An Roinn Leanaí
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Department of
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NATIONAL STRATEGY ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING 2015 – 2020

NATIONAL STRATEGY ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING 2015 – 2020

Department of Children and Youth Affairs
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FOREWORD BY MINISTER

I am pleased to publish the Government's first *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making, 2015-2020*.

My Department is strongly committed to the participation of children and young people in decision-making. We are proud to be the first country in Europe to develop a National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making. The strategy builds on the developing infrastructure for children's participation established by my Department and other organisations since the publication of the National Children's Strategy in 2000.

The goal of this strategy is to ensure that children and young people have a voice in their individual and collective everyday lives across the five national outcome areas set out in *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020*, namely: to be active and healthy; to be achieving in all areas of learning and development; to be safe and protected from harm; to enjoy economic security and opportunity; and to be connected, respected and contributing. The strategy focuses on the everyday lives of children and young people and the places and spaces in which they are entitled to have a voice in decisions that affect their lives, including in community, education, health and well-being, and legal settings.

The strategy 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. It is guided and influenced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

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 are included in this strategy.

Cultural change is also needed in this area. We often think of children only in their capacity as future adults, with less regard for the contribution they can make to our world during childhood. One of the key fundamentals of this strategy is recognition that children and young people are not 'beings in becoming', but rather are 'citizens of today' with the right to be respected and heard during childhood, their teenage years and in their transition to adulthood.

Despite the developments in improving opportunities for participation by children and young people in decision-making, many of us are aware that there is evidence of Ireland failing to give an adequate voice to children on certain aspects of their lives. I believe that this strategy is an important milestone in ensuring that children and young people in Ireland, particularly those who are marginalised and disadvantaged, will have a say in decisions that affect their lives.

Dr. James Reilly, TD
Minister for Children and Youth Affairs

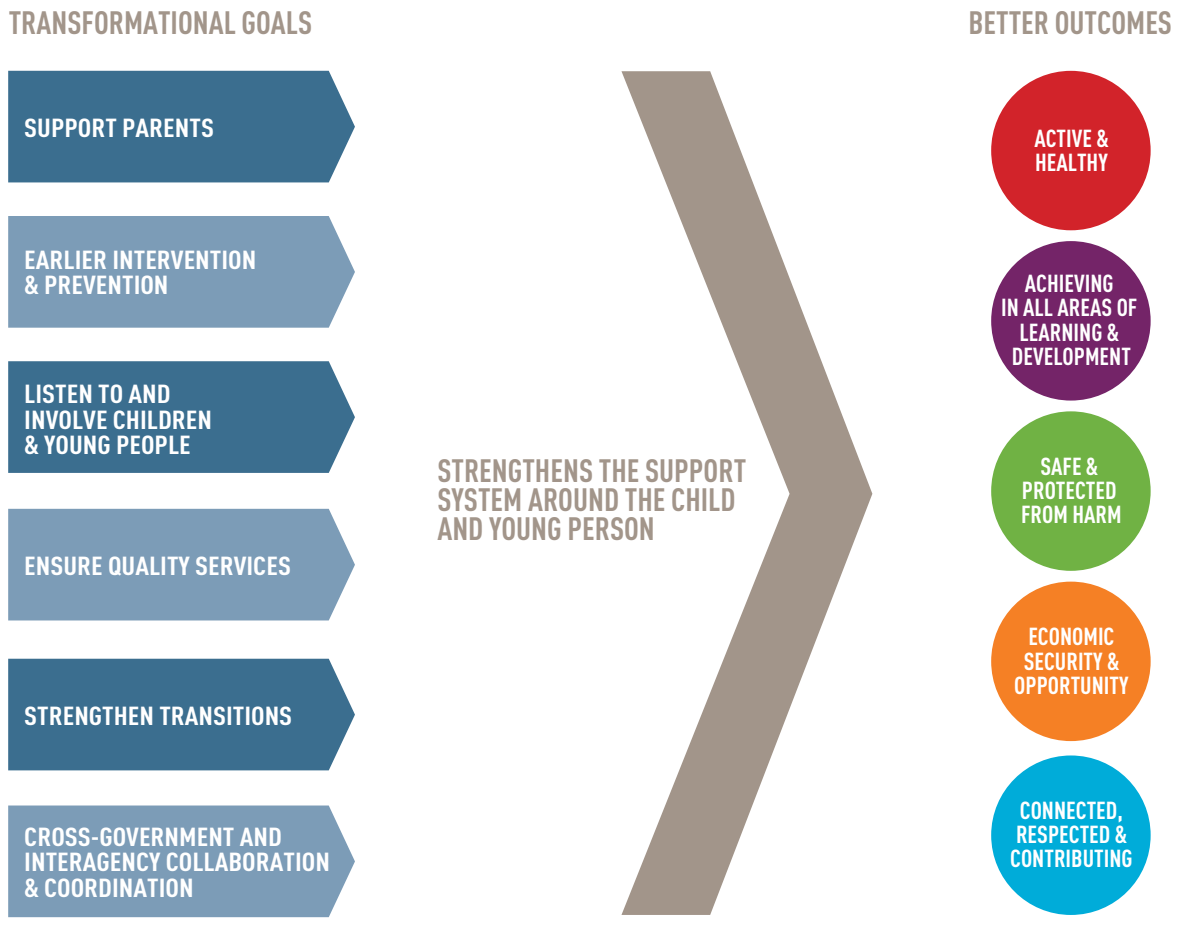
INTRODUCTION

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) was established to lead the effort to improve the lives of children and young people in Ireland. *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020*[1], published in April 2014, sets out the Government's agenda and priorities in relation to children and young people under the age of 25 and provides the overarching framework for the development and implementation of policy and services. The vision outlined in *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* states:

> 'Our vision 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.'

Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures has adopted an outcomes approach and is based on five interconnected and reinforcing national outcomes for children and young people. The importance of children and young people having a voice in decisions that affect their lives is integral to all five outcome areas. The Framework identifies six transformational goals for achieving the national outcomes, as outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The 6 transformational goals for achieving the 5 national outcomes of *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*



'Listening to and involving children and young people' is a transformational goal and *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* commits to the development and implementation of a National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making. It further commits to the establishment of a Children and Young People's Participation Hub by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, to become the national centre for excellence on children and young people's participation in decision-making. This hub will support implementation of the strategy through the provision of information and training for Government departments and agencies and the non-statutory sector.

Participation by children and young people in decision-making will be a core objective of the other national strategies being developed under *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*, which include an Early Years Strategy and a Youth Strategy.

The implementation structures for *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* directly involve children and young people in its oversight. Children and young people from the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive and young people from the EU Structured Dialogue Working Group have a formal and direct engagement with the Children and Young People's Policy Consortium* in identifying issues of importance to their peers and act as consultative groups on issues that need the views of children and young people or child-proofing.

Goal, focus and objectives of this strategy

The goal of this first National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making is to ensure that children and young people will have a voice in their individual and collective everyday lives across the five national outcome areas. The strategy 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 strategy is guided and influenced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)[2] and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.[3]

The strategy focuses on the everyday lives of children and young people and the places and spaces in which they are entitled to have a voice in decisions that affect their lives. Accordingly, the strategy identifies the following objectives and priority areas for action:

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.

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* The Children and Young People's Policy Consortium was established to have oversight of and drive cross-Government implementation of *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*, and represents the keystone in the implementation infrastructure. The Consortium comprises high-level representation from Government departments and agencies, key experts and representatives from a range of sectors and settings working with children and young people. It is chaired by the Secretary General of the DCYA and reports annually to the Cabinet Committee on Social Policy.

The strategy contains a series of additional objectives, which include:

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

Underlying all objectives in this strategy are 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: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children*[4];
- improving and establishing mechanisms to ensure the participation of seldom-heard and vulnerable children and young people in decision-making;
- collection of data, monitoring and evaluation of children and young people's participation initiatives.

Structure of document

Following this Introduction:

- **Chapter 1** outlines the background and rationale for participation by children and young people in decision-making.
- **Chapter 2** sets out the objectives of the strategy.
- Implementation of the strategy will be informed by Lundy's Model of Participation and a set of guiding principles, which are outlined in **Chapter 3**.
- **Chapter 4** describes the legal, policy and infrastructural supports that are in place to implement the strategy.
- Finally, **Chapter 5** outlines the Action Plan for the implementation of the strategy. Implementation will be the responsibility of all stakeholders involved in developing policy, services, legislation and research for children and young people, and will be delivered under the *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* implementation structures.

1. BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE FOR THE PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN DECISION-MAKING

1.1 BACKGROUND

Children and young people have a right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. With the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)[2] in 1992, Ireland, like almost all other countries in the world, committed to ensuring that the voices of children and young people are heard and that their opinions are given due weight in matters that affect them.

Ireland signed and ratified the UNCRC's Third Optional Protocol on a Communications Procedure in 2014, which further strengthens the voice of the child by allowing individual children to submit complaints regarding violations of their rights under the Convention.[5]

The Thirty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Children) Act 2015 was signed into Irish law on 28th April 2015.[6] This amendment provides, for the first time, a specific affirmation of rights and protections to be enjoyed by children as children. It gives Constitutional status to application of the principles of the best interests of the child and hearing the views of the child in stated circumstances.

At national level, the right of children and young people to a voice in decisions that affect their lives has been Government policy since 2000, with the publication of *Our Children – Their Lives: The National Children's Strategy, 2000-2010*.[7]

Goal 1 of the National Children's Strategy (NCS) stated that '*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 NCS identified a number of objectives and significant progress was made in achieving them. Goal 1 of the NCS was strongly aspirational and in full accord with Article 12 of the UNCRC. The structures and processes established under the NCS for collective participation by children in decision-making were initially inadequately funded and lacked a detailed policy focus and direction. Over time, and led by the National Children's Office, the Office of the Minister for Children and now the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), evidence-based policy, improved structures and best practice to deliver on children and young people's participation were developed. These developments include oversight of strong and effective Comhairle na nÓg (local child and youth councils) in every Local Authority area of the country; a vibrant national youth parliament (Dáil na nÓg); and a wide range of consultations with children and young people on issues of national importance (*see Appendix 2*). The DCYA also established the Children and Young People's Participation Support Team, in partnership with Foróige and Youth Work Ireland, to build good practice in giving children a voice in decision-making, in addition to commissioning a number of pieces of research to strengthen the evidence base for participation by children and young people in decision-making.

1.2 RATIONALE

Ireland now has a strong infrastructure for children's participation, which goes far beyond the expectations and aspirations of the National Children's Strategy, published in 2000. This infrastructure provides the foundations on which this new National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making, 2015-2020 is built and supports the active implementation of Article 12 of the UNCRC.

