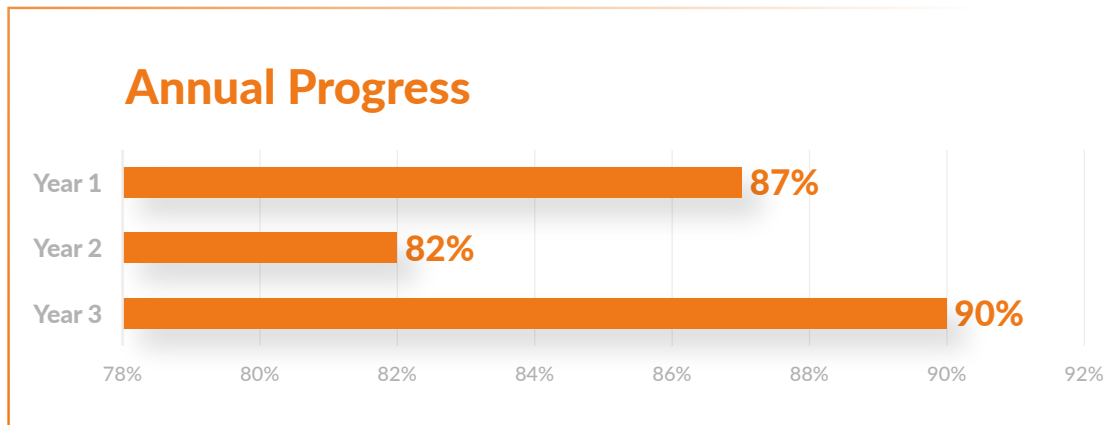
In 2019, the DCYA published the [Mid-Term Review and Phase Two Action Plan of the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making \(2015-2020\)](#) in Ireland.

The Irish national participation strategy mid-term review included the following elements:

- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Aim of the mid-term review
- ▶ Overview of the strategy and definitions of participation
- ▶ Progress summary
- ▶ Issues and recommendations
- ▶ Case studies
- ▶ New Action Plan

Level of implementation of actions

The progress summary in the Irish mid-term review showed the level of implementation of agreed actions in the first three years of the national strategy for children and young people's participation in decision-making. For example, in year 1 (2016), 87% of agreed actions reached completion or were in progress, in year 2 (2017), 82% of agreed actions reached completion or were in progress and in year three (2018) 90% of agreed actions reached completion or were in progress. The mid-term review states that "this reflects a high level of commitment to ensuring that the voice of children and young people is appropriately listened to in the development of policies and services across government".



Examples of good practice case studies in Ireland's Mid-term Review

The Arts Council Creative Schools Initiative

This pilot initiative is led by the Arts Council, in collaboration with the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Culture, Heritage and Gaeltacht, and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. A defining feature of the implementation plan developed for Creative Schools is emphasis on youth voice. With the help of Hub na nÓg, training in facilitation of young people's participation in decision-making (and in particular, the Lundy model) has been provided to all

of the Creative Associates delivering the initiative. All schools participating in the programme are expected to ensure that children and young people have a central role in developing and evaluating their plans for the arts and creativity in their schools.

Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA): *Integration of Voice of the Child in Inspection Methodologies for Children in Care*

Having learned of the work of Hub na nÓg, HIQA discussed the development of a training programme for HIQA inspectors on the voice of the child and how their inspection methodologies for children in care could be enhanced by this training. HIQA worked closely with Hub na nÓg to ensure that the training was appropriate for the needs of inspectors. The two-day workshop provided an opportunity to focus on Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – the voice of the child – and examined a range of participative methodologies appropriate to the environments in which inspectors were monitoring and inspection activity.

They worked in groups to explore which of these participative methodologies, as outlined by Hub na nÓg, were most appropriate to the objectives of their work and the contexts in which they were carrying out inspections. Inspectors have subsequently used the tools and participative methodologies to capture the voices of the children that they meet with during foster care inspections. HIQA has also revised the foster care report template to incorporate a specific section on the experience of children with the foster care service, including what children tell us, as part of the inspection.

Section 6

Additional Information and Resources

Introduction

This section of the report provides additional information and resources related to the development of a national children's participation strategy.

