

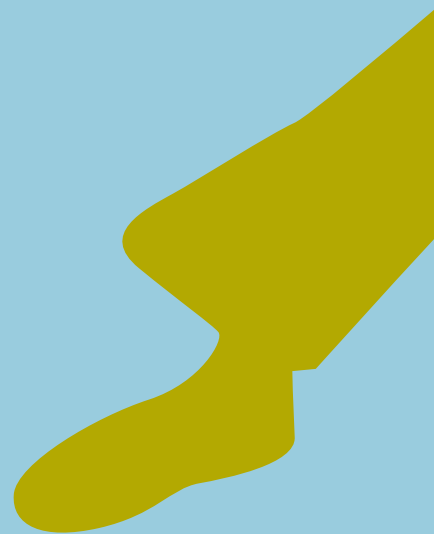
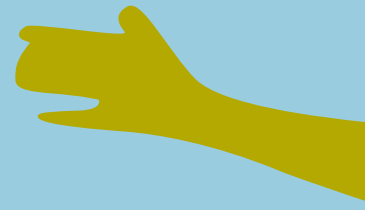


Report on the Comhairle na nÓg Development Fund (2007-2008)

for Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs

March 2009





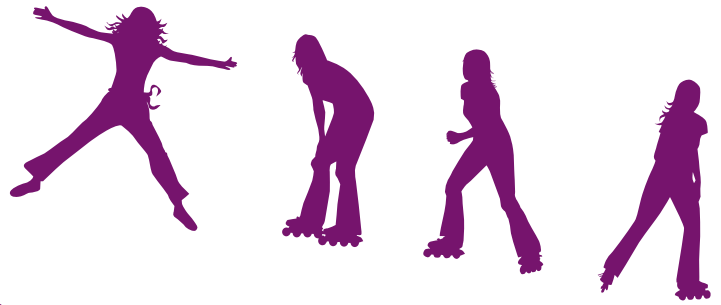


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The author of this report is Olivia McEvoy.

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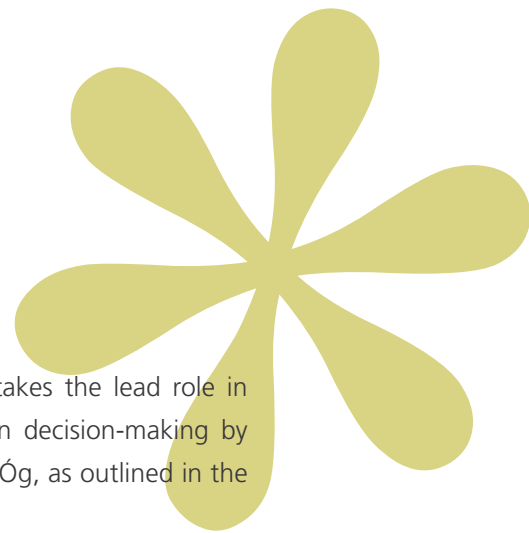
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Foreword



My Office (Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs) takes the lead role in ensuring the development of structures that enable participation in decision-making by children and young people, such as Dáil na nÓg and Comhairle na nÓg, as outlined in the National Children's Strategy (2000).

Dáil na nÓg is the national youth parliament and is overseen and funded by my Office. It meets once a year and provides young people, elected through their local Comhairle na nÓg, with the opportunity of feeding their concerns into public policy.

The 34 City and County Development Boards (CDBs) are responsible for implementing the National Children's Strategy at local level and for establishing Comhairle na nÓg to give children and young people an opportunity to influence local policy, planning and services. The effective development of Comhairle na nÓg is named as a Government priority in *Towards 2016*.

During 2007, my Office established the Comhairle na nÓg Development Fund (2007-2008) to support CDBs in running effective Comhairle na nÓg. Applications under the scheme were obliged to meet criteria that ensured effective engagement by members of the Comhairle na nÓg with key adult decision-makers and decision-making bodies. As part of this scheme, an independent evaluator was appointed to measure success in improving the operation of Comhairle na nÓg and value for money.

This report of the independent evaluator highlights that in its first year, the Development Fund has resulted in significant improvements in the operation of many Comhairlí na nÓg. Some CDBs have established regular sessions of Comhairle na nÓg, which link with the adult county council and interact with policy-makers to ensure that the views of young people are included in shaping policies and services. The report also describes that while some Comhairlí na nÓg used the funds to develop innovative ideas to enhance the experience of young members, others employed part-time workers to drive and improve their Comhairle na nÓg. The development of local partnerships with external agencies, such as youth services or other organisations engaged with 'hard to reach' young people, has been pivotal in ensuring broad access to Comhairle na nÓg. It is evident from the report that the additional funding has enabled many Comhairlí na nÓg to meet on a regular and sustained basis, possibly the single biggest achievement of the scheme.

As a result of the success of the first year of this initiative, the Comhairle na nÓg Development Fund will continue in 2009. This funding scheme is part of an ongoing strategy to enhance the effectiveness of Comhairle na nÓg and to develop good practice in participation in decision-making by children and young people.

Barry Andrews, TD

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs



Acknowledgements

The Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) and the author would like to acknowledge the significant input into both the Comhairlí themselves and this report by the Community Development Boards and all of the staff associated with organising Comhairle na nÓg.

Particular acknowledgement is afforded to the members and staff of the three Comhairlí na nÓg who contributed to the 'in-depth' evaluations conducted by the author, namely:

- Limerick City Comhairle;
- Sligo Comhairle;
- South Dublin Comhairle.



About the author

Olivia McEvoy of Cnagar an Doras was appointed as the independent evaluator of the Comhairle na nÓg Development Fund in December 2007. She is also the independent evaluator of the OMCYA's Inclusion Project and the Children and Young People's Forum. She has written the *Report on Teenagers' views on solutions to Alcohol Misuse* (2007) and the *Report on the consultations with teenagers on the issues to be considered by the Minister for Children when examining the age of consent for sexual activity* (2006) for the OMCYA, as well as the youth-friendly versions of *Teenspace: The National Recreation Policy for Young People* (2007).

She is a freelance consultant and lifecoach in the youth and community sectors, and works with a variety of Government and non-governmental organisations. Further details are available on www.cnagarandoras.ie.



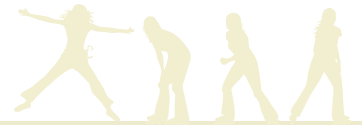


Executive Summary

In December 2007, the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) allocated the Enhanced Programme of Activities Grant to 30 County Development Boards (CDBs). The grant scheme was devised as a 'Comhairle Development Fund' in order to encourage good practice and aid the efforts of the CDBs in developing and supporting specific programmes of activity for Comhairle na nÓg.

An independent evaluator of the Comhairle Development Fund was appointed in December 2007 to assess the effectiveness of the grant scheme over a period of one year by considering the outcomes and experiences of each of the 30 participating Comhairlí na nÓg. The resulting analysis and report concentrates on four key areas:

- the participation of and impact on young people;
- the participation of 'hard to reach' young people;
- the structure of Comhairle na nÓg;
- the development of measurable initiatives with other relevant decision-making structures.



The report considers the main findings under each of these headings before assessing the considerable strengths and benefits of Comhairle na nÓg, which include:

- the positive experience reported by the majority of Comhairle members;
- the partnership approach in delivering Comhairle na nÓg;
- the Comhairle Development Fund;
- links with decision-making bodies;
- engaging 'hard to reach' young people.

The substantial challenges facing the youth participation structure are also considered, including:

- relevance and accessibility;
- different structures of Comhairle na nÓg;
- engaging 'hard to reach' young people;
- transport;
- time and competing activities.

Recommendations under each of the key areas are described in detail, followed by some examples of the many innovative and creative ideas and projects already in existence in Comhairlí na nÓg throughout the country.

There is simply no denying – or indeed underestimating – the enormous difference that extra funding has made to Comhairle na nÓg within the space of one year (2007-2008). Six years after its conception in 2002, Comhairle na nÓg has made in-roads in providing a youth participation structure for young people in Ireland. The Comhairlí that have been continually resourced and supported and the Comhairle Development Fund of 2007 prove what progress and standards can be achieved with an injection of funding and the drive and commitment to spend it appropriately.

It is vital that the enhanced funds are continued so that the development of Comhairle na nÓg is prolonged. If such funding is provided, Ireland has the potential to top the international poll in providing a quality youth participation structure in another six years' time.

Introduction

In December 2007, the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) allocated the Enhanced Programme of Activities Grant to 30 County Development Boards (CDBs). The grant scheme was devised as a 'Comhairle Development Fund' in order to encourage good practice and aid the efforts of the CDBs in developing and supporting specific programmes of activity for Comhairle na nÓg.

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- the participation of and impact on young people;
- the participation of 'hard to reach' young people;
- the structure of Comhairle na nÓg;
- the development of measurable initiatives with other relevant decision-making structures.

The assessment of the Comhairle Development Fund comes six years after the inception of Comhairle na nÓg (2002). Murphy's 2005 *Review of Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg*, together with much anecdotal evidence, indicated that individual Comhairlí varied considerably, particularly in terms of resources, CDB staff support, being youth-led and the number of occasions on which the Comhairle actually met in any one calendar year.

This report was commissioned to provide the first documentation of progress in Comhairle na nÓg as a youth participation structure since that official review in 2005 and, more importantly, since the injection of enhanced funding in 2007-2008 from the Comhairle Development Fund.