There is a growing body of evidence on the benefits of participation by children and young people in decision-making across a range of measures, including improved services, policies, research, active citizenship and, most importantly, improvements for children themselves and for society generally.[8, 9] Inclusion of children and young people in decision-making can promote children's protection, improve their confidence, communication skills and ability to negotiate, network and make judgements.[10, 11]

There is also strong evidence that participation by children and young people in decision-making can support active citizenship and social inclusion at an early stage and there is general agreement that this is crucial to building and sustaining a healthy society.[12] Young people's engagement with social media in new social movements and global forms of activism is evidence that they take their citizenship very seriously and are engaged actively on issues of importance to them, using a space that is owned and created by them.[13, 14]

In education, effective and meaningful participation of children and young people has been shown to be beneficial to children and young people, and to schools. Students' participation generally, and in student councils more particularly, can improve academic standards, reduce rates of early school-leaving, improve discipline and facilitate students in acquiring communication, planning and organisational skills.[15] A 2013 review of literature on school engagement shows that, among older students, strong feelings of attachment to the school and involvement in school life are associated with greater self-esteem and lower levels of anti-social behaviour and substance abuse, as well as superior academic performance.[16]

Improved services are among the most measurable benefits of children and young people's participation in decision-making. Recent studies indicate that using children's views in the development and evaluation of healthcare service provision can have a significant influence on health outcomes[17, 18, 19] and reduce healthcare usage[20]. In 2004, the National Youth Agency and the British Youth Council carried out a survey of statutory and voluntary sector organisations in the United Kingdom, in order to establish a systematic picture of the levels and ways in which they involve children and young people in public decision-making. Among those organisations that had structures for participation, approximately 80% of both statutory and voluntary sector respondents agreed that their services had improved as a result of involving children and young people in decision-making.[21]

1.3 PROCESS OF DEVELOPMENT OF THE STRATEGY

The National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making was developed under the guidance of a *Voice of the Child* Thematic Group on children and young people's participation, involving Government departments and agencies alongside academics with expertise in the area.

Following in-depth bilateral meetings with Government departments and agencies, a draft strategy and action plan were developed. Further consultation was undertaken with non-government stakeholders and with children and young people involved in the implementation of *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*.

In addition to the guidance of the Thematic Group and consultation with other key stakeholders, the following initiatives have been commissioned or conducted by the DCYA to provide a strong evidence base for the strategy:

1. An extensive literature review was conducted by University College Cork, which provides both an overview of participation structures and initiatives already in place, and an analysis of the implementation of Goal 1 of the National Children's Strategy.[8] The literature review identifies the strengths, weaknesses, gaps and areas for further development in providing children and young people with a voice, focusing on policy, legislation, structures, practice and evidence (research and monitoring).
2. A national consultation was conducted in 2011 with children and young people in which they were asked questions about what is good, what is not good and what should be changed to improve the lives of children and young people in Ireland. In total, 66,700 children and young people took part in the consultation. The resultant report, *Life as a child and young person in Ireland: Report of a National Consultation*[22], was published in 2012 and provides important information that informed the development of both this strategy and *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*.
3. A public consultation was conducted in 2012 to inform the development of *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*, 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 were over 1,000 respondents to this consultation and findings relevant to the present strategy have been taken into account.
4. An audit of children and young people's participation in decision-making was undertaken to document activity in statutory and non-statutory organisations that enables participation by children and young people in decision-making that affects their lives. In total, 570 respondents completed the audit survey.[23]
5. There has been ongoing monitoring, evaluation and stakeholder engagement in DCYA initiatives (e.g. Dáil na nÓg, Comhairle na nÓg, consultations and other initiatives involving children and young people). The collection of data from these projects has enabled the DCYA to build on good practice and improve mechanisms and opportunities for children and young people to have their voice heard and to have an impact on decision-making. All DCYA dialogues and consultations

with children and young people since 2003 (*see Appendix 2*) have been subject to evaluation by participants and other stakeholders. Many other organisations and stakeholders engaged in participation initiatives in recent years have also gathered important evaluative data, all of which is central to the goals, objectives and actions outlined in the present strategy. One of the key objectives underpinning this strategy is the collection of data, monitoring and evaluation of all children and young people's participation initiatives and the Action Plan for the implementation of the strategy outlines concrete measures to achieve this objective (*see Chapter 5*).

6. Research is now complete on children and young people's participation in decision-making, commissioned under Strand 9 of the Irish Research Council's Research Development Initiative (2010 and 2012) funded by the DCYA and the Irish Research Council, on the following research topics:

- An examination of children and young people's perspectives on the impact of their participation in decision-making in DCYA initiatives, such as Comhairle na nÓg, Dáil na nÓg, the Dáil na nÓg Council and the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive.[24]
- A review of national and international literature on the participation of seldom-heard children and young people to identify best practice principles in the field.[25]
- Children and young people's experiences of participation in decision-making at home, in school and in their communities.[26]
- Children and young people's voices in housing estate regeneration.[27]

7. A significant body of international literature on children and young people's participation has also grown in recent years, focused on the process of *doing* participation and on the *impact* of participation. Findings from these studies have also been used in the development of this strategy.

2. STRATEGY OBJECTIVES

This National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making builds on the achievements and challenges of the National Children's Strategy[7] in further embedding effective, meaningful and systematic participation by children and young people in decision-making on issues that affect them in all aspects of their lives.

2.1 PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING IN THE EVERYDAY LIVES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The early thinking in the development of this strategy was to base its priorities on the everyday lives of children and young people, who make up a considerable percentage of the Irish population. There are 1,148,684 children (under the age of 18) living in Ireland, amounting to 25% of the population. A further 411,152 (9%) are aged between 18-24 years.[28] Children and young people live their lives at home, in communities, in childcare, in schools and other education settings, in clubs and organisations. 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. 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 a key priority of this 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.

Accordingly, the priority objectives in this strategy are that:

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.

Each objective is discussed in further detail below.

One of the key fundamentals of the strategy is recognition that children and young people are not 'beings in becoming', but rather are 'citizens of today' with the right to be respected and heard during childhood, their teenage years and in their transition to adulthood. Public policy relating to children at times adopts an outcomes approach, focused only on the future capacities of children. Building a solid future for children is critical, but on its own, a focus on the future is unbalanced and needs to be accompanied by a concern for the present well-being of children, for their participation in social life and for their opportunities for self-realisation.[29]

While the primary focus of the Action Plan accompanying this strategy is on deliverables within the public sphere, by far the most important place for children to have a voice is in their own homes. Within the literature, the importance of children having a voice within the home is recognised. Ideally, children can begin to experience participation at a very early age. It can begin within their own families, if they are adequately listened to and their opinions valued.[30] In a recent study of children and young people's experiences of participation in Ireland[26], they generally felt that they had a voice and some level of influence at home, but there was also evidence of tokenistic practices as well as limited participation. Generally, children and young people accepted the authority of adults regarding decision-making in the home, although they were more likely to negotiate the adult–child power difference as they grew older. In recognition of the importance of decision-making in the home, the Action Plan in this strategy recognises the role of the State in promoting this and supporting parents' understanding of children and young people's right to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

The strategy recognises that from birth onwards, children have an evolving capacity to participate in the decisions that affect them and adults have a key role in enabling and facilitating their voice to be heard.[31, 32] Parents, childcare providers, teachers, youth workers, social care professionals, advocates, healthcare and medical professionals, judges, lawyers, policy-makers and others in daily contact with children and young people or who make decisions that affect their lives – all must play their part in realising the goals set out in this strategy.

Objective 1: Children and young people will have a voice in decisions made in their local communities.

Children and young people spend much of their time taking part in community activities in green spaces, playgrounds, parks, streets, libraries and cultural spaces. They are also very regular users of public transport and bicycles.

The Action Plan for this strategy identifies ways in which they will be given the right to be consulted on decisions about housing and accommodation, development, regeneration, parks, playgrounds, recreation facilities, transport plans, cultural developments and other issues relevant to their lives. In addition, the strategy commits to the development of a 5-year Development Plan for Comhairle na nÓg and to develop guidance for Children and Young People's Services Committees on engaging children and young people in their work.

Objective 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.

The vast majority of children and young people attend early education services or schools and spend a considerable amount of their daily lives in these settings. There is evidence of increased participation in decision-making by children and young people in schools. In 2010 (the latest figure available from the HBSC Survey), 32.6% of children aged 10-17 reported

that students at their school participate in making the school rules. This represents an increase from 22.5% in 2006[33], while pointing to the scope for further improvement.

This strategy strongly promotes the importance of children and young people's involvement in decision-making in education policy, in the running of schools and services, in school inspections, in schools' self-evaluations, in the curriculum, in behaviour and bullying policies, in support services and other areas, as outlined in the Action Plan. In addition, the strategy notes the need for improvement in the effectiveness of student councils in second-level schools, in accordance with the Education Act 1998[34] and the establishment of student councils in primary schools.

The strategy also outlines actions to ensure that children and young people participate in decision-making in non-formal education systems, such as youth clubs and services.

Objective 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.

While all children and young people have contact with the health services at some point, a minority are regular users of hospitals and the health services. This strategy commits to actions that meet the needs of both groups and will enable children and young people to have a voice in decision-making in important policies and services such as Healthy Ireland[35], the National Physical Activity Plan, the National Paediatric Hospital, mental health services, paediatric services, Primary Care Services, Disability Services and other key health and well-being initiatives.

Among the most vulnerable children are those living in the care of the State and those whose families are in receipt of targeted services, such as family support or child protection and welfare services. One of the key objectives of this strategy is the improvement and establishment of mechanisms to ensure the participation of seldom-heard and vulnerable children and young people in decision-making.

In Ireland, the consequences of not listening to the voices of children and young people have been well documented. Reports such as the Kilkenny Incest Case[36], the Roscommon Case[37], the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse[38] and the Report of the Independent Child Death Review Group[39] are stark reminders of the failures of individuals and systems to listen to and act on the voice of the child. To ensure that the failures of the past are not repeated, processes and systems must be in place to protect children by giving them a voice, listening to that voice, empowering them to act and, where appropriate, acting on their behalf.

This strategy sets out measures to ensure that our most vulnerable children are listened to, asked the right questions and better protected with actions that emphasise the importance of staff training and support, and the establishment of reference panels of children in care.

Objective 4: Children and young people will have a voice in the Courts and legal system.

Children and young people come into contact with the law in a variety of circumstances, including in their communities, in the Family Courts, as children of prisoners, as asylum-seekers or migrants, as young offenders, when affected by crime and in detention. Children and young people also have rights under the law and are entitled to be informed of those rights with age-appropriate information. In addition, they are entitled to be consulted and have a voice on legislation, policy and practice in the justice system.

This strategy acknowledges these rights and the Action Plan identifies a number of key initiatives aimed at strengthening the voice of children and young people in the Courts and legal system.

2.2 CREATING A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

The actions outlined in this strategy aim to address the challenges that exist in children and young people being enabled to participate appropriately in decision-making. All children have the capacity to exercise their voice, but need to be helped and supported in age-appropriate ways. Despite the challenges in engaging very young children in decision-making, there is growing recognition that young children are experts in their own lives, with a competence to communicate a unique insight into their experiences and perspectives, and are also skilful communicators employing a range of languages to articulate their views and experience.[40, 41]

There are challenges, too, in engaging older young people in decision-making and democracy, evidenced by the fact that 45% of non-voters in the youngest age category (18-34 years) were not registered to vote, compared with 13% of those aged 55 and over.[42]

This strategy promotes the use of strengths-based and innovative participative methodologies that start from the direct experience, knowledge and interests of participating children and young people. Young people want the focus of participation to reflect the everyday issues of personal relevance to them, such as education, work, public spaces and personal experiences. Equally, they want to 'make a difference', to 'give something back' and to have the outcome of their participation result in improvements for themselves, other young people and their communities. They believe that decision-making processes should be appealing and that this can be achieved through the use of fun activities, incentives and youth-friendly language and spaces.[43]

The use of age-appropriate methods is particularly critical in involving very young children in decision-making. There is a growing body of evidence and good practice on creative methods for involving this age group effectively in decision-making.[44] These methods are already being used by some early education practitioners in Ireland.