Central Union for Child Welfare

The [Central Union for Child Welfare](#) in Finland, founded in 1937, is a central organisation that works to promote child welfare and ensure that children's rights are implemented in full. The Central Union's members include NGOs as well as municipalities and joint municipal boards. Key documents include:

[The Central Union for Child Welfare strategy for 2022–2025](#)

[Action Plan 2022 – 2023.](#)

CP4Europe

CP4EUROPE - Strengthening National Child Participation Frameworks and Action in Europe is a European Union/ Council of Europe Joint Project that aims to contribute to the promotion of children's rights to participation at national and pan-European levels in accordance with Council of Europe standards and tools in this area. Key CP4Europe documents include the:

- ▶ [Council of Europe Child Participation Assessment Tool \(CPAT\)](#)
- ▶ [CPAT Implementation Guide](#)
- ▶ [Handbook on children's participation for professionals working for and with children.](#)
- ▶ CP4Europe is also in the process of developing Guidelines to develop Children's Advisory Councils.

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

Ireland's [Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth \(DCEDIY\)](#) is the government department responsible for children and young people's participation in decision-making.

Key policy documents include:

- ▶ [Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020](#)
- ▶ [National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making \(2015 – 2020\)](#)
- ▶ [National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making](#)

EU Children's Participation Platform

The [EU Children's Participation Platform](#) (due to go live in 2023) will connect existing child participation mechanisms at local, national and EU level, and involves children in the decision-making processes at the EU level. The platform is one of the key elements of including children in democratic and political life of the EU, and a key deliverable of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child. The platform will be established in partnership with the European Parliament and child rights' organisations, to ensure children are better involved in decision-making. The platform will be a hub for existing child participation mechanisms at all levels in the EU. It will also include an online platform where children can share their opinion with decision-makers on specific EU policies and initiatives. It will contribute to an exchange of practices and experiences on child participation across the EU.

Eurochild

[Eurochild](#) is a network of organisations and individuals working with and for children in Europe. In 2021 it published [Eurochild Child Participation Strategy - Children's Priorities are our Priorities](#). Eurochild's Participation Strategy builds on the previous version from 2017. It is based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and is supported by Eurochild's [child protection policy](#).

Hub na nÓg

Ireland's [Hub na nÓg](#), is a centre of excellence on children and young people's participation including information on the National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making, information on training and development, examples of good practice and a library of resources in children and young people's participation in decision-making.

Instituto de Apoio à Criança (The Child Support Institute)

The [Instituto de Apoio à Criança](#) (The Child Support Institute) in Portugal was founded in 1983 with the fundamental objective of the integral development of Child and the Defense of their Rights, seeking at every moment to be the Voice that calls attention, pressures, acts and carries out actions that help more Children live with joy the time of being Children.

SALTO

SALTO-YOUTH is a network of seven Resource Centres working on European priority areas within the youth field. SALTO-YOUTH stands for Support, Advanced Learning and Training Opportunities for Youth. It works within the Erasmus+ Youth and the European Solidarity Corps programmes. Key documents include:

[SALTO Youth Participation Strategy: A strategy for enhancing youth participation in democratic life through the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes](#)

[SALTO Youth Participation Pool](#), which includes resources on project examples, training tools and best practices in the area of youth participation.

Slovenian Association of Friends of Youth

[Slovenian Association of Friends of Youth](#) (SAFY) is a non-governmental, voluntary, humanitarian and non-profit organisation. The association was founded in 1953 and works in the fields of social care, education, and advocacy.

Youth Wiki

European Commission [Youth Wiki](#), an online platform presenting information on European countries' youth policies including youth participation policies. The main objective of the Youth Wiki is to support evidence-based European cooperation in the field of Youth. It does so by providing information on national policies in support of young people – in a user-friendly and continuously updated way. The overall purpose is to help the European Commission and Member States in their decision making, by providing information on reforms and initiatives. It allows the exchange of information and innovative approaches and can substantiate peer learning activities. There are currently 34 countries participating in the Youth Wiki.

Youth Wiki policy fields include the following:

- ▶ Creativity and Culture
- ▶ Education and Training
- ▶ Employment & Entrepreneurship
- ▶ Health and Well-Being
- ▶ Participation
- ▶ Social Inclusion
- ▶ Voluntary Activities
- ▶ Youth and the World
- ▶ Youth Policy Governance
- ▶ Youth Work

The member states of the European Union have decided to link together their know-how, resources and destinies. Together, they have built a zone of stability, democracy and sustainable development whilst maintaining cultural diversity, tolerance and individual freedoms. The European Union is committed to sharing its achievements and its values with countries and peoples beyond its borders.

www.europa.eu

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.

www.coe.int

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