Methodology

The methodology for assessing the Comhairle Development Fund was four-fold:

- familiarisation with all relevant background information, including original application forms, first progress reports and the report from the Comhairle Implementation Group;
- an analysis of information from the completed Programme Evaluation templates that were supplied to all 30 County Development Board (CDB) applicants;
- an analysis of information from the Final Reports, which are submitted annually by all participating Comhairlí na nÓg;
- an analysis of information arising from the in-depth evaluation of three Comhairlí na nÓg (Limerick City, Sligo and South Dublin), which included:
 - a site visit to include a Comhairle meeting, where possible;
 - semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, namely:
 - the Administrative Officer in the CDB;
 - the Director of Services of the CDB;
 - the Youth Service providers involved;
 - the youth workers directly involved in the coordination of the programme.
 - a focus group with the Comhairle members, or a sample selection of members, to assess and discuss their experience, learning and satisfaction with the process.

The evaluator also became a member of the Comhairle na nÓg Implementation Group (CIG) in order to gather additional information from any discussions or key decisions made at this forum.

The analysis concentrates on four key areas:

- the participation of and impact on young people;
- the participation of 'hard to reach' young people;
- the structure of Comhairle na nÓg;
- the development of measurable initiatives with other relevant decision-making structures.

The developed methodology was designed to support an evaluation process that enables the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) and all other interested parties:

- to understand and verify the impact of the Enhanced Programme of Activities Grant Scheme on the Comhairle members;
- to understand and verify the impact of the programme on increasing the input and impact of young people into local decision-making structures;
- to improve the Comhairlí to be more efficient by identifying the strengths and benefits of the programme;
- to identify the main areas of improvement for the Comhairlí.





Chapter 3

Participation of and impact on young people

Participation of young people

There are reasonable numbers of young people involved in Comhairle na nÓg nationwide. Based on figures provided by individual Comhairle na nÓg, up to 2,334 young people attended the Comhairle na nÓg 'annual meeting' in the 2007-2008 'Comhairle calendar year'; 653 of these young people were voted onto one of the local Comhairle na nÓg 'committees'¹ that meet on a regular basis throughout the year to discuss issues relevant to young people.

Table 1 shows the number of young people who attended the annual Comhairle na nÓg event in each Local Authority area in 2007-2008, together with the number of members who met on a regular basis in Comhairle 'committees'.

¹ The Comhairle na nÓg that meet on a regular basis throughout the year are referred to by many different titles in different locations, including 'youth forum', 'youth cabinet' and 'youth council', as well as 'Comhairle na nÓg'. The use of the word 'committee' refers to all such groups. Further information on the varying names for the committees is outlined in Chapter 5 under the heading 'Branding'.




Table 1: Number of young people at annual Comhairle na nÓg event and number of young people regularly involved, by Local Authority area (2007-2008)

Local Authority area	No. of young people at annual event	No. of young people regularly involved
Carlow	48	12
Cavan	60	15
Clare	86	14
Cork City	64	3
Donegal	34	34
Dublin City	484	30
Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown	17	16
Fingal	24	24
Galway City	39	13
Galway County	117	60
Kerry	107	107
Kildare	106	20
Kilkenny	120	10
Laois	175	26
Limerick City	53	18
Limerick County	50	No regular meetings to date
Longford	27	15
Meath	35	12
Monaghan	60	15
North Tipperary	82	15
Offaly	51	15
Roscommon	52	30
Sligo	62	15
South Dublin	26	26
South Tipperary	16	10
Waterford City	28	15
Waterford County	36	8
Westmeath	85	14
Wexford	110	10
Wicklow	80	51
TOTAL	2,334	653

Impact on young people

It is more than apparent from both the focus groups conducted in the in-depth evaluations as well as the completed evaluations that the Comhairle has a significant impact on the young people involved. When asked *'What difference does having a Comhairle na nÓg in your area make to YOU?'*, the responses can be grouped under the following themes, with a sample of typical comments:

Involvement

- chance to be involved;
- chance to go to Dáil na nÓg;
- going to the Dáil and the possibility of participating in national structures;
- having information on what is going on in the area;
- awareness of issues;
- insight into politics;
- it provides Youth Councillors and young people with interesting and fun things to do.

Having a voice

- having a voice on youth issues;
- discussing issues that are important to young people in the area;
- feeling of democracy – having your voice heard;
- it gives young people in Donegal a voice – we are given a chance to get our views across to anyone we wish from this position;
- the area has a voice;
- a break from school and a chance to discuss and give opinions on issues.

Making a difference and achieving change

- Youth Councillors can make changes and improvements for young people;
- young representatives can deal best with issues that really affect young people – young people can approach me and I will bring their views to the rest of the Youth Council [Comhairle];
- making a difference for the young people in their area;
- getting stuff done – getting results.

Improved skills

- confidence;
- making new friends;
- skills in public-speaking – how to persuade people and put across your point;
- the involvement looks very well on our CVs;
- it's a personal achievement – it's a memory that will stay with me.

Miscellaneous

- free credit for phone;
- learning about the different types of education – Youthreach and post-primary;
- free trips.

The *'chance to be involved'* and the opportunities that stem from that involvement are of obvious importance to Comhairle members. Indeed, it is almost always the case that given the opportunity in the right setting, young people are more than keen to engage with processes and opportunities. *'Having a voice on issues'* and having that voice and views heard is also of utmost importance to young people. But having a voice and being involved is not enough in itself – *'making a difference'* and *'getting stuff done'* is also paramount. Indeed, it is when young people feel that they are not actually making a difference that they are frustrated and disappointed with the system.

It is thus not enough that the Comhairle system gives young people a voice – it is vital that *this voice is heard and translates into tangible achievement and change* in order for young people themselves to consider it a success. The young people also note many of the skills, such as public-speaking and greater self-confidence, that being in the Comhairle gives them, acknowledging that their involvement *'looks well'* on their CVs.

The Comhairle also has an impact on members in other ways. For example, it helps members interact *'with other groups – not just youth groups'*. In addition, it *'allows the community to get to know the young people and shows a different side to the negative stereotyping of young people'*.

While no member cited that the Comhairle had a negative impact on them personally, a minority felt that *'there is no evidence that we made a difference'*, while others felt that *'time is too short and there is not enough time to do something real and consult with other young people in the area'*.



Chapter 4

Participation of 'hard to reach' young people

The inclusion and retention of 'hard to reach' young people has always been both an important element and a challenge for Comhairlí na nÓg. Many Comhairlí have made considerable efforts to make the annual event and process attractive and relevant to 'hard to reach' young people, often with little success. Conversely, some Comhairlí have opted not to invest time and resources into attracting or supporting 'hard to reach' young people because of the perceived 'minimal' rewards for considerable investment.

There are a number of challenges in including 'hard to reach' young people in the Comhairle na nÓg system. As one Sligo youth worker commented: *'There is a level of **confidence** needed to be involved and this is a natural barrier for some young people, particularly those who are less articulate and self-confident.'*

Indeed, this issue of 'confidence' is not exclusive to 'hard to reach' young people. Many young people feel alienated by the perceived need to be a 'good public-speaker' and 'articulate in presenting your views'. It is often the case that 'hard to reach' young people, and others, lack the self-esteem to consider that their own view is important enough to be aired, while simultaneously lacking the confidence to articulate that view.

While there is little doubt that 'hard to reach' young people and less articulate young people are sharing a space with others who are extremely confident and articulate, it is important that the methodologies used in facilitating and conducting Comhairlí events take lower confidence and literacy levels into account. Roscommon Comhairle, for example, used an extensive number of non-verbal methods to help young people express their opinions, including body mapping, 'Agony Aunt' letters, a walking debate and statement boards. Both participants and facilitators felt these methods were highly successful. Without introducing such methods, there is a danger that 'less confident and articulate' young people will be further alienated from the process.

Many 'hard to reach' young people see Comhairlí na nÓg and similar participation structures as entirely **irrelevant** to their lives. As one CDB worker reported: *'There was a challenge in initially linking with the young people and making the Comhairle na nÓg seem relevant to their lives. It was also difficult to communicate and convince the youth organisations of this and engender their support'*. Many of the young people perceive the Comhairle system or structure to be alien to them, as well as the issues being discussed. They are not interested in sitting in a formal setting, attending meetings on an ongoing basis or discussing issues such as 'immigration' or 'racism', which they see as having no relevance in their lives.

Despite the challenges of attracting them to the Comhairle meetings, it is evident that numerous 'hard to reach' young people do actually attend the meetings, especially the annual event. However, due to the issues of 'confidence' and 'relevance' mentioned above, it is not often the case that those who attend either put themselves forward for election or get elected to the Comhairle 'committee'. There have been numerous debates about the merits of 'positive discrimination' towards 'hard to reach' young people to ensure their success at the Comhairle elections. One argument suggests that it is often the only way that such young people will have a chance to be represented on the committee, while another argument says that this can be perceived as further alienating and stereotyping the 'hard to reach' young person in question. The Fingal experience, for example, where varying attempts have been made to meaningfully include 'hard to reach' young people, indicates that *'the number of "hard to reach" young people has not been sufficient to ensure that they make it through to the election process. We are currently revising how this can be achieved without undermining the election process'*.

The nationwide experience over a number of years indicates that supporting 'hard to reach' young people to participate meaningfully in the Comhairle na nÓg system is *'worker-dependent and resource-intensive'*. Indeed, as one Kerry CDB worker commented, this is especially the case *'when working with young people who are not automatically attracted to an election or the idea of representing others'*. It is likely that this is perhaps the biggest challenge of working with 'hard to reach' and 'marginalised' young people since, as one Kilkenny youth worker put it, *'they need to be actively engaged and worked with over a period of time in order for them to be able to interact with a Comhairle na nÓg event. This is a time commitment for community-based youth workers and teachers, and therefore is not prioritised to any great extent'*.