In addressing these challenges, the strategy contains a series of additional objectives, which include:

Objective 5: Promoting effective leadership to champion and promote participation of children and young people.

National leadership on participation will be strengthened through the establishment of the DCYA Children and Young People's Participation Hub, which is one of the key actions in this strategy (*see Section 4.3.1 for details on the role and remit of the hub*). The hub will support Government departments and other organisations to develop the leadership and culture required to implement the strategy's actions effectively.

Organisational change is essential to ensuring meaningful participation by children and young people in decisions that affect them. Participation must be embedded within the infrastructure of an organisation and progress beyond one-off, discrete activities, to become an ongoing embedded process.[45, 46] Effective participation demands a whole-systems approach, combining four key elements, namely:[46]

- **Culture:** The ethos of an organisation, shared by all staff and service users, which demonstrates a commitment to participation.
- **Structure:** The planning, development and resourcing of participation evident in an organisation's infrastructure.
- **Practice:** The ways of working, methods for involvement, skills and knowledge that enable children and young people to become involved.
- **Review:** The monitoring and evaluation systems that enable an organisation to evidence change effected by children and young people's participation.

This strategy proposes a range of measures to achieve a whole-systems approach to participation:

- increased participation training for individuals and organisations;
- building capacity;
- raising awareness;
- skills training for young people and adults;
- the adoption of participation practice standards;
- opportunities for practitioners and organisations to network and share information about participation practice;
- embedding a culture of participation within organisations, whereby young people feel that they are valued, listened to and play an important role in influencing decisions that affect their lives.

Organisational culture and strong leadership are particularly critical in ensuring the involvement of seldom-heard children and young people in decision-making. A precondition for the meaningful, effective and sustainable participation of seldom-heard young people is an appropriate organisational infrastructure, including a cultural climate that values inclusiveness, empowerment and participation.[25, 47]

Objective 6: Development of education and training for professionals working with and on behalf of children and young people.

Training for professionals is also critical to participation by children and young people in decision-making. Strategies to give children a voice will only work if there are adults willing to listen to them.[48] Commenting on the need for adults to be receptive to listening to children, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child[49] notes the need to *'provide training on Article 12 [voice of the child] and its application in practice, for all professionals working with, and for, children, including lawyers, judges, police, social workers, community workers, psychologists, caregivers, residential and prison officers, teachers at all levels of the educational system, medical doctors, nurses and other health professionals, civil servants and public officials, asylum officers and traditional leaders'*.

In 2011, the Council of Europe conducted in-depth Strategy reviews on child and youth participation in three countries. The findings from the Strategy review conducted in Finland[50] noted *'the need for better training of professionals working with and for children, including, teachers, legal professionals, healthcare workers, police officers, social workers, NGO representatives and municipal, regional and national civil servants'*.

Actions in the present strategy address the training of professionals and others who work with and on behalf of children and young people. The DCYA Children and Young People's Participation Hub will form partnerships with third-level and further education institutions to oversee development of education on children's rights (including participation in decision-making) for professionals who work with and on behalf of children and young people.

Objective 7: Mainstreaming the participation of children and young people in the development of policy, legislation and research.

As noted in Chapter 1, the right of children and young people to a voice in decisions that affect their lives is Government policy since 2000. Since that time, children and young people have been involved in the development of a number of significant pieces of national policy, legislation and research. *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*: *The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-202*0 also commits to children and young people having a voice in decisions that affect their lives across all five outcome areas of the Policy Framework. Actions in the present strategy commit Government departments and agencies and other stakeholders to involve children and young people in the development of policies, legislation and research.

3. DEFINITION, MODEL AND PRINCIPLES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING

3.1 DEFINING PARTICIPATION

Children and young people's participation in decision-making is defined 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*'.[51, 52, 53, 54]

This definition is consistent with Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which underlies this strategy, and Article 24 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.[3]

Article 12 of the UNCRC (often referred to as the Participation Article) states:

1. 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.
2. 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:

1. 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.
2. In all actions relating to children, whether taken by public authorities or private institutions, the child's best interests must be a primary consideration.
3. 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.

According to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (the expert body that monitors implementation of the UNCRC) and in line with its General Comment on Article 12 of the UNCRC[49], the duty to take account of what children say applies in a variety of contexts. For example, at macro level, children's views should be taken into account in the development of national policies and in the design of services. At micro level, children's views should be taken into account in the individual decision-making that affects their daily lives. The UN Committee has highlighted the relevance of children's involvement in decision-making in schools and local communities, given that these are the spaces where many important decisions are taken that directly affect their lives. These are two of the priorities of the present strategy.

The participation of children and young people in decision-making involves taking children and young people seriously and where possible responding to their suggestions, ideas and views in an appropriate and timely manner.[55]

There are a range of models of participation. The best-known models include Hart's Ladder of Participation[56], first developed by Sherry Arnstein in 1969[57]; Treseder's Degrees of Participation[58]; Shier's Pathways to Participation[59]; Kirby *et al*'s Model of Participation[44]; and Lundy's Model of Participation[60].

This strategy is underpinned by Lundy's Model of Participation as the most appropriate to achieving its objectives. It also outlines a set of core principles of participation (*see Section 3.4*).

3.2 LUNDY'S MODEL OF PARTICIPATION

As noted above, in the process of moving beyond the aspirations of the first National Children's Strategy, published in 2000, innovative models and methods of engagement by children and young people were explored and used by the DCYA. In this process, non-hierarchical models of participation emerged as most effective not only because they value all forms of participation, but also because they highlight the importance of the impact and outcomes of participation. The present strategy is underpinned by Lundy's Model of Participation (*see Figure 2*), which is grounded in the UNCRC and focused on a rights-based approach to involving children in decision-making.

Figure 2: Lundy's Model of Participation[60]

This model provides a way of conceptualising Article 12 of the UNCRC which is intended to focus educational 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.

3.3 VOICE MODEL CHECKLIST

As part of the development of the present strategy, Professor Lundy, in consultation with a strategy development sub-group comprised of representatives from Government departments and agencies, has developed a checklist for participation (*see Figure 3*). This 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.

Although developed to assist in the implementation of Article 12 of the UNCRC, Lundy's model and checklist are applicable to participation of young people up to the age of 24.

Figure 3: Lundy's Voice Model Checklist for Participation

3.4 PRINCIPLES OF PARTICIPATION

The present strategy has 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:

- 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.

4. SUPPORTING IMPLEMENTATION

An extensive literature review[8] on achievements under the National Children's Strategy indicates that many sectors and agencies in Ireland have made efforts to enable children and young people to have a voice in matters that affect them. Policy, legislation and infrastructural mechanisms have been developed which include children and young people's participation as a principle, action or objective. These supports and infrastructure will continue to be critical in embedding participation practice and in ensuring successful implementation of the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making, 2015-2020.

4.1 LEGAL SUPPORTS

There are a number of legislative measures that require the voice of the child to be heard in specific contexts (e.g. in adoption and child care proceedings, and in the justice system). This will continue to direct participatory approaches in a number of discrete areas as outlined below. New legislation should continue to consider how the voice of children can be specified in appropriate legislation that affects their lives.

Child and Family Agency Act 2013

Under the Child and Family Agency Act 2013[62], the functions of Tusla – Child and Family Agency, established in January 2014, are detailed in Section 8 of the Act and include to:

- support and promote the development, welfare and protection of children;
- support and encourage the effective functioning of families.

The working through of this process to benefit the individual child in his or her neighbourhood, home or other place of care requires the effective participation of many people – from service managers and professionals to volunteers, parents and children themselves. As part of developing this needs-led service, professionals must retain a focus on the inclusiveness of children and families as central players in the design, implementation and evaluation of services.

Policy in this area will require that all users of the services, including children, must have a clear say in how the services are performing and how they can be improved.

The legislation underpinning the establishment of Tusla – Child and Family Agency specifically provides the legal requirement to give consideration to the views of the child, as outlined in Section 9 of the Child and Family Agency Act 2013, entitled 'Best interests and views of the child':

- **Section 9(3)**
  The Agency shall, when planning and reviewing the provision of services in connection with the performance of functions under section 8(1)(a), (b) or (c)[62], ensure that consideration is given to the views of children.

- **Section 9(4)**
  The Agency shall, in performing its functions in respect of an individual child under the Child Care Act 1991[63], the Education (Welfare) Act 2000[64], the Adoption Act 2010[65] or section 8(1)(c) or 8(3)[62], ensure that the views of that individual child, where that child is capable of forming and expressing his or her own views, be ascertained and given due weight having regard to the age and maturity of the child.

Other legislation also provides for the voice of the child in relation to decisions that may affect their lives, including:

- Education Act 1998[34]
- Children Act 2001[66]
- Ombudsman for Children Act 2002[67]
- Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014[68]
- Children and Family Relationships Act 2015[69]
- Thirty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Children) Act 2015[6]

Referendum on Children's Rights

The Constitution of Ireland sets out rights for all citizens. In the referendum held on 10th November 2012, the people approved the Thirty-first Amendment of the Constitution for the insertion of a new Article 42A relating to children. This amendment provides, for the first time, a specific affirmation of rights and protections to be enjoyed by children as children. It gives Constitutional status to application of the principles of best interests of the child and hearing the views of the child in stated circumstances. This enhances the position of children in the decision-making framework that flows from the Constitution. The Thirty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Children) Act 2015 was signed into Irish law on 28th April 2015.[6]

Guardian ad litem

In child care proceedings under the Child Care Act 1991[63], a Court may appoint a Guardian ad litem for a child, who will act independently of the parties to the proceedings and has the role of making known the child's views to the Court and of informing the Court's consideration of what is in the child's best interests. Accordingly, the work of the Guardian ad litem is directed towards supporting the Court in its determination of care proceedings in the best interests of the child.

There is wide acceptance that the existing provision in Section 26 of the 1991 Act relating to Guardians ad litem requires reform. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs is committed to bringing forward proposals, at an early date, to significantly reform the provisions in the 1991 Act relating to Guardians ad litem.

4.2 POLICY SUPPORTS

A wide range of national, European and international legal and policy instruments advocate for and seek action by governments and other stakeholders to ensure that the voices of children and young people are brought into decision-making processes, as noted in Chapters 1 and 2 of this document.

At European level, the Structured Dialogue process was established by the Council of the European Union in its *Council Resolution on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010-2018)*.[70] The EU Structured Dialogue process is an instrument to ensure that the opinion of young people is taken into account in defining youth-related policies of the European Union. To achieve this, the process brings together young people and policy-makers across the EU to jointly discuss and feed into youth policy development at national and European levels.

