

The National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making, 2015–2020

The National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making, 2015–2020 is guided and influenced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. Primarily aimed at children and young people under the age of 18, the Strategy also embraces the voice of young people in the transition to adulthood.

The actions outlined in the Strategy aim to address the challenges in children and young people's lives and to enable them to participate appropriately in decision-making.

The commitments outlined in the Strategy are aligned with Government commitments in, and based on the values, principles and vision of, Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014–2020.

The seven priority objectives of the Strategy are that children and young people will have a voice in decisions;

- * In their local communities;
- * In early education, schools and the wider formal and non-formal education systems;
- * In decisions that affect their health and well-being, including on the health and social services delivered to them; and
- * In the courts and legal system.

Additionally:

- * The voice of children and young people in government decision-making and the development of policy, legislation and research will be embedded.
- * Effective leadership to champion and promote participation of children and young people will be promoted.
- * Education and training for professionals working with and on behalf of children and young people will be developed.

All commitments and actions in this Strategy are underpinned by the following key fundamentals:

- * Recognition that children and young people have a right to participate in decisions that affect their lives;
- * Ensuring the protection and welfare of children and young people in accordance with Children First;
- * Establishing and improving mechanisms to ensure the participation of seldom-heard and vulnerable children and young people in decision-making; and
- * Collection of data, monitoring and evaluation of children and young people's participation initiatives.

Defining Participation

The UNCRC defines children and young people's participation in decision-making as: "ongoing processes, which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes." (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, (2009). In the lived experiences of children, this relates to children and young people's involvement in decision making processes in everyday settings such as classrooms, childcare settings, healthcare, out of school settings as in national policy decisions that affect their lives.

Children and young people are recognised as rights holder, 'citizens of today' rather than merely as 'beings in becoming' (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009) and their capacity to participate in decisions that affect them evolves as they grow and mature.

Children and young people have expertise in their own lives, and adults also have considerable expertise in the lives of children and young people. However, adults do not always know how children feel, what they think or what they like and accordingly have a duty to give due weight to children and young people's views in decision-making processes.

Progress Summary

- The first, second and third annual reports on the implementation of the actions in the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making, 2015–2020 were published in July 2016, November 2017 and January 2019, respectively. All three reports are available on the DCEDIY website.
- The Mid-Term Review and the Phase Two Action Plan of the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making, 2015-2020 was published in October 2019. This review is also available to view on the DCEDIY website.
- This final progress report shows a positive picture of how the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making, 2015–2020 continues to be implemented.
- The report findings show that 93% of the agreed actions have reached completion or are in progress.
- All Government Departments and Agencies are actively progressing 92 of the 99 agreed actions that were established in the Phase 2 Action Plan. 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.

Participation Framework

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Inclusion and Youth (DCEDIY) National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making (the Framework) aims at support departments, agencies and organisations in a journey towards improving their practice in listening to children and young people and giving them a voice in decision-making.

The Framework is underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and and the

National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making (the National Participation Strategy) and was developed in collaboration with Professor Laura Lundy of Queen's University, Belfast.

The priority for the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) in the National Participation Strategy was the establishment of Hub na nÓg to support and enable the implementation of the Strategy and build capacity in relation to children and young people's participation in decision-making. In tandem with the National Participation Strategy, the Framework is primarily aimed at children and young people under the age of 18, but "also embraces the voice of young people in the transition to adulthood up to the age of 24."

The implementation of the Framework by departments, agencies and organisations must be informed and supported by an effective child safeguarding statement and processes.

Context for the development of the Framework by Hub na nÓg.

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 is also a response to requests from stakeholders for guidance on meeting their obligations under the CRC, the CRPD and domestic policy and legislative provisions on children and young people's right to a voice.

A Collaborative Process of Development

From the outset, collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders was at the heart of the development of the Framework. This collaboration included strategic meetings with government departments, state agencies, young people and non-government organisations. Stakeholders provided written feedback on the Framework document, user-tested the draft planning checklist and feedback form and proposed good practice examples for inclusion in the Framework.

In order to ensure that the Framework's Everyday Spaces Checklist meets the needs of practitioners, Hub na nÓg conducted focus groups with early learning and care and school aged childcare practitioners, primary school teachers, secondary school teachers, social workers and family support workers, youth workers, paediatric nurses and Garda Juvenile Liaison Officers.

Focus of the Framework

The Framework focuses on children and young people's individual and collective participation in decision-making, whether that takes place in person, online or both. Individual decisions are those that affect one child, such as decisions about the health, education or social care that they receive. Collective decisions are those that affect children as a group in everyday settings like schools, early learning and care services, youth clubs and projects, and creative, artistic and sporting activities, or in the development of national and organisational projects, programmes, services, research, legislation and policies.

Concerning their collective participation in decision-making, the Framework's vision and guidance includes both adult-led engagement of children and young people and child and youth-led participatory initiatives in face-to-face and online settings.

The Framework aims at achieving the overarching objectives of the National Participation Strategy. This includes:

- improving and establishing mechanisms to ensure that seldom-heard and vulnerable children and young people are listened to and involved in decision-making; and
- mainstreaming the participation of children and young people in the development of policy, legislation, services and research.

Meaningful and sustained participation by children and young people in decision-making requires strong organisational commitment, and the implementation of the Framework is supported by four enabling factors:

- Organisational buy-in
- Training and capacity building for decision-makers
- Resources (financial, human, time)
- Monitoring and feedback

Framework Vision: Participation with Purpose

The vision of the Framework is participation with purpose. Participation with purpose is about two distinct but interrelated factors, the purpose or objective of your organisation and the purpose or objective of involving children and young people in decision-making. It is important not to get stuck in the process of 'doing' participation, but to ensure that the purpose of involving children and young people in decision-making is to give them a voice on day-to-day activities and practices, or on the development of projects, programmes, services or policies that are central to the objectives and role of your organisation. At the heart of participation with purpose is ensuring that when children and young people are involved in decision-making, their views are listened to, taken seriously and given due weight, with the intention that these views will influence the outcome or initiate change.

The Planning Checklist and Everyday Spaces Checklist provide guidance on how to involve children and young people at all the different levels of an activity and at all the stages of decision-making in both face-to-face and online settings.

Implementing participation with purpose requires a clear rationale on:

- what participation is and what it is not;
- how to involve children and young people in decision-making;
- how to ensure the involvement of seldom-heard children and young people in decision-making;
- how to follow up and give feedback to children and young people; and
- how to be realistic with them.

What participation is and what it is not
What it is
Children and young people's participation in decision-making is defined as: "ongoing processes, which include information-sharing and dialogue

between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes.”

In practice, this means that children and young people should be involved in decision-making in everyday spaces and situations such as early learning and care settings, classrooms, hospitals and clubs as well as in strategic developments, such as policies, programmes, services, legislation and research.