It is clear that to include and support 'hard to reach' young people in the Comhairle na nÓg system first demands capacity-building and support work over a period of time. Without any doubt, the successful and meaningful inclusion of 'hard to reach' young people in Comhairlí na nÓg has only resulted when one or both of the following have been in place:

- a 'partnership of agency' approach between the CDB and other agencies that work with 'hard to reach' young people; and/or
- a capacity-building programme for 'hard to reach' young people.

'Partnership of agency' approach

In the words of a Sligo-based youth worker, it is *'essential to have youth services involved if you want to have a diversity of young people'* involved in the Comhairle na nÓg system from the outset. The Kilkenny experience also indicates that *'there has to be a commitment from those working with marginalised young people to actively work with them so that they can have a meaningful voice around the table'*. Effectively, this means it is important that more than one partner or agency is needed to best support 'hard to reach' young people to be involved. Rather, a 'steering committee' or 'partnership of agencies' needs to be formed so that all of the organisations that work with 'hard to reach' young people in the area are working together to support their meaningful participation in the Comhairle process. These agencies might include:

- local youth services;
- schools;
- the local Vocational Education Committee (VEC);
- organisations such as Pavee Point, the Irish Association of Young People in Care (IAYPIC), BeLonG To, Inclusion Ireland, Irish Wheelchair Association, Barnardos, ISPCC and Youthreach;
- any other agency working locally with 'hard to reach' young people.

The ultimate aim of this partnership approach is to ensure not only that the participating young people are properly supported before and after Comhairle meetings, but also, and most importantly, that they have already been or are part of an ongoing capacity-building programme.



Comhairle gives young people a voice

Capacity-building

A capacity-building programme is likely to address issues of self-esteem and self-confidence. Any programme specific to supporting young people aiming to participate in their local Comhairle na nÓg might also consider skill-based initiatives on communication and a translation of 'youth participation' itself. The importance of capacity-building before introducing 'hard to reach' young people into the Comhairle system cannot be underestimated. As the Wicklow VEC youth officer commented, *'With capacity-building, participation is likely; without it, it is not'*. It is that stark.

In Limerick City, where they have been very successful in meaningfully including many 'hard to reach' young people in the Comhairle na nÓg, the youth worker only targets 'hard to reach' young people who are already involved in youth projects or youth organisations, so that there is a commitment to ensuring that they are *'properly supported in between meetings'*.

In Carlow, a meeting with agencies that were engaged in a capacity-building process with 'hard to reach' young people took place some time before the annual Comhairle na nÓg event. The young people were then supported to engage with the process: 15 'hard to reach' young people attended the annual meeting and 4 were elected to sit on the main 'committee', which meets on a regular basis.

There is no doubt that the meaningful inclusion of 'hard to reach' young people in the Comhairle na nÓg system has proved one of its bigger challenges to date. However, there is also ample evidence to suggest that considerable success has been, and can be, achieved when there is a commitment to capacity-build and devise a partnership approach with any agencies that work with 'hard to reach' young people locally.



Chapter 5

Structure of Comhairle na nÓg

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The Comhairlí na nÓg have grown organically since they were established in 2002, as part of the National Children's Strategy (2000), by the 34 City and County Development Boards (CDBs) in each local authority area. However, although every Comhairle na nÓg provides a forum for children and young people to discuss local and national issues of relevance to them and are the official structures for participation by children and young people in the development of policies and services, the structures and practices of each Comhairle na nÓg still vary considerably. Some Comhairle na nÓg meet once a year, while others meet weekly; some are run directly by the CDB, while others are run in partnership with a range of agencies, often a youth service, while still others are run entirely by external agencies.

It is not surprising that the structures and practices of the Comhairlí are so diverse since each Comhairle na nÓg has developed at its own pace since 2002 and has also been contingent on local funding, resources and the commitment of the personnel involved.

In addition, individual Comhairle na nÓg are working somewhat in isolation, with little connection to their counterparts in other regions. This is particularly unhelpful when key staff change at local level. Currently, there is little guidance or direction for any personnel new to the Comhairle structures and procedures. In some instances, staff changes have resulted in a hastily organised Comhairle na nÓg, purely designed to elect delegates for the annual Dáil na nÓg event, and in the inability to complete end-of-year reports because of lack of information.

Comhairle Development Fund

The provision of funds under the Comhairle Development Fund has been somewhat reflective of the diversity of structures and processes that exist around the country, in that some monies were granted to develop Comhairle from a very basic starting point, whereas other grants were for funding of highly innovative projects to enhance the experience of the Comhairle members. What is extremely clear is that the Comhairle Development Fund is allowing Comhairlí na nÓg nationwide, regardless of their starting point, to develop in a way that would simply otherwise not be possible.

The additional funds have allowed each Comhairle to develop in a range of ways, including:

- hosting meetings on a more regular basis;
- employing a part-time worker dedicated to driving the process;
- developing partnership arrangements with external agencies, such as local youth services, garnering their youth participation experience;
- developing innovative ideas to enhance the experience of the members;
- promoting Comhairle na nÓg through media campaigns and other means to a wider audience;
- dedicating resources to the meaningful inclusion of 'hard to reach' young people in the process.

In fact, the Comhairle Development Fund has allowed CDBs to expand and develop their ideas on Comhairle na nÓg and to actually have the capacity to implement some of those ideas.

Delivery partners

There have been many different agencies and combination of agencies involved in the delivery of Comhairle na nÓg throughout the years. Although the CDB has ultimate responsibility for ensuring the Comhairle is operating, some Comhairlí are delivered entirely 'in-house' (e.g. Dublin City, Fingal, and Cavan/Monaghan), while others are delivered entirely 'externally', with a youth service being paid by the CDB to deliver on the entire programme (e.g. Ossory Youth, Kilkenny; Kildare Youth Service, Kildare; and FDYS, Wexford). Many Comhairlí have been delivered in 'partnership' between the local youth work service and the CDB (e.g. Limerick City, Sligo, Longford, and Westmeath). In some instances, a part-time worker has been employed by either the youth work service or the CDB to drive the work of the Comhairle (e.g. South Dublin, Sligo, and Kilkenny). Indeed, many Comhairlí used the Development Fund to employ a dedicated Comhairle worker.





Many Comhairlí used the **Development Fund** to employ a dedicated Comhairle worker

16

There is a huge advantage to having a part-time worker to drive the Comhairle process and to ensure achievements are made in the very tight timeframe of the Comhairle's 'year' or term of office. According to South Dublin Comhairle, who employ a part-time worker, some of these advantages include:

- providing a direct link with Comhairle members;
- dedicated time to driving the Comhairle;
- a familiar presence gives continuity and allows trust to be build up with members;
- dedicated post gives credibility to the Comhairle;
- demands commitment to the process from members;
- provides training to young people on particular aspects of work.

The process of arriving at the best 'delivery partners' and mechanisms at local level is an organic one and often contingent on specific local factors. Sometimes there is a natural fit of delivery partners, whereas in other locations it takes longer to establish what works best. It would seem that there is additional merit in the 'partnership approach' to delivering Comhairle na nÓg. The youth service brings the experience of youth work, working directly with young people and sometimes knowledge of other youth participation structures. The CDB often provides the venue, but more importantly can develop the links to the decision-making bodies in the area, not least the County Council itself. Importantly, the CDB retains the expertise of working directly with young people, which enables it to better include young people in all other aspects of its work and that of the County Council, while the youth service makes important links with local decision-makers. Increasingly, partnerships are beginning to be forged with the local VEC youth officer. This holistic approach to young people's participation is to be welcomed.

'Branding' of Comhairle na nÓg

From its inception, the emphasis of many Comhairlí na nÓg was on the 'annual event', whereby young people came together to discuss issues of relevance to them and where elections for Dáil na nÓg usually took place. In many instances, this was the only Comhairle na nÓg meeting of the year. Indeed, many CDBs perceived that the annual grant of (then) €2,500 was only for this purpose and used it accordingly. If such funds were not matched or furthered by the CDB, it was argued that there was little funding to conduct anything other than the annual meeting.