At national level, a number of Government departments and State agencies have since 2000 developed national policies, strategies, plans, sets of standards and frameworks that name the participation of children and young people in decision-making as a key objective, with accompanying commitments.

National policies, strategies and plans include:

- National Play Policy: *Ready, Steady, Play*[71]
- National Recreation Policy for Young People: *Teenspace*[72]
- National Action Plan for Social Inclusion, 2007-2016[73]
- The Agenda for Children's Services[74]
- Report of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship[75]
- National Strategy for Service User Involvement in the Irish Health Service, 2008-2013: *Your Service – Your Say*[76]
- National Youth Justice Strategy, 2008-2010[77]
- National Drugs Strategy (Interim), 2009-2016[78]
- Steering Group Report on a National Substance Misuse Strategy, February 2012[79]
- An Garda Síochána Children and Young Person's Strategy, 2012-2014[80]
- Youth Café Best Practice Guide and Toolkit[81, 82]
- Ireland's National Traveller/Roma Integration Strategy, 2011[83]
- National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives, 2011-2016[84]
- Youth Justice Action Plan, 2014-2018: *Tackling Youth Crime*[85]
- National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020: *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*[1]

National sets of standards include:

- National Standards for Special Care Units[86]
- National Standards for Children's Residential Centres[87]
- National Standards for Foster Care[88]
- Assessment Framework: Detention Schools[89]
- National Standards for the Protection and Welfare of Children[90]
- National Standards for Residential Service for Children and Adults with Disabilities[91]
- Quality Standards for Volunteer-led Youth Groups[92]

National charters and frameworks include:

- Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education[93]
- Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework[94]
- The National Quality Standards Framework for Youth Work[95]
- HSE National Healthcare Charter for Children[96]

The present National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making builds on the above initiatives and aims to broaden and deepen participation by children and young people in the development of policy, legislation and research. An important action in the strategy is to address the need to build capacity and confidence among policy-makers and practitioners in engaging children and young people in decision-making.

4.3 INFRASTRUCTURAL SUPPORTS

The leadership and infrastructure for children and young people's participation in decision-making was developed under the National Children's Strategy[7] and provides the foundations on which the present strategy has been developed and will be implemented. As a result of the importance assigned by Government to children's participation in decision-making, a lead Government department has been assigned responsibility for policy development and implementation in this area. Other important organisations and structures have been developed nationally and locally to support the voice of the child and to directly give children and young people a voice (*see Sections 4.3.1 and 4.3.2*). These supports need to be sustained and evolve for effective implementation of this strategy.

4.3.1 National infrastructure

Department of Children and Youth Affairs

The National Children's Office (NCO) was established in 2001 to oversee implementation of the National Children's Strategy. The Office evolved to become the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) in 2006 and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) in 2011, the first full Government department dedicated to the needs of children and young people. The legislation underpinning the Transfer of Departmental Administration and Ministerial Functions to the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs[97] names one of the functions of the Minister as '*overseeing the development, improvement and monitoring of policies and structures to promote and enable participation by children and young people in decision-making on matters that affect their lives*'. Thus, the participation of children and young people in decision-making is embedded in all aspects of the work of the DCYA.

The DCYA has a dedicated Citizen Participation Unit, which takes the lead national role in ensuring that '*children have a voice on matters that affect their lives and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity*'.[7] The work of this Unit is responsible for much of the progress achieved under Goal 1 of the National Children's Strategy through the development of effective structures for children's participation in decision-making, conducting consultations and dialogues with children and young people, and the development of evidence-based policy in keeping with national and international best practice. The DCYA funds and oversees Comhairle na nÓg, Dáil na nÓg and the Children and Young People's Participation Support Team (*see below*) and has established an effective mechanism for collaboration with academic institutions on children's participation. The Unit collaborates with other Government departments, statutory bodies and non-governmental organisations in providing opportunities for children and young people to have a voice in decisions that affect their lives, with a strong focus on ensuring participation by seldom-heard children and young people.

DCYA Children and Young People's Participation Support Team

The DCYA 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 DCYA. The Team works on building and developing best practice, conducting participation initiatives and supporting existing participation structures.

The regional Participation Officers have a particular role in supporting the work of Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg through:

- providing support, advice and training for organisers of Comhairle na nÓg;
- conducting regional networking sessions for young members of Comhairle na nÓg;
- conducting regional networking and development sessions for adult organisers of Comhairle na nÓg;
- working with the DCYA in overseeing expenditure under the DCYA Comhairle na nÓg Development Fund.

DCYA Children and Young People's Participation Hub

Establishment of a Children and Young People's Participation Hub is the key priority action for the DCYA in the Action Plan accompanying this strategy (*see Chapter 5*). The establishment of this hub, as the national centre of excellence on children and young people's participation, was recommended by Kilkelly *et al* (2015) in the literature review commissioned to inform the development of this strategy.[8]

The hub will provide information, guidance and practical support to Government departments and agencies in delivering commitments outlined in this strategy's Action Plan. It will also become a key driver in supporting the implementation of this strategy and *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*. To achieve this, the hub will champion and promote participation, create resources and training materials, conduct training, document and disseminate learning and establish an online children's participation database. It will also form partnerships with third-level and adult education institutions to oversee development of education on children's rights (including participation in decision-making) for professionals who work with and on behalf of children and young people.

The vision for this Participation Hub includes the establishment by the DCYA of strategic formal partnerships with organisations and initiatives in the statutory and non-statutory sectors to develop and document innovative best practice in children and young people's participation in decision-making. The hub will involve children and young people appropriately in its development and operation.

DCYA Children and Young People's Participation Research Advisory Group

This Advisory Group was established in 2013 to explore mechanisms for the DCYA to collaborate with academics and researchers in documenting children's participation initiatives, led and carried out by the DCYA, and to develop education and training on children's participation.

The group is comprised of officials from the DCYA Citizen Participation Unit and the Research Unit, together with senior academics from third-level institutions with expertise in children's rights and children and young people's participation in decision-making.

The role of the Advisory Group is:

- to support the DCYA in finding suitable academic collaborators to write up and co-author the participation initiatives of the DCYA;
- to support the DCYA in developing education and training materials;
- to collaborate with the DCYA in building a strong evidence base for children's participation in decision-making.

Collaborations on a number of key initiatives were commenced in 2013, including documenting the process and outcomes of the work of the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive. This and future collaborations will be written up for national and international academic journals and used as models of good practice in building a children's participation infrastructure across the country.

Ombudsman for Children's Office

The Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO) was established under the Ombudsman for Children Act 2002.[67] Independent of Government and directly accountable to the Oireachtas, the OCO's overall role is to promote and monitor the rights and welfare of children up to 18 years of age living in Ireland. Its statutory functions encompass the traditional role of an Ombudsman, with the specific mandate to investigate complaints, independently and impartially made by or on behalf of children in relation to the administrative actions (or inactions) of public bodies which may have adversely affected a child or children.

The Ombudsman for Children also has a set of complementary powers under the 2002 Act, which are broadly concerned with promoting children's rights and welfare. Among the OCO's positive obligations under Section 7 of the 2002 Act are:

- to advise any Minister of Government on the development and coordination of policy relating to children;
- to encourage the development of policies, practices and procedures that promote children's rights and welfare;
- to promote awareness among members of the public, including children, of matters relating to children's rights and welfare, including the principles and provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child;
- to consult with children and highlight issues relating to their rights and welfare that are of concern to children themselves;
- to monitor and review the operation of legislation concerning matters relating to children's rights and welfare;
- to undertake, promote or publish research on any matter relating to children's rights and welfare.

Inspection bodies

There are a number of Government bodies that monitor and inspect particular services provided to children and young people and seek their views during regular inspections of various premises.

The **Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA)** is authorised under the Child Care Act 1991[63], the Children Act 2001[66], as amended under the Health Act 2007[98], to monitor and inspect the following services provided to children and young people:

- Children's Residential services;
- Special Care Units;
- Children Detention Schools;
- Foster Care services;
- Child Protection and Welfare services;
- Residential services for children with disabilities.

The **Mental Health Commission (MHC)** is an independent statutory body established under the Mental Health Act 2001[99]. In its inspection role, children and young people under the age of 18 come under the remit of the MHC in instances where they have been admitted to an approved adult mental health service/centre under the Act.

The **Department of Education and Skills' Schools Inspectorate**, a division within the Department, is responsible for the evaluation of primary and post-primary schools and other centres for education.

Tusla – Child and Family Agency provides monitoring and inspection services in relation to private residential services and Early Years services for children and young people.

Dáil na nÓg

Dáil na nÓg is the national youth parliament for young people aged 12-18 years. It was established under the National Children's Strategy to provide a national forum for young people to discuss and vote on issues that affect their lives. Some 200 delegates, elected through the 31 Comhairle na nÓg, participate in the biennial Dáil na nÓg event, hosted by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. As part of the day-long event, delegates get the opportunity to meet with adult decision-makers and policy-makers. The DCYA is responsible for funding and overseeing Dáil na nÓg. The event is independently monitored and evaluated. *See* www.comhairlenanog.ie for further information.

Comhairle na nÓg National Showcase

The Comhairle na nÓg National Showcase is held every alternate year to showcase the work of the 31 Comhairle na nÓg to decision-makers. It is hosted by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and funded by the DCYA. The 2014 National Showcase was held on 20th November to celebrate the work of Comhairle na nÓg and to mark the 25th anniversary of the signing of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. At this event, the 500 young participants discussed and voted on the aspect of their lives on which they most need a voice in decision-making – to have a stronger voice in their education, including on policy, curriculum, subject choice and in the running of schools. The event was attended by An Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, TD, and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Dr. James Reilly, TD.

Comhairle na nÓg National Executive

Each of the 31 Comhairle na nÓg elects one representative to the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive (previously Dáil na nÓg Council). The role of the National Executive is to take action on behalf of young people on the top recommendation voted at the previous Dáil na nÓg. The National Executive has a term of office of two years and is facilitated and supported by the DCYA to ensure that its members get the opportunity to engage with appropriate Ministers, policy-makers, Oireachtas Committees and other decision-makers. Over the years, some extremely important improvements have been achieved by young people from Comhairle na nÓg through successive Dáil na nÓg Councils and Comhairle na nÓg National Executives.

An independent evaluation of this body was undertaken in 2009-2010 and drew very positive conclusions about its impact on the young people directly involved, who reported the development of skills in public speaking, research methods and advocacy. The evaluation also reported direct impact on policy development.[100]

As noted in the Introduction to this document, the implementation structures for *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* include the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive. Children and young people from the National Executive will have a formal and direct engagement with the Children and Young People's Policy Consortium in identifying issues of importance to their peers and act as a consultative group on issues that need the views of children and young people or youth-proofing.

4.3.2 Local infrastructure

Comhairle na nÓg

Comhairle na nÓg are local councils for children and young people, aged 12-17, that give them a voice on the development of local policies and services. They were established under the National Children's Strategy and are the recognised key national structure for participation by children and young people in local decision-making in all 31 Local Authorities around the country. They are supported by the DCYA Comhairle na nÓg Development Fund, which has been managed by Pobal since January 2011 in cooperation with the DCYA. Analytical data on progress achieved under the Development Fund is collected by Pobal and evaluated by the DCYA as part of the application and reporting process. These data provide the DCYA with invaluable information on reviewing progress and identifying areas for improvement. *See* www.comhairlenanog.ie for further information.