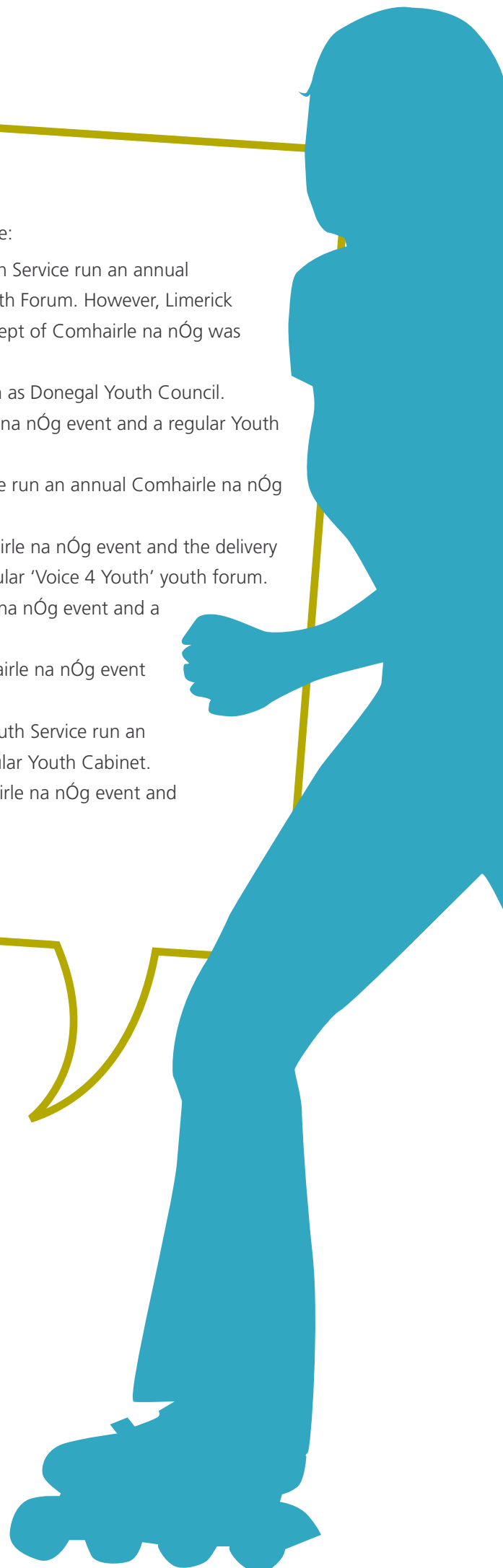
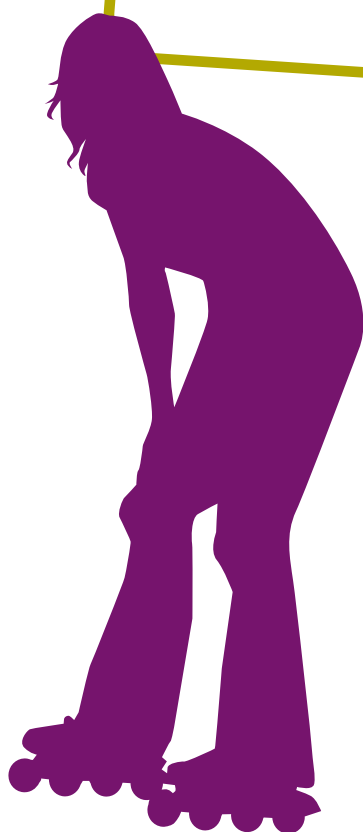
With additional investment from the CDBs at local level, together with increased emphasis and belief in youth participation and encouragement from many quarters, more and more CDBs have ensured that more frequent meetings of the Comhairle na nÓg are held, often as regularly as weekly or bi-monthly. Indeed, many Comhairlí have used the grant from the Comhairle Development Fund to secure personnel, either internal or external, to facilitate more regular meetings of the Comhairle. This is a very welcome move.

However, it seems that there is a move away from referring to these 'more regular' meetings as meetings of Comhairle na nÓg. Instead, many CDBs now often describe Comhairle na nÓg as the event where a greater amount of young people are invited, discuss one or two issues, and where the young people are then elected to another body that meets on a more regular basis and/or Dáil na nÓg. The 'body that meets on a more regular basis' has varying names throughout the country and includes 'youth council', 'youth cabinet' and 'youth forum', as well as 'Comhairle na nÓg' or the 'Comhairle na nÓg committee'. These bodies refer to meetings of young people, elected at Comhairle na nÓg to meet on a regular basis to discuss local issues of importance to them and to meet with or influence local decision-makers.



Examples of where this divergence occurs include:

- **Limerick City:** The CDB and Limerick Youth Service run an annual Comhairle na nÓg event and a regular Youth Forum. However, Limerick City ran this 'youth forum' before the concept of Comhairle na nÓg was established in 2002.
- **Donegal:** Comhairle na nÓg is only known as Donegal Youth Council.
- **Kerry:** The CDB runs an annual Comhairle na nÓg event and a regular Youth Forum.
- **Kildare:** The CDB and Kildare Youth Service run an annual Comhairle na nÓg event and a regular Youth Council.
- **Kilkenny:** The CDB runs an annual Comhairle na nÓg event and the delivery partner – Ossory Youth Service– runs a regular 'Voice 4 Youth' youth forum.
- **Laois:** The CDB runs an annual Comhairle na nÓg event and a regular Youth Council.
- **Longford:** The CDB runs an annual Comhairle na nÓg event and a regular Youth Council.
- **Wexford:** The CDB and Ferns Diocesan Youth Service run an annual Comhairle na nÓg event and a regular Youth Cabinet.
- **Wicklow:** The CDB runs an annual Comhairle na nÓg event and regional Youth Councils.



There is no doubt that the OMCYA is interested in encouraging the CDBs to develop youth participation structures that meet on a regular basis. Indeed, through the Comhairle Development Fund, the OMCYA is helping to fund such initiatives. However, at local level, these more regular meetings are often perceived as separate to the Comhairle na nÓg and not as the same structure. There are a number of issues with this development, not least that it is potentially confusing for young people and indeed for all involved. It is certainly not useful from a 'branding' perspective because many young people may think that they are part of a different initiative to their county neighbour when it is, in fact, the same thing. Similarly, Comhairle na nÓg has long been heavily criticised for being too much of a 'once-off event' and now that funding and support is available to run the Comhairle more regularly, this is being done under another name. In addition, it can be the case that the CDBs are involved in the annual Comhairle na nÓg event, but less so with the ongoing 'forum' or 'cabinet'. This has implications for the retention of the 'youth participation' experience in the CDBs and also for the forging of links with decision-making structures, to which the CDB often has a close link, on an ongoing basis.

Although one can argue 'What's in a name?', it is potentially both confusing and damaging if the more regular meetings of Comhairle na nÓg are referred to as something different and, more importantly, are not run in partnership with the CDBs.

Membership age

Comhairle na nÓg was devised as a youth participation initiative for young people, aged 12-18. However, it would seem that considerable numbers of Comhairlí are populated by young people over the age of 15. In fact, in many instances, the Comhairle is presented as a group for young people over the age of 15. As Comhairle na nÓg is often the only structure at local level where young people aged 12-18 can have a voice, it is important that young people under the age of 15 are accommodated, encouraged and supported to make a meaningful contribution to Comhairle na nÓg.



Membership term

The Comhairle na nÓg year is a very short one since meetings often do not take place during school holidays or exam times. This makes it quite a pressurised timeframe during which to achieve the goals of the group. A Sligo Comhairle member claimed that *'there is not enough time to do something real and consult with other young people in the area'*. The same young person was disappointed that although Sligo Comhairle had been invited to have a regular column in the local newspaper, *'there was not enough time [to write the articles] because of regular business'*. In addition, many Comhairlí have cited a 'lack of time' as the reason they are unable to develop links with other decision-making structures.

Young people in Comhairle in Donegal, Galway County and Fingal are elected for a 2-year term of office. Complaints about a 'lack of time' are definitely less prevalent in these locations. Indeed, the Galway County CDB officer reports that this extended term of office has resulted in improved participation.

CDB 'performance indicator' for Comhairle na nÓg

It is essential for the success of the Comhairle system that schools are not the only invited or represented group on Comhairlí na nÓg. According to numerous sources, *'there is a tendency for schools to nominate a particular type of young person'*, which has the potential to limit the diversity of the Comhairle membership. The over-reliance on the inclusion of schools to the detriment of youth organisations or Youthreach centres can sometimes be explained by the section in the OMCYA's Final Report where Comhairlí are asked to 'give the number of schools who participated in the Annual Meeting and attach list of same'. This question is included on account of the performance indicator for Comhairle na nÓg in the CDBs' annual report, which asks for 'the percentage of local schools involved in the local Youth Council/Comhairle na nÓg scheme'.

Link with schools

Despite this current over-reliance on schools, a link with schools should still be maintained. However, school Principals receive considerable amounts of information on various initiatives and cannot be expected to digest or realise the merit of links with such a youth participation structure. Comhairlí na nÓg have complained of spending much time and resources in attempting to make links with schools, often with little reward. Where successful links have been made, there has been a good working relationship developed with student councils.

Elections for Dáil na nÓg

There has certainly been an increase in the number of democratically held elections for places on Comhairlí na nÓg and to attend as delegates at the annual Dáil na nÓg. There are various processes for these elections, with some members being elected following individual presentations, others from within a workshop group and still others from specific electoral areas within a region.

There are quite a number of instances where the selection for the Comhairle and/or Dáil na nÓg takes place 'out of a hat'. One could argue that this gives every member – articulate or otherwise, good at presentations or not, 'hard to reach' or not – an equal chance of becoming a delegate at Dáil na nÓg. Also, if everybody is an equally equipped member of Comhairle na nÓg, it may be the fairest way to select delegates to attend the Dáil event. There are many Comhairlí who designate a place or places for 'hard to reach' young people, both on the Comhairle itself and to attend Dáil na nÓg. Limerick City also makes provision to ensure a gender divide, while Wicklow and Donegal ensure an even spread from the various electoral areas.

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Grant timeframe

Many Comhairlí complained that the timeframe for reporting on the Comhairle Development Fund was not conducive to the Comhairle cycle and also that *'the timeframe for spending the money is unrealistic'*. Because the money was received at the end of a calendar year, many thought that they were obliged to spend it before the Final Report date of 30th June. A 6-month window is too short to complete many of the proposed projects.

Similarly, the Final Report also demanded an evaluation of the process. The majority of Comhairlí were unable to provide an evaluation, particularly from the young people, of the funded project because the project had either not been completed or there were no further meetings planned until September.

Chapter 6

Development of initiatives with decision-making bodies

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If the Comhairlí are to have a significant impact on matters that affect them at local level, it is extremely important that there is provision for young people themselves to sit on the committees and boards where decisions on such matters are made. This is an element of Comhairle na nÓg that needs significant attention, but also one where significant progress has been made since 2002.