The Comhairle na nÓg get young people's voices heard in two ways: by working on topics of importance to young people and by acting as a consultative forum for adult decision-makers in the locality. Every Comhairle na nÓg holds an Annual General Meeting (AGM), to which children and young people are invited from schools, local youth clubs and other projects. Attendance usually ranges between 80-150 young people at each local AGM. There, participants work on identifying local topics of importance to them. A Comhairle na nÓg Committee is elected at the AGM and is responsible for working on the topics identified during the coming year, as well as being the consultative forum that works with decision-makers.

Below are some key statistical data gathered under the evaluation of the Comhairle na nÓg Development Fund 2014 by Pobal:[101]

• Number of young people across Ireland who attended Comhairle na nÓg AGMs	5,032
• Total number of Comhairle na nÓg meetings held across the country	805
• Average number of meetings of individual Comhairle na nÓg per annum	24
• Total number of young people elected to Comhairle na nÓg Committees	1,036
• Average number of young people elected to Comhairle na nÓg Committees	30

Percentage gender breakdown of Comhairle na nÓg membership:

- Total female = 57%
- Total male = 43%

Percentage age range breakdown of Comhairle na nÓg membership:

- 12 – 15 years = 38%
- 16 – 18 years = 62%

The reports of the independent evaluations of the Comhairle na nÓg Development Fund covering the period 2007-2010 [102, 103, 104] and monitoring and evaluation conducted by Pobal during 2011-2014 [101] highlight:

- the importance of the rigorous funding criteria imposed by the DCYA;
- the significant improvements in the operation of Comhairle na nÓg resulting from the Fund;
- the value of the support, information and training provided by the three regional Participation Officers contracted by the DCYA through Foróige and Youth Work Ireland;
- the important role played by the Participation Officers in creating a strong link between Comhairle na nÓg and the DCYA, including the provision of information on expenditure under the Development Fund.

Children and Young People's Services Committees

Previously known as Children's Services Committees, the Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSCs) arose from the DCYA's 'Working Together for Children' Initiative [105], which had the aim of developing and implementing a local planning model for interagency working to improve outcomes for children, young people and their families in local county areas. The CYPSCs bring together a diverse group of local agencies to engage in joint planning of services for children and are firmly embedded in *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* as an important vehicle for local interagency work. As the local delivery mechanism for the coordination and planning of services for children and young people, CYPSCs are integral to achieving the outcomes and goals set out in the National Policy Framework.

The age remit of CYPSCs runs from 0 to 24 in alignment with *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*, ensuring a more connected and coordinated response to the needs and aspirations of children and young people.

Both the CYPSC National Steering Group and each local CYPSC continue to work to ensure meaningful participation by children and young people. Each CYPSC is required to produce a 3-year Children and Young People's Plan, which provides for national policy and local needs and priorities. The plans are contemporary, relevant and timely, accommodating and anticipating themes and trends affecting the child and youth population of the area. In developing its plan, each CYPSC will proactively operate mechanisms to ensure that children and young people are informing the committee's work through implementation of the present strategy. As part of the Action Plan for the present strategy, guidance on engaging children and young people in decision-making in the work of CYPSCs will be developed by the DCYA, in consultation with CYPSCs.

Student councils

The Education Act 1998 [34] makes provision for student councils to be set up at post-primary level with a view to providing students with the opportunity to be involved in the affairs of the school. An audit of student councils, in the form of an online survey, was undertaken by the former OMCYA in 2010 [23] (albeit with a poor response rate – only 28.5% of schools responded to the audit). It identified that student councils have become permanent participation structures, with 93% of all responding student councils meeting at least once a month and just over half meeting more than once a month. The student councils are run by students and are usually chaired by a young person.

Other findings noted in the audit include:

- 78% of student councils have been consulted by their school management regarding school rules (e.g. the Code of Behaviour) and 62% have been responsible for changes in rules;
- student councils enjoy relatively high levels of autonomy to set their agenda and make their own decisions;
- 37% of student councils are represented on other school committees.

However, the young people involved as members of student councils identified the key benefits of participation as personal – they considered their main achievements to be the development of their own leadership and communication skills, as well as increased responsibility.

While the majority of student council members agreed that making sure students have a say was their main role, only 60% said that they always consulted with the student body on important issues. Furthermore, the survey found that the least positive relationship experienced by members of student councils was with other students in their schools, while the most positive relationship was with principals and teachers.

The Action Plan for the present strategy includes specific commitments to enhance the operation of student councils in second-level schools and also to promote their establishment in primary schools.

4.3.3 International infrastructure

EU Structured Dialogue

The EU Structured Dialogue process gives young people all over Europe a chance to have their say about decisions affecting their lives (*see* http://ec.europa.eu/youth/policy/implementation/dialogue_en.htm). It is a continuous process that brings together young people and policy-makers across the European Union to jointly discuss, formulate and put forward proposals for the development of youth policy at national and European level.

The Structured Dialogue is implemented in work cycles of 18 months, each focusing on one topic (overall thematic priority), which is discussed by young people and policy-makers in all EU Member States. The results of these discussions serve as a common basis for the joint deliberations between young people and Ministry representatives from all Member States at the EU Youth Conferences, organised successively by each Presidency every 6 months. The policy proposals resulting from the EU Youth Conferences are then brought to the Member States in the Council of the European Union, which decides on whether to include them in Council documents setting common practices and standards for youth policy in the EU.

A National Working Group, with representatives from the relevant stakeholders and chaired by the DCYA, has overall responsibility for Structured Dialogue in Ireland. The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) plays a key role in supporting the implementation of Structured Dialogue.

As noted in the Introduction to this document, the implementation structures for *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* include young people from the Structured Dialogue Working Group. Young people from this group have a formal and direct engagement with the Children and Young People's Policy Consortium in identifying issues of importance to their peers and act as a consultative group on issues that need the views of young people or youth-proofing.

5. ACTION PLAN

The commitments outlined in this **Action Plan for the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making, 2015-2020** 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*. Implementation of actions in this strategy will be monitored and evaluated under the structures established for *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*.

All commitments and actions in this strategy will be 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;
- collection of data, monitoring and evaluation of children and young people's participation initiatives.

The commitments in this Action Plan are the agreed actions for 2015. Additional commitments have been agreed for 2016 and 2017, which will be published at the start of each year. A full list of Government departments and agencies with commitments in this Action Plan is provided in Appendix 1.

Commitment in *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making* (**bold tick** indicates lead Government department or agency)	DCYA	DES	DoH	DJE	DECLG	DTTAS	DAHG	HSE	Tusla	Local Gov	AGS	Others
Commitment in *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures:* **G14 Consult with children and young people on policies and issues that affect their lives.**												
G14.1 The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) will publish the first National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making.	✓											
G14.2 Government departments and agencies will consult with children and young people appropriately in the development of policy, legislation, research and services, with the support of the DCYA.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
G14.3 Local Community Development Committees will collaborate with Children and Young People's Services Committees and Comhairle na nÓg in the planning process for the community element of Local Economic and Community Plans (LECPs).										✓		✓
G14.4 Local Authorities will integrate local children and young people's participation into Housing Regeneration Programmes funded under the National Regeneration Programme.										✓		

Commitment in *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making* (**bold tick** indicates lead Government department or agency)	DCYA	DES	DoH	DJE	DECLG	DTTAS	DAHG	HSE	Tusla	Local Gov	AGS	Others
G14.5 All bodies responsible for the delivery of Local Area Plans (LAPs) will be required to ensure the direct participation of local children and young people in the aspects of the LAP relevant to their lives.										✓		
G14.6 Children and Young People's Services Committees will put structures and mechanisms in place to ensure children and young people's active participation in planning, development, delivery and evaluation of children's services.	✓								✓			
G14.7 The participation of local children in the development of play spaces and play facilities will be included as a criterion for the provision of funding in 2015 for National Play Day and National Recreation Week, and for the DCYA Capital Funding Scheme for play and recreation.	✓									✓		
G14.8 The Local Government Management Agency will ensure that children and young people (who are local service users) are included as decision-makers in library design and development processes, and in the planning of child and youth-centred initiatives, activities, events and actions to be held in public libraries.	✓									✓		
G14.9 Children and young people will be involved in decision-making about cultural programme content and their feedback will be sought on programmes offered in national cultural institutions.							✓					✓
G14.10 A forum will be established to enable children to participate in decisions that may impact on their participation in sport. This forum will explore existing models, such as the participation structures being established in the GAA, to be used or adapted by other national governing bodies of sport to facilitate the involvement of children and young people in decision-making.						✓						
G14.11 Consultation with children and young people about programmes and regulations for Gaeltacht summer camp schemes, Gaeltacht summer colleges and language support schemes in Gaeltacht schools will be established as a condition of funding.							✓					
G14.12 The views of children and young people on the services provided will be invited on the Smarter Travel and Bike Week programmes.						✓						

Commitment in *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making* (**bold tick** indicates lead Government department or agency)	DCYA	DES	DoH	DJE	DECLG	DTTAS	DAHG	HSE	Tusla	Local Gov	AGS	Others
G14.13 The inclusion of children and young people in the consultation process for the next Green Schools Programme will be incorporated as a qualifying criterion.						✓						
G14.14 Children and youth groups will be consulted during public consultation phases when reviewing the National Cycling Policy Framework.						✓						
G14.15 Organisations involved with the development of water safety awareness programmes will be advised to involve young people and children in the consultation and development process.						✓						
G14.16 Countrywide consultation with children and young people, including seldom-heard children, will be held to allow input into the Ireland 2016 programme in a meaningful way.	✓						✓					
G14.17 The participation of children in decision-making will be included as a core principle and aim in the National Early Years Strategy.	✓											
G14.18 Non-governmental organisations will continue to support the implementation of the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme, which includes a Standard (Standard 4) on consultation and on including the voice of the child in issues relating to their daily experiences in Early Years settings.	✓	✓										✓
G14.19 The Department of Children and Youth Affairs will develop a National Youth Strategy, involving young people in its development and including their participation in decision-making as a core principle and aim.	✓											✓
G14.20 Young people will continue to be consulted as part of the revision of curricula, including the Primary School Curriculum and the Junior Cycle Student Awards.		✓										
G14.21 The Department of Education and Skills will ensure that: • the views of children and young people will be reflected in the Digital Strategy for Schools; • the views of young people are gathered through the Webwise Youth Advisory Panel.		✓										
G14.22 The National Educational Psychological Service will ensure the voice of the child contributes to the development of policy and service delivery in relation to the provision of psychological services to schools and children, where this is appropriate.		✓										