There are many instances where young people *are* sitting on boards and committees where decisions about local matters are taken. In some cases, young people are members of their Local Authority's Strategic Policy Committee² (SPC). This takes considerable effort and commitment on both the side of the Comhairle and the SPC to organise and is to be greatly welcomed. Areas where young people are represented on an SPC include:

- **Fingal**
 - SPC for Community, Recreation and Amenities
- **Kildare**
 - SPC for Urban and Rural Development
 - SPC for Transportation

² The establishment of Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs) was the result of one of the four core principles of the 1996 White Paper entitled *Better Local Government – A Programme for Change*, which proposed to enhance local democracy by ensuring that local communities and their representatives have a say in the provision of local services and by strengthening the role of elected members (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 1996). SPCs prepare the groundwork on policies, which are then considered by the local council.

However, Comhairle members are not just involved in SPCs, but also a large range of local decision-making bodies. Some examples include:

- **Carlow**
 - Advisory committee for Carlow Youth Services Youth Café (The Vault)
- **Cavan and Monaghan**
 - Monaghan Sports Partnership
 - County Monaghan Youth Network
 - Health Service Executive (HSE) North East's Committee for Youth Affairs
 - Monaghan Community Forum's Management Committee
 - Inter County Management Committee board
- **Donegal**
 - North West Alcohol Forum
 - Donegal Sports Partnership
 - Sexual Health Reference Group
 - Finn Valley Alliance for Positive Mental Health
 - Road Safety Working Group
- **Fingal**
 - Joint Policing Committee: subcommittee on policing and crime
- **North Tipperary**
 - Play and Recreation Advisory Committee
- **South Dublin**
 - Community Forum (from where SPC members are nominated)
- **Wexford**
 - Representation on the Board of Directors of the local voluntary youth service, FDYS Youth Work Ireland

There are also other means of contributing to decision-making bodies without sitting on the board or committee itself. Examples of such interaction in 2007-2008 include:



- **Cavan and Monaghan**
 - Consultation on a draft proposal for the Sports Strategy for the County.
 - Questionnaire on the level of broadband facilities in the area.
 - Questionnaire on the issues surrounding drugs and alcohol affecting young people.
- **Dublin City**
 - Input into consultation on Public Libraries.
 - Input into consultation on developing an Energy Action Plan for Dublin.
 - Submission to the Biodiversity Action Plan being developed by Dublin City Council.
- **Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown**
 - Councillor interaction with young people at Active Citizenship conference.
- **Fingal**
 - Parliamentary question on 'youth cafes' submitted by TD on behalf of the Comhairle.
- **Galway City**
 - Made a film entitled 'Where have all the buses gone?', which includes interviews with six Galway City Councillors and will be presented to the Integrated Transport Committee in Galway City (see p. 47).
- **Kerry**
 - Drugs Task Force consultations.
- **Longford**
 - Consultation on the Integration Plan for Longford county.
- **North Tipperary**
 - Input into the county Play and Recreation Policy.
- **Roscommon**
 - Input into the consultation on Social Inclusion Strategy and the Disability Implementation Strategy.
- **Waterford City**
 - 'Political Speed Dating' between Comhairle members and City Councillors (see p. 49).

It is evident from the above lists that there is a great number of links being forged between Comhairlí and decision-making bodies. In some instances, these do not have to involve sitting directly on the board or committee of the decision-making body, but still involve young people having an impact on a decision on a matter relevant to them.

Comhairlí have also reported on a number of linkages where a decision-making body comes to a local Comhairle to make a presentation to them on a particular issue or decision. However, often these presentations are for 'information' purposes only, sometimes on a decision that has already been made, and feedback from the young people is not sought.

The development of initiatives and links with decision-making bodies is one of the most pivotal in making Comhairle na nÓg a meaningful youth participation structure. With these links, members of the Comhairle can play a meaningful role in impacting on decisions, matters and processes that affect their lives and those of their peers. The success that Comhairlí have had in this area is to be strongly encouraged and should be continually developed.

Challenges in developing initiatives with decision-making bodies

Although the lists above prove that there has been considerable success in developing links between Comhairlí and decision-making bodies, the development has not been without its challenges and this is still currently the case. Some of these challenges are outlined below.

Strategic Policy Committees

Even in areas where considerable effort is being made to make such links with Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs), this has proved extremely difficult. Indeed, there is a feeling in many CDBs, which are really trying to make that effort, that neither the guidelines on nor perhaps the structure of the SPCs lend themselves to the inclusion of young people.



In many SPC structures, there are a set number of places allocated to the community and voluntary sectors. Comhairle members and/or young people from another grouping can become one of the representatives from the community and voluntary sectors, as proven by the examples of Fingal, South Dublin and Kildare. In practice, because the places for the community and voluntary sectors are limited, this can sometimes mean that another established group has to lose its place on the committee to make way for a Comhairle member. The decision to make a Comhairle member a representative on an SPC in place of another established member is both unlikely and liable to be unpopular at local level. In addition, it can also be the case that the SPC members are only selected from another adult-orientated body; for example, the Limerick City Community Forum is the nominating body for non-elected members of SPCs, the Limerick Childcare Committee and other working groups of the City Development Board. Thus, it would be essential for a Comhairle member to first sit on the Limerick City Community Forum before being able to gain a place on any relevant SPC. This is a complicated and unlikely route for a young person to have to take in order to sit on a local decision-making body.

Alienating experiences

It is neither realistic nor fair to expect a young person, representing their local Comhairle na nÓg, to sit alone on an adult-orientated body, whose meetings are during school hours and conducted in a language which they possibly may not understand. In fact, such an experience would do little except further alienate young people from the local decision-making process.

It is important that it can be established, firstly, that committees and bodies are open to properly and meaningfully including young people in their fora and, secondly, that the young people are given skills training (upskilled) in how to participate in such a setting. In addition, it is important to consider alternative means for young people to contribute to decision-making processes without having to sit on such committees. The impact on and experience of the young people who are chosen to sit on these committees is as important as ensuring Comhairle members are linked into the decision-making process.

Operating timeframe

It is a significant challenge for the CDB to make the relevant links between the Comhairle and decision-making bodies in the one-year cycle of a Comhairle. It may be that relevant links to discuss a particular issue have just been established before the term of office of the Comhairle is over and the incoming elected group are then not interested in pursuing that issue. This has led to frustration on the side of the CDB and the decision-making body.

Tokenism

Young people report as a highlight when they *'are really listened to'* and their ideas are *'taken on board'*. They also report their frustration of *'tokenism'*, when their ideas fall on deaf ears or indeed when they have no idea what became of their input into a consultation or other process. Dublin City Council has the excellent plan of asking people who want to consult with the Comhairle to ensure that their information is relevant to the age profile and interests of the group and also to *'provide comprehensive details of how the Comhairle delegates' views or ideas were used'*. Ensuring the relevance of any presentation and ensuring feedback based on any consultation or other process are both vital for the sustainability and integrity of the process.

Culture in decision-making bodies

There has been enormous progress in the quest to ensure Comhairle members are sitting on committees where decisions on local issues affecting young people are made. However, it is possibly the case that a more seismic shift in adult organisations is necessary if we are to meaningfully include young people in the decision-making process. This shift is perhaps a cerebral and cultural one, where organisations are prepared to make any necessary changes in their structures and processes that would mean young people could meaningfully take part. The support of senior personnel of the CDB, including the Director of Services, should not be underestimated in making this happen – nor indeed in the entire success of Comhairle na nÓg.



The background of the page features light blue silhouettes of people in a meeting. On the left, a person is shown from the side, gesturing with their hand. On the right, another person is shown from the front, holding a pen and looking towards the left. The overall style is clean and modern, with a focus on human interaction.

Chapter 7

Other key issues

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Promotion of Comhairle na nÓg

CDBs and Comhairle organisers are making significant efforts to include young people from a diversity of backgrounds. Invitations are sent to schools, youth organisations, Youthreach and a host of organisations representing ‘hard to reach’ young people. However, many of these invitations go unanswered and the diversity of young people who are invited is not matched by the diversity attending the annual Comhairle event or the smaller groups who meet regularly. Indeed, in many cases, the same young people attend and are voted onto the Comhairle year in, year out.

In addition, when the Comhairle is formed, it is not always the case that decision-making bodies, or indeed other young people, know of its existence. With better promotion of the formed Comhairle, more young people might make contact with their representing peers on issues of concern to them and it would also generate interest in Comhairle membership in future years. Similarly, it is vital that local decision-making bodies know of the Comhairle and are aware that they can consult with the Comhairle on matters that might affect them throughout the year.

It is also important that the wider community is made aware of the Comhairle and the issues of relevance to them. Both Kerry and Kilkenny Comhairle have developed strong links with local media, conducting radio interviews and submitting articles to local press on their experiences and also on the issues that they are interested in progressing. This is also seen as very useful in portraying a positive image of young people locally.

'Youth-led'

The extent to which Comhairlí na nÓg are youth-led varies extensively. There are some Comhairlí where the focus is very much on young people directing the process, whereas other Comhairlí are simply organised (by adults) and young people turn up to find out what is on the agenda.

In this evaluation, two of the Comhairlí – South Dublin and Limerick City – scored especially high on being youth-led. Focus groups with the Comhairle members yielded the following responses on why they thought the Comhairle was youth-led:

- We pick the subjects and tasks.
- We can influence agenda or speakers.
- We decide on dates and agendas.
- We deliver presentations.
- We can bring up anything under AOB ('any other business').

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Overall, the young people in South Dublin and Limerick City felt that they had considerable say in the direction and work of the Comhairle. However, they felt that they would also like to engage in:

- more hands-on work;
- sitting at tables where the 'big ideas stuff' is being discussed.

They also lamented that *'politicians take credit for our work'* and just *'appear at the last moment when something is being launched'*, without having any real interest in the process.

It is evident that the more 'youth-led' Comhairlí are those organisations that have been resourced and developed over a longer period. It is understandable that there is a focus on getting the structures established and young people engaged with the process before empowering the young people to take over those structures and influence the direction. However, it is vital that the needs of young people are met from the outset and that they have a chance to influence and direct the structures and processes of their own Comhairle na nÓg.

Chapter 8

Strengths and benefits of Comhairle na nÓg

Although not necessarily at the pace that most parties would have liked, it is fair to say that Comhairle na nÓg has developed significantly since 2002. Indeed, the youth participation structure, established in all 34 Local Authority areas, has developed to a stage where there are many strengths in the programme and much to be admired. Some of these strengths are discussed below.

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Positive experience of young people

The single biggest strength of Comhairle na nÓg is that the vast majority of young people who participate report having a very positive experience. Indeed, for members of the Comhairle, their involvement is a source of pride to them. The evaluations and information derived from the focus groups conducted for this study indicate that Comhairle na nÓg members are both positively impacted by their experience and also believe that their contribution is making a positive impact on their local community. The young people involved listed what they perceived as the numerous benefits to them personally in being involved and also noted that the Comhairle lent itself to counteracting the stereotyped negative image of young people in the media and in the community.

Partnership approach in delivering the Comhairle

The involvement of agencies from different sectors to form a 'partnership approach' in delivering Comhairle na nÓg is a huge strength of the programme. Although it is not the only model for success, the partnership approach does have particular merit. It serves not only to bring the different expertise of the youth and public sectors together, but also the learning from working with the Comhairle is shared among both sectors. It is essential that the CDBs retain the 'youth participation' learning within the organisation to make it easier to include young people in all elements of their work. Similarly, they pave an important road to linking with decision-makers at local level. On the other hand, the youth services bring their expertise in working directly with young people and all of the benefits that come using youth work development tools. Emerging partnerships with VEC youth officers are also to be encouraged.

Comhairle Development Fund

The additional monies provided by the Comhairle Development Fund is an undoubted strength of Comhairle na nÓg during 2007-2008. The additional resources and funding has enabled Comhairle organisers to expand their ideas about their Comhairle and to actually put those ideas into practice. The monies have also led to more creative practices and experimentation in delivering Comhairle. While not all of these ideas will be an outright success, it is useful that new ideas can be explored and many experiments are resulting in very useful examples of innovative ideas (see Chapter 11).

Links with decision-making bodies

Although there is much progress yet to be made in this area, the links forged between Comhairle na nÓg and decision-making bodies is a very significant strength of the programme. At this stage, many extremely useful links have been made between young people and decision-makers at local level. This has taken the form of young people sitting on the committees and boards of decision-making bodies, as well as making occasional presentations to or being consulted by these bodies on matters or issues of importance to them. Young people have also begun to think in terms of wanting to make this extra step and make an impact on the decision-making process. Most importantly, these links are beginning to reap dividends and young people are beginning to have a tangible impact on decisions in their locality. Examples include the extensive and successful lobbying of Fingal Comhairle for a skate park in Swords, while Dublin City Comhairle played a significant role in the establishment of a youth café in St. Catherine's Youth and Community Centre. In addition, all of the recommendations on library developments from Kerry Comhairle have been taken on board by Kerry County Council.

Engaging 'hard to reach' young people

Again, although improvement is needed in this area, many Comhairlí have been successful in engaging 'hard to reach' young people in the programme. Indeed, the majority of Comhairlí report that at least 10% of their membership comes from 'hard to reach' backgrounds, with some Comhairlí (including Wicklow, Dublin and Limerick City) reporting up to 30%. Work is also commencing on ensuring that the setting and methodologies used facilitate a wider group of young people.



Chapter 9

Challenges for Comhairle na nÓg

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Comhairle na nÓg has faced many challenges in its 6-year history, but still remains one of the most significant structures for youth participation in this country. However, there are continued challenges facing Comhairle na nÓg and the personnel involved in making it a success.

Relevance and accessibility

Like many programmes and processes for young people, it is essential that significant effort is made on a constant basis to keep Comhairle na nÓg both relevant and accessible to young people. It is certainly a challenge to not only make Comhairle relevant and accessible to a wider and more diverse audience, but also to then satisfy the needs of that diverse group. Consulting with young people on how best to achieve this is, without doubt, the first and most important step.

Young people themselves have indicated that ensuring there is a connection with decision-making bodies which can result in actually making an impact on decisions in the local community is the other main means of keeping the Comhairle relevant to them.

There are other important steps to take to ensure that Comhairle remains relevant, including:

- conduct training and capacity-building with ‘adult-orientated’ decision-making bodies so that the experience of sitting on such boards and committees is not an alienating experience for young people;
- ensure an informal, safe and comfortable setting for young people to conduct Comhairle business;
- rotate and elect new members to the Comhairle every 2 years;
- use a variety of methodologies, including non-verbal ones, to suit the diversity of young people involved, especially those who feel less confident or articulate.

Structure of Comhairle na nÓg

Six years on, it is now the challenge that all Comhairlí reach a ‘minimum standard’, which would be used as a platform from where to further develop. There is little doubting that the Comhairle Development Fund has provided the funding and resources to enable that further development, irrespective of the Comhairle’s starting point. There is thus a challenge to maintain that level of funding to each Comhairle to ensure that this development continues.

As the development continues, there is also a challenge that the structure is branded in a way that ensures consistency and an enhanced experience for young people in all Comhairlí. This consistency and enhanced experience is much aided by using a ‘partnership of agency’ approach in delivering Comhairle na nÓg, ensuring the expertise of the youth service while maintaining that learning within the CDB which can make the connections to the decision-making bodies. The partner organisers of the Comhairlí must also meet nationally to share experiences and expertise and to combat working in isolation or in a vacuum.

‘Hard to reach’ young people

It remains a challenge for Comhairle na nÓg to attract and engage the interest of ‘hard to reach’ young people. In addition to the various means of making the Comhairle relevant and accessible to all young people, as outlined above, additional time and resources must be invested to ensure this for the ‘hard to reach’ cohort. Although securing these funds and resources is a challenge in itself, it is clear that capacity-building with a partnership of agencies can work extremely well in combating this challenge.



Transport

Both rural and city-based Comhairlí have cited '*lack of transport*' as a significant challenge. In more rural-based Comhairlí, it is often the case that there is no transport available to young people to get to meetings. Where it is available, the cost can be significant, particular for Comhairlí in larger counties or where the population is widely dispersed. In city-based Comhairlí, especially Dublin, the transport available is usually only directed at one central location (Dublin City centre) while the Comhairle is actually based elsewhere (e.g. Tallaght, Dun Laoghaire, Swords). While the Comhairlí are not alone in facing this challenge, poor transport can have a significant effect on numbers attending meetings on any one day.

Time and competing activities

Like many projects involving young people, Comhairlí na nÓg face the challenge whereby their members are engaged in a number of activities that compete for their time. These activities (such as sports, drama, school and exams) often make planning meetings at a time that suits everyone quite difficult and thus have an impact on attendance. Coupled with the fact that the Comhairle year is a short one, conducting the business of a Comhairle and attempting to have tangible success on the issues of importance to young people can prove an enormous challenge for Comhairle members and organisers alike.



Chapter 10

Key Recommendations

1. Participation of and impact on young people

County Development Boards (CDBs) and Comhairle organisers need to be mindful that it is not enough for Comhairle members simply *'to be involved'* and *'have their voice heard'*. Comhairle members are also keen to *'make a difference'* and *'achieve change'* locally if they are to consider the system and process a success.

2. Participation of 'hard to reach' young people

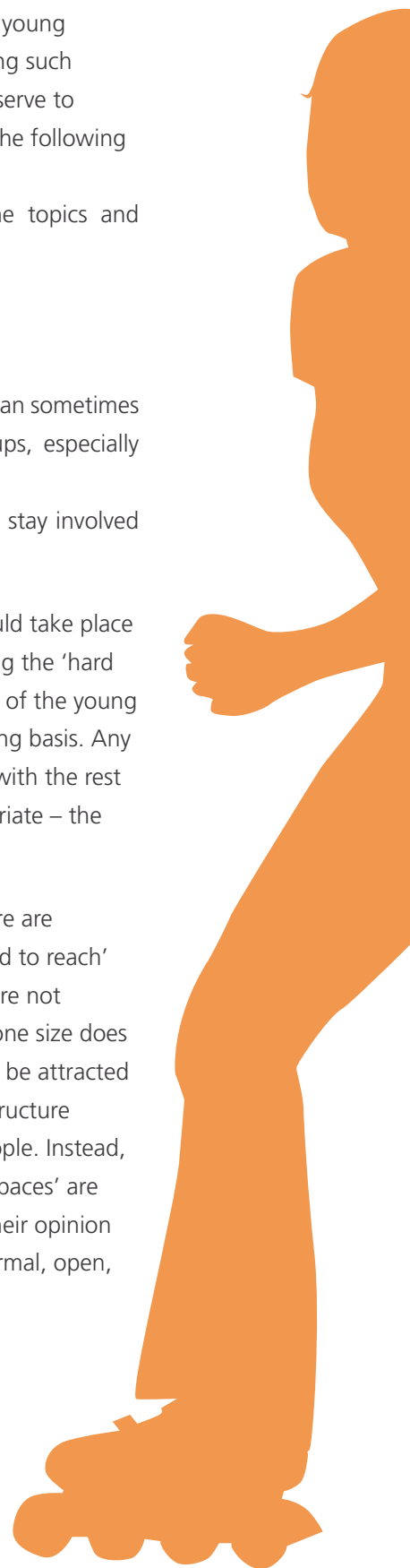
- **'Partnership of agency' approach:** A partnership between all agencies that work with 'hard to reach' young people should be established in each Comhairle na nÓg area. This might take the form of a 'steering committee' or 'special interest group', where all parties pool their resources and expertise to best support those 'hard to reach' young people who are interested in participating in the Comhairle structures. The steering committee should be driven by the local CDB and aim to support the meaningful inclusion of such young people in the Comhairle system.
- **Capacity-building:** All 'hard to reach' young people should undergo, or be undergoing, a simple capacity-building programme *before* attending the Comhairle na nÓg. This programme should address self-confidence and self-esteem issues, before considering some of the skills useful to participating in a 'meeting' setting, such as communications and information on the local Comhairle structure and mechanism.
- **Confidence and literacy:** Facilitation methods need to take confidence and literacy levels into account and ensure that 'hard to reach' or 'less articulate' young people are not further alienated from the process. Consideration should be given to securing ideas through non-verbal methodologies, such as 'moving debates', using 'post-its', or silent voting systems such as 'sticky dots'. Other non-verbal methodologies include body mapping, 'Agony Aunt' letters and statement boards.