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G14.23 Audit current practices for hearing the voice of the child within the statutory Tusla Educational Welfare Services, the School Completion Programme, the Home–School Community Liaison Scheme and Home Education.									✓			
G14.24 Devise strategies to hear the voice of seldom-heard children in the education system in relation to their attendance, participation and retention issues.									✓			
G14.25 Ensure that the voice of the child is a core part of the services and supports provided to schools and children by monitoring and evaluating Educational Welfare Services and through the implementation of Tusla's 'One Child, One Team, One Plan' intervention model.									✓			
G14.26 Students will be consulted on teacher education and a range of other matters. Appropriate mechanisms for consulting students will be determined in consultation with relevant agencies.		✓										
G14.27 Through its consultative forum and other consultative processes, the National Council for Special Education will continue to consult with children and young people and/or their representative groups.		✓										
G14.28 Traveller representative groups will be required to include the voices of children and young people in their engagement with the Department of Education and Skills.		✓										
G14.29 Young people will be provided with opportunities to participate in decision-making in the design, delivery and evaluation of youth services and programmes through implementation of the Quality Standards Framework for Staff-led Youth Projects and Quality Standards for Volunteer-led Youth Groups.	✓											
G14.30 Apprentices will continue to have their views represented on the National Apprenticeship Advisory Committee through their union representation. The views of apprentices will also inform the work of the Education and Training Boards, the Institutes of Technology and SOLAS – the Further Education and Training Authority.		✓										

Commitment in *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making* (**bold tick** indicates lead Government department or agency)	DCYA	DES	DoH	DJE	DECLG	DTTAS	DAHG	HSE	Tusla	Local Gov	AGS	Others
G14.31 The Healthy Ireland Council will explore and use appropriate means of engagement with children and young people in order to seek their views.			✓					✓				
G14.32 The Department of Health will commit to provide opportunities for consultation with children and young people to facilitate their views in areas of key policy development, as appropriate, and will collaborate with the DCYA to facilitate such engagement.	✓		✓									
G14.33 The Department of Health will consult with young people as part of the development of the National Obesity Strategy and any health promotion campaigns arising from that strategy.	✓		✓									
G14.34 The HSE will ensure that the National Healthcare Charter for Paediatric Services will include mechanisms for obtaining feedback from children about the services they receive.								✓				
G14.35 Children and young people will be included in the development and design of the National Children's Hospital and in its ongoing operation.			✓					✓				
G14.36 A Feedback and Complaints Policy will be developed by Tulsa – Children and Family Agency and ongoing feedback will be sought from children and young people receiving services from the Agency, to inform practice and service improvements.									✓			
G14.37 The Mental Health Commission will ensure that the inspection reports of the Inspector of Mental Health Services will include information on the availability and use of the Toolkit for Young Mental Health Service Users, which was developed with young people and promotes the voice of the child.												✓
G14.38 The Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) will commence development work on a children's forum to facilitate consultation on how it carries out its work and to ascertain the issues that matter most to children.												✓

Commitment in *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making* (**bold tick** indicates lead Government department or agency)	DCYA	DES	DoH	DJE	DECLG	DTTAS	DAHG	HSE	Tusla	Local Gov	AGS	Others
G14.39 The Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) will carry out inspections of and publish reports on residential and foster care services for children and young people in care to ascertain if services promote a child-centred approach which recognises their right to be listened to and to participate in decisions made about them, taking into account their age, maturity and best interests in line with the National Standards for Children's Residential Services, National Foster Care Standards, Child Care (Placement of Children in Residential Care) Regulations 1995, Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations 1995 and Child Care (Placement of Children with Relatives) Regulations 1995.												✓
G14.40 HSE Disability Services will develop a framework document on how children's voice will inform the design, implementation and evaluation of disability services.								✓				
G14.41 All relevant Justice stakeholders will consult with young people regarding justice policies and issues that affect their lives.				✓								
G14.42 The DCYA will bring forward proposals to significantly reform the provisions in the Child Care Act 1991 relating to Guardians ad litem.	✓											
G14.43 Devise regulations setting standards with regard to the qualifications, role and performance of the experts provided for under the Children and Family Relationships Act 2015 to ascertain the views of the child in private family law proceedings.				✓								
G14.44 In reviewing its services, the Legal Aid Board's External Consultative Panel will seek to improve its mechanisms for hearing the voice of children and young people in the context of examining the impact on children and young people of the Board's policies and procedures.				✓								
G14.45 The DCYA will ensure that children and young people's views will be included in the development of the national outcome indicators and the national well-being indicators.	✓											

Commitment in *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making* (**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 *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*:												
G15 **Develop and implement a National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making to strengthen efforts to ensure children and young people are supported to express their views in all matters affecting them and to have those views given due weight, including those of 'seldom-heard' children.**												
G15.1 The DCYA will develop and publish a National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making.	✓											
G15.2 Children and young people's participation will be included by all relevant Government departments in the objectives and actions of their Statements of Strategy.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					
G15.3 Building on existing mechanisms, incremental progress will be made on funding criteria for publicly funded programmes and schemes that are relevant to children and young people, requiring consultation with children and young people.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
G15.4 Government departments and agencies that provide services for children and young people will develop child- and youth-friendly feedback and complaints mechanisms, with the assistance of the DCYA Children and Young People's Participation Hub.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
G15.5 Data collection, evaluation and monitoring of children and young people's participation initiatives will be conducted to ensure robust findings and outcomes that influence the development of policies and services.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Commitment in *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making* (**bold tick** indicates lead Government department or agency)	DCYA	DES	DoH	DJE	DECLG	DTTAS	DAHG	HSE	Tusla	Local Gov	AGS	Others
G15.6 Government departments and agencies will ensure the involvement of children and young people in reporting on international instruments relevant to their lives and well-being, including the Universal Periodic Review, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, World Health Organization reviews and strategies, and Council of Europe reviews and strategies.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
G15.7 Children and young people will be involved in informing the implementation of *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* through the formal engagement of the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive and the EU Structured Dialogue (Youth) Group with the implementation structures of *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*.	✓											
G15.8 A Strategy for the Participation of Children and Young People will be published and disseminated by Tusla – Children and Family Agency, to ensure that children and young people (individually and collectively) participate in the design, development, delivery and evaluation of all services delivered and commissioned by the Agency. This strategy will be compatible with and based on the DCYA National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making.									✓			
G15.9 The concepts of the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making will be incorporated in the Local Authority plans for the recipients of the 2014-2016 Active Travel Towns awards.										✓		
G15.10 Where relevant, SOLAS strategies and all Education and Training Boards will be required to incorporate the principles and objectives of the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making in their 5-year Strategy Statements.		✓										
G15.11 A framework to include the voices of children and young people in the design, implementation and evaluation of health and well-being services will be developed, commencing in 2015, incorporating the principles and objectives of the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making.			✓					✓				

Commitment in *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making* (**bold tick** indicates lead Government department or agency)	DCYA	DES	DoH	DJE	DECLG	DTTAS	DAHG	HSE	Tusla	Local Gov	AGS	Others
Commitment in *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures:*												
G16 Strengthen participation in decision-making for health and well-being at community level.												
G16.1 Young people will be centrally involved in the development and management of drug and alcohol-free venues and programmes for young people (e.g. youth cafés, alcohol-free music and dance venues, and sports venues), with an emphasis on those most at risk.			✓									✓
G16.2 The Health Service Executive (HSE) will develop mechanisms, including consultation and feedback mechanisms, for the participation of service users, families and carers in the decision-making processes of mental health services for young people at local and national levels, including any new significant changes that are being introduced. These will be developed and utilised with partners in young people's mental health. This may include organisations such as the Children's Mental Health Coalition and mechanisms such as the national Headstrong Youth Advisory Panel (YAP) and local Headstrong YAPs as possible partners in consultation and feedback in 2015.								✓				
G16.3 Children and young people will be consulted by services seeking to respond to parental substance misuse or substance misuse in families as targeted by the 'Hidden Harm' initiative.			✓					✓				
G16.4 Children and young people will be included in consultations with communities to inform the development of Primary Care Services.			✓					✓				
G16.5 The Health Service Executive (HSE) will share best practice in adolescent mental health advocacy services with key stakeholders in 2015.								✓				
G16.6 The Health Service Executive (HSE) will involve children and young people who have caring responsibilities, as appropriate, as partners in care planning and provision by health and personal social service providers and particularly by the Primary Care Teams.								✓				

Commitment in *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making* (**bold tick** indicates lead Government department or agency)	DCYA	DES	DoH	DJE	DECLG	DTTAS	DAHG	HSE	Tusla	Local Gov	AGS	Others
G16.7 Mechanisms will be developed for involving children and young people in the assessment of local needs and in evaluation processes as part of a monitoring and evaluation framework for the Area-Based Childhood (ABC) Programme.	**✓**											
G16.8 Comhairle na nÓg will be represented on Education and Training Boards.		**✓**										
G.16.9 Tulsa – Child and Family Agency will commission a National Training Pack and Toolkit on participation and Quality Assurance Frameworks on participation.									**✓**			✓
G16.10 Tulsa – Child and Family Agency will develop and implement training and support for staff in children's participation, including the development of a toolkit for participatory practice and a toolkit for the engagement of children and young people in the commissioning processes of Tusla.									**✓**			
Commitment in *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures:*												
G17 Create mechanisms to provide children and young people with the opportunity to be heard in primary and post-primary schools and centres for education through Student Councils or other age-appropriate mechanisms.												
G17.1 The Department of Education and Skills will encourage more primary schools and all post-primary schools to establish student councils. Data from the latest Lifeskills Survey (2012) indicate that 14% of primary schools and 97% of post-primary schools have established student councils.	✓	**✓**										
G17.2 The Department of Education and Skills Schools Inspectorate will review its current practices on student participation in the inspection process with a view to enhancing the level and quality of student participation.	✓	**✓**										
G17.3 The Teaching Council will consult students on teacher education and a range of other matters. Appropriate mechanisms for consulting students will be determined in consultation with relevant agencies.		**✓**										
G17.4 The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning will analyse the data from the first full Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) (2014). A report based on improving the student experience will be published in 2015.		**✓**										

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G17.5 Students' voices will continue to be represented through mechanisms such as the National Forum's 'Teaching Heroes' awards scheme, in partnership with the Union of Students in Ireland (USI). The outputs of the data gathered through the 'Teaching Heroes' awards will inform the design by the National Forum of a professional development framework for teachers in higher education, to be established in 2015. Student representation will continue, through the USI, on the boards of the Higher Education Authority and the National Forum, as well as a range of committees and at policy forums.		✓										
G17.6 The DCYA will engage proactively with the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals to build a stronger role for student councils to promote the value of the student voice in schools.	✓											
Commitment in *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures:* **G18 Create mechanisms to provide children with the opportunity to be heard in judicial proceedings affecting them, including through independent representatives where appropriate.**												
G18.1 Mediators from the Family Mediation Service will ensure children's views are heard and taken into account in the process of family mediation, as appropriate, to ensure the best interests of the child are upheld.				✓								
G18.2 A service-level agreement with Empowering People in Care (EPIC) has been agreed to make children in detention aware of their rights and their right to make a complaint. This will be developed and implemented in 2015.				✓					✓			✓
Commitment in *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures:* **G19 Facilitate children and young people in care to have meaningful participation in their care planning and decision-making.**												
G19.1 Tulsa – Children and Family Agency will implement the 'Me and My Care' care plan templates nationally.									✓			
Commitment in *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures:* **G20 Ensure the views presented by children and young people in participatory forums and consultations are taken into account by the formal political and policy-making process, and that feedback to the young people is always provided in return.**												
G20.1 Establish terms of reference and mechanisms for the engagement between the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive and the structures established to oversee the implementation of *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*.	✓											✓