- **Relevance and accessibility:** It is vital to ensure that the issues being discussed are interesting to and selected by a wider audience of young people and not just the articulate minority. The setting for holding such meetings or discussions should not be too formal, which might serve to alienate some young people. Consideration should be given to the following to ensure relevance and accessibility:
 - use some non-verbal methodologies to elicit ideas on the topics and issues to be discussed;
 - include fun elements in the programme;
 - keep the workshops brief and to the point;
 - ensure a comfortable, informal and safe setting;
 - consider an appropriate casual dress code – school uniforms can sometimes further alienate ‘hard to reach’ or more marginalised groups, especially those who do not attend school;
 - make the annual event fun and creative to attract people to stay involved throughout the year.

- **Election process:** Discussion on a suitable election process should take place at local level between the partner agencies involved in supporting the ‘hard to reach’ young people. It should consider the current capacities of the young people involved and their interest in being involved on an ongoing basis. Any proposal to ‘positively discriminate’ should be openly discussed with the rest of the Comhairle na nÓg or its relevant subgroup where appropriate – the process needs to be transparent and fair to all parties.

- **Alternative participation mechanisms:** It is essential that there are additional and alternative mechanisms to hear the voices of ‘hard to reach’ young people and, indeed, the many other young people who are not attracted by the Comhairle system. It is essential to admit that ‘one size does not fit all’ and that there are many young people who will never be attracted to or involved in the Comhairle system. Hence, the Comhairle structure should not be relied upon solely to hear the voices of young people. Instead, it is important that less formal, less structured and more ‘open spaces’ are made available to such young people who want to contribute their opinion on and/or support to issues that are relevant to them, in an informal, open, safe space, potentially on a ‘one-off’ basis.



3. Structure of Comhairle na nÓg

Guidelines

While there is no need to make the Comhairle na nÓg system entirely uniform, there needs to be a clear set of 'revised guidelines' for the Comhairle na nÓg. The revised guidelines should outline:

- a clear set of objectives for Comhairle na nÓg;
- emphasise the key areas of development for Comhairle na nÓg. These might include:
 - to develop further links with decision-making structures;
 - to develop a 'partnership of agencies' that work with 'hard to reach' young people and to help fund their capacity-building programmes;
 - to upskill Comhairle members in areas useful for them to engage with decision-making structures, such as presentation skills (including, for example, PowerPoint proficiency) and public-speaking;
 - to run innovative and creative projects that will make Comhairle na nÓg more appealing to all young people.
- clarify the conditions of funding for the annual grant based on the agreed objectives, but dependent on achieving a set of 'minimum standards'. Provision of the annual grant should be contingent on achieving these standards.

The guidelines should be developed by the Comhairle na nÓg Implementation Group (CIG), or its subgroup, and presented for agreement to a wider group of decision-makers, which would include young people, CDB representatives and all other key stakeholders.

The CIG should also consider the varying structures and practices of Comhairlí na nÓg when devising its new 3-year strategic plan.



Information-sharing Day

To combat the isolation felt by some personnel working on Comhairle na nÓg at local level, an annual Information-sharing Day should be held for key people involved. The event could be used to:

- get initial agreement on the 'revised guidelines' and 'minimum standards' produced by the CIG (*see above*);
- share expertise and knowledge;
- share ideas on innovative projects;
- support new personnel;
- gather ideas on the future direction of Comhairle na nÓg from a wider cohort.

Training Day

With the frequent changes of staff working on Comhairle na nÓg at local level, an annual Training Day should be held on the basics in order to ensure that all new personnel are, first, supported at local level and, secondly, understand the structure, processes and minimum standards expected of Comhairle na nÓg.

Alternatively – or in addition – a 'Basics of Comhairle na nÓg' manual should be devised so that, again, any staff who are new to the process and take up the reins mid-year have guidelines on which to base their work.

Comhairle Development Fund

While the variety of projects that were funded through the Comhairle Development Fund is to be welcomed, the OMCYA should specify that any future 'development funds' are closely linked to the core objectives of Comhairle na nÓg. These might include:

- to develop links with decision-making structures;
- to develop a 'partnership of agencies' that work with 'hard to reach' young people and to help fund their capacity-building programmes;
- to upskill Comhairle members in areas useful for them to engage with decision-making structures, such as presentation skills and public-speaking;
- to run innovative and creative projects that will enhance Comhairle na nÓg and make it more appealing to all young people.

Delivery partners

The decision on what agencies are best suited to delivering the Comhairle at local level is contingent on local factors. Consideration should be given to devising a 'partnership approach' between the CDB and local youth service, where this is appropriate and possible. If funding allows, a dedicated part-time worker should be employed to drive the work of the Comhairle.

Branding

A discussion needs to be facilitated with the OMCYA, the CIG and the key stakeholders in Comhairlí who run regular meetings under a different name. Keeping an open mind on the name 'Comhairle na nÓg' itself, a name for the annual event and more regular meetings should be agreed by all parties. This need not necessarily be the same name for both events, but all parties should agree to refer to the 'annual event' as 'x' and the more regular meetings as 'y'. The participation structure should then be 'branded' and promoted under the agreed name, or names.

OMCYA Annual Final Report

The OMCYA Final Report puts considerable emphasis on the 'annual' Comhairle event only. The form for the Final Report should be revised to give equal weight to the meetings that are conducted on a regular basis. This would also help ensure that these regular meetings are perceived as 'Comhairle na nÓg' meetings.

Membership age

Every effort should be made to include young people from as young as 12 years of age in Comhairle na nÓg. A policy of constricting the Comhairle to young people in Transition Year or over the age of 15 should be avoided.



Membership term

Consideration should be given to the possibility of extending the term of office for a Comhairle na nÓg member to 2 years. This has the potential to increase the likelihood of better connections and relationships with personnel in other decision-making bodies. Similarly, it will give the young people time to develop their confidence, ideas and skills, and make for increased and improved participation. However, such an arrangement needs to be appropriate to the local area and be dependent on the views of young people. It might be that some people choose to take the 2-year option, while others opt out at the end of one year. The 2-year term should be a *maximum* term and members should not be re-elected to Comhairle for more than 2 years. Similarly, no one Comhairle member should be selected to attend Dáil na nÓg for more than 2 years.

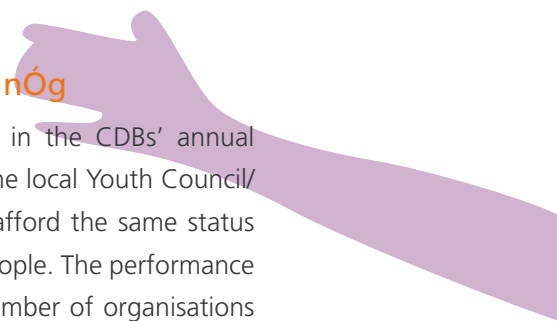
CDB 'performance indicator' for Comhairle na nÓg


The current performance indicator for Comhairle na nÓg in the CDBs' annual report asks for 'the percentage of local schools involved in the local Youth Council/Comhairle na nÓg scheme'. This needs to be changed to afford the same status given to schools to *all organisations* that work with young people. The performance indicator could be changed to assess 'the percentage or number of organisations that work with young people, including schools, involved in the local Youth Council/Comhairle na nÓg'.

The section in the OMCYA's annual Final Report on 'the number of schools who participated in the Annual Meeting and attach list of same' could then be changed accordingly, asking CDBs to indicate and list 'the number of organisations – whether schools, youth organisations, Youthreach centres or other organisations working with young people – involved in the Comhairle na nÓg'. This will serve to negate the over-reliance on schools and to increase the diversity of young people involved in the Comhairle.

Link with schools

There needs to be a national approach to making links with Principals and schools. The OMCYA and/or the CIG need to make an approach through the Department of Education and Science to discuss the most efficient means of making such links. There should also be an official link between student councils and Comhairlí.





Comhairle members are keen to **'make a difference'** and **'achieve change'** locally

Elections

There are many merits to the various electoral procedures already in existence in Comhairlí na nÓg nationwide. The methodology in any one area should ensure that:

- young people have been consulted on their preferred method of voting;
- the method has been carefully considered and is appropriate to local circumstances;
- issues of gender, 'hard to reach' and age spread are considered;
- the system is sensitive and fair.

Grant timeframe

If the budgeting model allows, the OMCYA should give consideration to extending the 'reporting' timeframe to 18 months (from the present 6 months). This would give ample time for all monies to be spent and accounted for, and for a proper evaluation, especially with young people, to be completed.