Commitment in *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making* (**bold tick** indicates lead Government department or agency)	DCYA	DES	DoH	DJE	DECLG	DTTAS	DAHG	HSE	Tusla	Local Gov	AGS	Others
G20.2 The role and capacity of Comhairle na nÓg will be enhanced through the development and implementation of a 5-year Comhairle na nÓg Development Plan, aligned to Local Government structures and policies, and including children under the age of 12 and children and young people who are seldom heard.	**✓**		✓		✓					✓		✓
G20.3 The Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (DECLG) will nominate a Departmental representative to become a member of the Steering Committee established to support the development and implementation of a 5-year Comhairle na nÓg Development Plan.					**✓**							
G20.4 Ongoing support and improvement of Comhairle na nÓg will be maintained through the administration and oversight of the Comhairle na nÓg Development Fund, awarded to Local Authorities.	**✓**				✓					✓		✓
G20.5 Support and training to Comhairle na nÓg across the country will be maintained to ensure the development of best practice.	**✓**				✓					✓		✓
G20.6 Young people under 18 will have a voice in matters that affect their lives at a national policy level through Dáil na nÓg. In following up recommendations from Dáil na nÓg, the work of the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive will be facilitated by the DCYA and other relevant Government departments and agencies.	**✓**	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
G20.7 Young people up to the age of 25 will have the opportunity to have a voice in decisions that affect their lives through Ireland's participation in the EU Structured Dialogue process across Member States of the European Union.	**✓**	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓
Commitment in *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures:*												
G21 Establish a Children and Young People's Participation Hub to support Government departments and agencies in the implementation of the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making.												
G21.1 The DCYA will establish a Children and Young People's Participation Hub to become the national centre for excellence on children and young people's participation. The hub will champion and promote participation, create resources and training materials, conduct training, document and disseminate learning, and establish an online children's participation database.	**✓**											

Commitment in *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making* (**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.	**✓**											✓
G21.5 Practical toolkits will be developed to provide guidance to Local Authorities on effective methodologies for consulting with children and young people in planning and regeneration projects. The DECLG will commence collaboration with the DCYA on the development of practical toolkits.	✓				**✓**							
G21.6 The Mental Health Commission will undertake training for the Mental Health Inspectorate in meeting with child service users.												**✓**
G21.7 A national awareness campaign will be conducted to promote a culture of children and young people's right to participate in decision-making.	**✓**											✓
G21.8 Through the Children and Young People's Participation Hub, the DCYA (in collaboration with other government departments and agencies) will form partnerships with third-level and adult education institutions to oversee development of education and training on children's right to participation in decision-making for professionals who work with and on behalf of children and young people.	**✓**	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
G21.9 A mechanism will be developed to ensure that initiatives undertaken by Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSCs) to involve children and young people in decision-making are regularly reported to the DCYA.	**✓**											✓
G21.10 A mechanism to share information and resources between CYPSCs and the Children and Young People's Participation Hub will be identified and developed.	**✓**											✓

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Commitment in *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures:*												
5.13 Work with children and young people to help them contribute to their own community and safety, ensuring a positive relationship between An Garda Síochána, children and young people.												
5.13.1 An Garda Síochána will contribute to realising this outcome by: • The delivery of the Garda Schools Programmes (Primary and Secondary Schools). • Through the Garda Youth Diversion Programme, An Garda Síochána will engage with young people who engage in criminal behaviour to establish their needs and priorities. • An Garda Síochána will engage with young people, youth organisations and educational institutions on issues relating to policing, crime prevention and road safety.	✓	✓									✓	
5.13.2 The Joint Policing Committees will improve their engagement with young people's organisations such as Comhairle na nÓg in discussions of local crime and community safety issues.	✓			✓							✓	

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Government departments and agencies with commitments in Action Plan for National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making, 2015-2020

Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA)

- Participation, Play and Recreation and Culture Unit
- Research Unit
- Early Years Unit
- Irish Youth Justice Service
- Youth Affairs Unit
- Policy Innovation Unit
- Children and Young People's Services Committees

Tusla – Child and Family Agency

Department of Environment, Community and Local Government (DECLG)

- Local Authority
- Local Community Development Committee
- Relevant Housing Authority
- Local Government Management Authority

Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (DTTAS)

- Irish Sports Council/Sports Partnerships
- Rural Transport Network
- National Transport Authority

Department of Health (DoH)

- Healthy Ireland Council

Health Service Executive (HSE)

- HSE, Mental Health Services

Mental Health Commission

Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA)

Drug and Alcohol Task Forces

Department of Education and Skills (DES)

- National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)
- The Teaching Council
- National Council for Special Education (NCSE)
- SOLAS – The Further Education and Training Authority
- Higher Education Institutions

Department of Justice and Equality (DJE)

- All relevant justice stakeholders
- Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission
- Legal Aid Board
- Family Mediation Services
- An Gardaí Síochána
- Joint Policing Committees

Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (DAHG)

Others

Non-statutory and other providers

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs)

Appendix 2: Examples of DCYA dialogues and consultations with children and young people

- Consultation with young people to develop questions on sexual behaviours and health to inform the *Growing Up in Ireland* study (2015).
- Consultations with children and young people about the ideal qualities for the Ombudsman for Children (2014-2015).
- Consultations with children and young people as part of the development of the Digital Strategy for Schools (2014).
- Consultation with children and young people on how they have/can have their voices heard in the GAA (2014).
- 'Young Voices – Have Your Say' consultations with young people (aged 15-30) on the Social Inclusion of young people. These consultations are conducted every 6 months as part of the EU Structured Dialogue process (2013 and 2014).
- Consultations with young people on the transition to third-level education (2013).
- Consultations with children and young people to develop domains and questions for the Health Behaviour of School-aged Children (HBSC) Survey (2012 and 2013).
- Consultations with children and young people to inform development of the Health Behaviour of School-aged Children (HBSC) Survey (2012 and 2013).
- Consultations with children and young people as part of the development of *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020* (2011).
- Consultations with children and young people for the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in Primary Schools (2011).
- Consultations with children and young people in the care of the State (2010).
- Consultations with young people on reform of Junior Cycle in second-level schools (2010).
- Consultation with young people on the White Paper on Crime (2010).
- Children and young people's views about being in the care of the State (2010).
- Consultations with children and young people on the new Paediatric Hospital (2009).
- Consultations with children and young people on Teenage Mental Health: What Helps and What Hurts (2008).
- Consultations with children and young people on the development of the Irish Youth Justice Strategy (2007).
- Consultations with young people on the misuse of alcohol among young people (2007).
- Consultations with children and young people on the development of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship (2006).
- Consultations with young people on the age of consent for sexual activity (2006).
- Consultations with young people on the development of the National Recreation Policy (2005).
- Consultations with children and young people on the development of the Children's Code of Advertising (2004).

Appendix 3: Case histories illustrating effective participative processes

1. Ombudsman for Children's Office – Big Ballot

In November 2007, the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO) conducted the Big Ballot – the largest ever national poll of children in Ireland. During the poll, over 75,000 children from 500 schools and education centres (Youthreach and Traveller Centres) voted on what mattered most to them. The five issues that emerged were: Education; Having a Voice; Play and Recreation; Family and Alternative Care; and Health, Wealth and Material Well-being.

In addition to the poll, the Ombudsman and her team toured more than 30 participating schools to listen to what children and young people had to say on the issues. The results of the poll were communicated back to schools. The issue of Family and Alternative Care, followed by Play and Recreation, topped the poll and the OCO adopted the issue as a strategic priority for the Office.

During 2007, as part of the preparation for the Big Ballot, the OCO met with a range of groups of children and young people, including children in care, children living in areas of deprivation and children from ethnic minority backgrounds. As part of this consultation, the OCO met with a group of separated children and many of the issues they raised were a cause of concern to the OCO.

2. TV advertisement on young people's mental health

In October 2008, the former Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA), in partnership with the Department of Health and the Health Service Executive, conducted a series of national consultations with 277 teenagers aged 12-18 years. The theme of the consultations was *Teenage Mental Health: What Helps and What Hurts*. Consultation participants were informed that the outcomes of the consultations would feed into the development of an advertising and public awareness campaign on mental health aimed at teenagers and inform future developments in mental health services for young people.

In early 2009, the HSE commissioned quantitative research that obtained the views of 505 young people on issues that affect their mental health. This research confirmed the findings from *Teenage Mental Health: What Helps and What Hurts* (2009) on the negative impact on teenagers of poor self-image, school and exam pressures, family problems, bullying and isolation.

Concepts for the TV advertisement and awareness campaign were focus-tested in several forums of young people around the country, including a group of young people who had taken part in the consultations.

A reference panel of 25 young people was established to become involved in the development of the awareness campaign at every stage of the process. Young people from the Dáil na nÓg Council, the OMCYA Children and Young People's Forum, Headstrong,

Spunout and other organisations were involved in this panel. They advised the marketing company on everything – from the ideal accent for the main character in the advert to the most appropriate clothes for the actors – to appeal to the widest possible audience of teenagers. They also advised on the TV time-slots for screening the advert to ensure viewing by a maximum number of teenagers.

The advert features a teenage boy with a hoodie, who cannot share his feelings with anyone. Young people from the reference panel featured as extras in the advert.

The teen mental health TV/cinema advertisement, outdoor advertising and on-line campaign (www.letsomeoneknow.ie) were launched on 10th October 2009 — World Mental Health Day.

Post-campaign launch quantitative research conducted with 505 young people found that the TV/cinema advert had an exceptionally high level of recall and awareness among teenagers (87%). A recall/awareness rate of 49% is the norm in the Republic of Ireland for TV/cinema advertisements from a cross-section of industries.

The research further indicates that the TV/cinema advertisement had the following impacts:

- it motivated 3 in 4 young people to talk to someone if something is getting them down;
- it encouraged them to find out more about looking after their mental health;
- it made them think differently about mental health.

The unusually strong impact of the TV/cinema advertising campaign highlights the value of the intensive and prolonged methodology used in obtaining the views of young people and involving them in every stage of development and delivery of the campaign.

Over three years later, the advert continues to be screened on a regular basis in cinemas throughout Ireland.

3. NCCA consultation on Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

Aistear, the new framework for all children from birth to 6 years, was launched in 2009. Children were involved through a research study called *Listening for Children's Voices: Children as partners in the Framework for Early Learning*. Children were asked what they enjoyed doing, who they liked being with and places they enjoyed being in. Twelve children in 11 settings took part from different areas of the country, ranging in age from 9 months to 6 years and including 4 girls and 8 boys. They were consulted and involved in the research study through the methodology of portraiture, which allowed for the description of the rich, complex and diverse experiences of children within the socio-cultural context of their settings. The consultation is interesting since it sought the views of infants and very young children through the description and analysis of their portraits. Portraits of participating children are available on the NCCA website.

4. Leitrim County Council – Play and Recreation Policy, 2009-2013

Leitrim County Council's *Play and Recreation Policy, 2009-2013* has formulated four action points under a 'giving voice' objective, which ensures children and young people's involvement:

- Leitrim County Council will utilise Leitrim Youth Council to inform the development, review and evaluation of relevant County Strategies/Plans, particularly in relation to play and recreation facilities/actions/programmes.
- Young people will be included in the consultations for the provision of recreational facilities (youth-specific and general community).
- Leitrim County Council will encourage Leitrim Youth Council to actively promote and seek the inclusion of young people and their views in relevant community and statutory councils, committees and organisations.
- Leitrim County Council through Leitrim Youth Council will involve young people in the provision of Local Authority arts and culture activities.

5. Listening to Children in Care

In 2010, the DCYA conducted consultations with 210 children and young people who live in the care of the State from all over Ireland. The report of the consultations was called *Listen to Our Voices: Hearing children and young people living in the care of the State* (2012). The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs invited children and young people who had taken part in the consultations to become part of a group to oversee implementation of the recommendations from *Listen to Our Voices*.

The group of 19 children and young people named itself 'Teenagers and Children Talking in Care' (TACTIC) and spent almost two years working with the DCYA and HSE Children and Family Services to drive forward the recommendations from the report. TACTIC decided that the most useful way to support children and young people going into care and give them a voice in decisions about their lives is to provide them with information written *by* children and young people who live in care *for* children and young people going into care. They worked on developing an information pack to give to all children and young people *when they first go into care*.

The TACTIC group developed the following resources:

- a storybook for children aged 3-7;
- a guide book for children in foster care aged 8-12;
- a guide book for young people in foster care aged 13-18;
- a guide book for young people in residential care aged 13-18;
- bookmarks on the national standards for foster care and residential care;
- 'Child in Care Record Forms' that ask children in care for their views and opinions.

These resources were launched by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and Tusla – Child and Family Agency in December 2014 and are now provided to every child entering the care system.

6. Arts-Youth-Culture: FYI

In 2010, the Arts Council organised a 3-day event involving 60 young people aged 15-25 and 36 policy-makers. Using a variety of artistic media (including music, theatre, film and visual arts), young people explored their right to participate in cultural life and the arts. They shared their experiences, concerns and ideas with key policy-makers and cultural providers through a day-long series of round table discussions and artistic presentations, the themes and format of which were determined in consultation with the young people. They were also involved in the preparation and shaping of the agenda for the meeting; in the workshops taking place during the event; in organising the consultation with policy-makers; and in all other associated activities related to the organisation and running of the initiative.

Recommendations emerging from the event, voiced by young people, included the following:

- **Develop a youth advisory committee to the Arts Council**, consisting of representatives from a range of youth arts programmes nationwide. The committee could meet with relevant members of Arts Council staff and at least one Council member to provide input into the ongoing development of young people's arts; respond to specific Arts Council initiatives, as well as propose new initiatives; invite professional youth arts practitioners to assist in facilitating committee meetings and ancillary activities; ensure the process is relevant and engaging for a diverse group of young people; and facilitate a creative process that draws on best practice in youth arts.
- **Develop a pool of young critics/experts**, the members of which might report to the Arts Council on a range of youth arts activities nationwide and assist in the assessment process for relevant Arts Council schemes and awards.
- **Support the development of youth-led advocacy initiatives** in the arts by offering an open, responsive door to such initiatives and facilitating access to information, networking opportunities and media attention for such groups, as appropriate.
- **Ensure organisations funded by the Arts Council and providing programmes for children and young people have appropriate practices in place** to enable young people to provide input and feedback on the provision and development of programmes targeted towards them.
- **Work with the National Youth Council of Ireland and Local Authority Arts Officers** to foster and develop relationships between local Arts Offices and local Comhairlí na nÓg.

7. Ireland becomes the first country to involve children and young people in the development of the HBSC Survey 2014

The Health Behaviour of School-aged Children (HBSC) Survey is a cross-national research study conducted in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO). It is run on a 4-year cycle, with over 43 participating countries and regions, and is one of the most important data sources on the health and well-being of children around the world. It is extensively used in policy development in Ireland.

Domains explored in the HBSC Survey and the questions under each domain are developed by academics and policy-makers at national and international level. Up until 2012, no participating country had ever involved children or young people in developing domains and questions for the survey.

The DCYA Citizen Participation Unit and the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG) undertook a process of involving children and young people in the development of domains and questions for the HBSC Survey 2014 for Ireland. Thus, Ireland became the first country ever to involve children and young people in development of the survey. Separate creative and age-appropriate workshops were conducted with children aged 8-12 and young people aged 13-17 at each stage of the process over a 2-year period.

A three-stage process was adopted for involving children and young people:

Stage 1: Identification of domains that are important to children and young people;
Stage 2: Development of questions under the domains identified by children and young people;
Stage 3: Testing the questions.

The domain areas that were prioritised as **most important to 8-12 year-old children** were:

1. Having fun.
2. Parents, family and well-being.
3. Safety.

Domains on 'Having fun' and 'Parent, family and well-being' had not to date been included in the HSBC Survey.

The domain areas that were prioritised as **most important to 13-17 year-old young people** were:

1. Mental health.
2. Cyberbullying.
3. Independence.
4. Diversity and individuality.

Domains on 'Cyberbullying', 'Independence' and 'Diversity and individuality' had not to date been included in the HSBC Survey.

At the end of all stages in the process, the questions that were included in the HSBC Survey 2014 for Ireland are outlined below:

Questions for Primary school children

Question	Response	Domain
Do you play sports?	Yes, No	Fun
Do you play with a club?	Yes, No	Fun
Do you prefer to play ...	Indoors, Outdoors	Fun
How often do you do your hobbies?	Every day, Every week, Every month, Rarely, Never	Fun
Does your family play with you?	Always, Often, Sometimes, Never	Family
Do you love your family?	Always, Often, Sometimes, Never	Family

Questions for Second-level young people

Question	Response	Domain
Are you comfortable talking about your sexuality?	Yes, No, Don't know	Diversity/ individuality
Do you feel comfortable being yourself with your friends?	Always, Often, Sometimes, Never	Diversity/ individuality
At what age should young people be allowed to work?		Independence
The voting age is 18. What age do you think it should be?		Independence
Are you self-confident?	Always, Often, Sometimes, Never	Mental health
Do you feel social networking sites are safe?	A lot, Some, A little, Not very much, Not at all	Bullying

The inclusion of the new domains and questions in the HBSC Survey 2014 for Ireland will provide valuable information on aspects of the lives of children and young people never before explored in the survey. This information will assist in the development of policies and services that meet the needs of children and young people in aspects of their lives that are important to them.

The outcomes from the process confirm the value of involving children and young people as stakeholders in the HSBC Survey and challenges researchers and policy-makers to consider involving them in the future in the development and design of this and other research into their lives and behaviour.

8. Irish Sports Council – Girls Active Programme

Girls Active is a physical activity programme targeting teenage girls in schools and Youthreach Centres in the north-west region of Ireland. It is a joint initiative between the Health Service Executive West, Sligo Sport and Recreation Partnership, and Donegal Sports Partnership. The programme is designed to increase the number of teenage girls involved in long-term regular physical activity through developing more supportive environments in schools and Youthreach Centres.

Among others, the good practice principles developed through the Girls Active Programme are:

- it was developed from a consultation with girls;
- it involves the girls in choosing and organising their own activities;
- it links with activities available in the community;
- it caters for more diverse needs than traditional extra-curricular sports.

In view of the success of this programme, the good practice principles identified have been used to devise other local programmes for teenage girls, such as Active 8 and Girls in Action. These have been rolled-out through the network of Local Sports Partnerships supported by the Women in Sport initiative of the Irish Sports Council.

9. Tusla consultation with children and young people on participation

At the end of 2014, Tusla carried out consultations with children and young people on its draft statement of strategic intent in relation to participation, entitled *Towards the development of a Participation Strategy for Children and Young People*. Workshops were conducted with four groups of children and young people. The groups consisted of Degree students in their Final Year of health promotion and public health; young people from An Gaisce and Comhairle na nÓg in a youth project and health café; a group of Junior Cert students; and a group of Sixth Class pupils.

The groups were asked for their opinions on:

- The Tusla draft document *Towards the development of a Participation Strategy for Children and Young People*.
- What are the top 3 messages that children under the age of 12 need to know?
- What are the top 3 messages that young people between the ages of 13-17 need to know?
- What is the best way to consult about the strategy with children under 12?
- What is the best way to consult about the strategy with young people between the ages of 13 and 17?

The recommendations from the children and young people included:

- That Tusla would provide clear communication, using a variety of mechanisms, on who Tusla is, what it does and how to make contact. This information should be targeted at specific audiences (those who work with children, parents and the general public) and also be age-appropriate for children and young people.
- That Tusla would provide clear text and communication, using a variety of mechanisms, on simple messages about the right to be heard and involved in decision-making and who to contact.
- That all communications should have clear details on a point of contact for information about Tusla and about participation in decision-making. It is essential that this point of contact has been trained in children and young people's rights and participation.
- That Tusla should communicate the strategy in a variety of formats and in a variety of media. The full document should also be easily accessible.

Following this consultation, Tusla drafted a leaflet for children and young people entitled *Participation of Children and Young People – Our Approach*. Children and young people were consulted on its content and design.

The leaflet and the document *Towards the development of a Participation Strategy for Children and Young People* were both published in April 2015.

10. Youth Empowerment Service – Advocacy for adolescents in St. Patrick's Mental Health Services

The Youth Empowerment Service (YES) is an advocacy service supporting the young people who are current service users of the Willow Grove Adolescent Unit in St. Patrick's Mental Health Services, Dublin. Willow Grove, which has 14 bedrooms, is a residential unit for adolescents, aged 12-17, who experience mental health difficulties. YES was set up as a response to the positive strategies proposed in Ireland's *A Vision for Change*, a comprehensive policy framework for mental health services published by the Department of Health and Children in 2006, and also from the feedback received from service users, family members, nursing staff and the Board of Management at St. Patrick's Hospital, all of whom clearly expressed the need for peer and group advocacy within the Adolescent Unit. It is currently the only advocacy service in Ireland supporting a residential facility in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and giving young people a voice in the design, development and delivery of adolescent mental health services.

The service is driven by a panel of passionate young men and women, former service users, who strive to support the vision stated in *A Vision for Change*, which is that *'Service providers should work in partnership with service users and their families, and facilitate recovery and reintegration through the provision of accessible, comprehensive and community-based mental health services'*. The panel of young advocates empower the young people by raising public awareness around issues that affect them directly and indirectly, reviewing the tools used in their treatment and providing an advocacy support for the young people to ensure that their voices are heard and their needs met. Through their own experiences of mental health services, the young advocates work to reduce the stigma of mental health, contribute their expertise and actively participate in the development of services in the Willow Grove Adolescent Unit. They also deliver informal training directly to the young people in the unit through a Community Links programme and through novel and creative media, drawing on their skills and talents as actors, illustrators and film-makers. They have produced a one-act play, 'Masks', and have engaged members of the public in their street art projects, opening up conversations about adolescent mental health in a fun and innovative style.

NOTES

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