4. Development of initiatives with decision-making bodies

Strategic Policy Committees

If we expect and want young people to sit on the Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs) of relevance, an extra space needs to be created in the allocation for the community and voluntary sectors on those SPCs. This will ensure that any Comhairle member does not have to go through unnecessary hoops to get onto the committee and also that a young person is not seen as 'displacing' another organisation from the community and voluntary sectors, which would be an unfair burden to place on any young person.

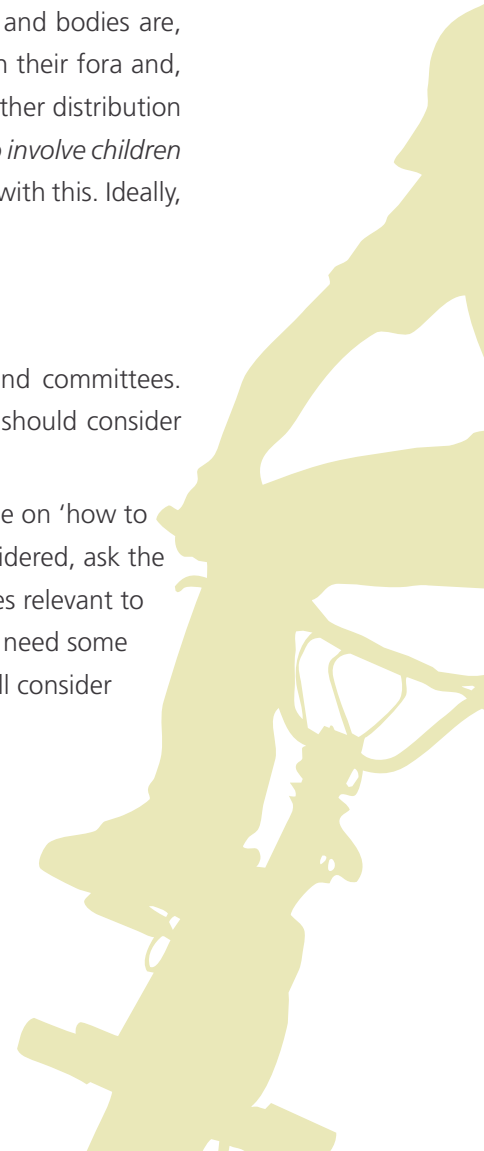
Training and capacity-building on 'involving young people' for decision-making bodies

It is important to acknowledge that if we want young people to sit on such bodies as SPCs, community fora and other decision-making bodies, there needs to be some training and capacity-building within these bodies on 'how to best include young people'. It is important that it can be established that committees and bodies are, first, open to properly and meaningfully including young people on their fora and, secondly, that the young people are upskilled in how to do this. Further distribution and promotion of the publication *Young Voices: Guideline on how to involve children and young people in your work* (OMC, 2005) could potentially help with this. Ideally, training should also be offered to such interested groups.

Combating alienating experiences

Comhairlí na nÓg are often approached to sit on various fora and committees. Before committing to membership of such bodies, the Comhairle should consider asking the committee in question:

- Has the committee given any consideration to the best practice on 'how to meaningfully involve young people'? If this has not been considered, ask the committee to work with the CDB or youth service on the issues relevant to 'involving young people'. Alternatively, suggest that they may need some training or to first read *Young Voices* before the Comhairle will consider membership.



- If the committee has given this consideration, the Comhairle should then ask the committee to conduct a presentation to the entire Comhairle on why they would like a Comhairle member to join their committee. The Comhairle can then decide if they are interested in being involved.

While it is certainly the case that Comhairle na nÓg should be trying to link up with as many relevant decision-making bodies in the local area as possible, it is vital that this link is a meaningful one and that the young people selected will have an equal opportunity to contribute in an environment in which they are comfortable and safe.

Role of Senior Local Authority personnel

The role of senior CDB and Local Authority personnel in the success of Comhairle na nÓg as a whole, but especially in linking with decision-making structures, cannot be underestimated. The CDB should ensure that senior personnel, including the Director of Services, are aware of and linked into the activities of the Comhairle. The work of the Comhairle should inform the thinking and decisions of senior personnel and decision-making committees. Any newly established projects or decision-making bodies should be inter-agency in nature and aim to include representation from the Comhairle from the outset. Conversely, the Comhairle should be aware of what the issues and policies of importance are at local level so that they can gather their views and share them with the relevant parties.

Alternative feedback mechanisms

There are also instances where young people do not want to sit on decision-making bodies for an entire year. While it may be relevant to present the views of young people on a one-off basis, it may not be relevant to sit on the committee for the entire year. If young people – and young people must be consulted on this – do not want to sit on a committee, but would prefer to present their views, or be consulted on their views, on a one-off basis, this should also be facilitated.

Alternative feedback mechanisms (such as consultations, presentations and surveys with young people) should also be considered for ensuring that the views of young people are represented and heard.



If an organisation or body asks to make a presentation to Comhairle na nÓg, the Comhairle should ask if the favour can be reciprocated, if the Comhairle feels it is relevant and interesting to them. An arrangement should then be made for the Comhairle to present their issues of importance to the body in question.

Tokenism

Comhairle organisers should ask any committees that would like to make a presentation to ensure that the information is relevant to the age profile and interests of the Comhairle cohort. Similarly, committees should be asked to provide a 'feedback report' outlining how the delegates' views were used or considered.

5. Other key issues

Promotion of Comhairle na nÓg

Comhairle na nÓg needs to be better promoted on a national level. The existing promotional tools, such as the Comhairle na nÓg website (www.comhairlenanog.ie), should be better advertised. Links to widely used websites, such as Bebo and TeenSpace, should also be developed and maintained.

Links with schools (see *p. 40*) should also improve the promotion of Comhairle na nÓg. Consideration should be given to developing a national poster that would enable each CDB to advertise the Comhairle with completed local details on location, date and time.

When first formed for the year, the Comhairle should write to every local decision-making body to officially announce its formation. The letter should invite such groups to contact the Comhairle should they wish to consult on matters of relevance to young people and outline any issues of particular interest to Comhairle members.

The wider community also needs to be more aware of the Comhairle so that they can see the voluntary involvement and achievements of young people. Ideally, this should be reported through the local media. Where possible, a relationship with the Comhairle members and local media should be established and regular contributions made. Alternatively, Comhairle members should submit articles or seek radio interviews as the need and issues arise.

'Youth-led'

Young people are keen to be involved in all aspects of their Comhairle, particularly in directing and influencing what issues are discussed and 'what is on the agenda'. However, they are also keen on structure and appreciate that there are agendas and minutes to support each meeting. Having the skills and confidence to influence the direction of the Comhairle is an evolving process that takes time. Young people should be given the time, ideally a 2-year period, to develop such confidence and skills. Similarly, young people should be empowered and encouraged to take the lead in the direction of their own youth participation structure. This may take the form of:

- setting the agenda for the following meeting;
- indicating what speakers or presenters they would like to hear from;
- deciding what issues are relevant to them for discussion and working on these throughout the year;
- making presentations on these ideas to local decision-making bodies;
- *'sitting at tables where the big ideas stuff is being discussed'*.



Chapter 11

Examples of innovative projects and ideas

While the Comhairle Development Fund has predominantly been used to ensure that the Comhairlí are meeting on a more regular and sustainable basis, the funds have also been used to develop highly creative and innovative ideas, greatly enhancing the experience of Comhairle members around the country. Some of the more creative and innovative ideas put into action during 2007-2008 are outlined below.

Securing dedicated noticeboard space in schools – CAVAN/MONAGHAN

Cavan and Monaghan Comhairlí na nÓg worked to secure noticeboard space in each school to allow the Comhairle to put up their quarterly newsletter and other relevant youth information. This allowed the Comhairle to create a permanent and regular connection with the schools and the students in those schools. Ensuring this regular connection is an extremely useful way of promoting interest in Comhairle na nÓg on an ongoing basis.

Production of a promotional DVD on Comhairle na nÓg – CAVAN/MONAGHAN

Cavan and Monaghan Comhairlí na nÓg dedicated three special workshops to designing, scripting, filming, producing and editing a promotional DVD about their Comhairlí. The project was driven and directed by young people and will be used to encourage a wider audience of young people to get involved in their local area.

The completed DVD was then launched at a County Council meeting where the Comhairle members presented their DVD to Councillors and used the opportunity to ask pertinent questions.

Production of the documentary 'Where have all the buses gone?' – GALWAY CITY

Galway City Comhairle na nÓg researched, designed and produced a documentary film on public transport entitled 'Where have all the buses gone?'. The film allowed the Comhairle members to contribute their ideas on public transport, not traditionally considered a 'youth issue', while learning new skills in the meantime. Interviews with 6 Councillors were conducted as part of the film, which will soon be presented to the Galway City Council and the Galway Integrated Transport Committee.

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Comhairle meetings in regional/electoral areas – GALWAY COUNTY, WESTMEATH AND WICKLOW

Three different Comhairlí na nÓg have opted to host their Comhairle meetings on a regional or electoral area basis. Effectively, a Comhairle meeting is held in each of the locations. In all counties, transport is a significant issue for young people and hosting the meetings in different locations allows more young people to participate in the Comhairle structure. Holding meetings in more than one location has resource implications, but Galway County, Westmeath and Wicklow have been very successful in attracting a greater cohort of young people, with between 80 and 120 young people involved in each county on a regular basis.

Online Youth Council Discussion Forum – KILDARE

Kildare Comhairle na nÓg established an online Youth Council Discussion Forum, which allows Comhairle members to have a direct link with the Councillor from their electoral area. Up until the advent of the online forum, Comhairle members made one presentation to the County Councillors each year. The online forum gives the Comhairle members direct access to their Councillors and allows them to question them and make suggestions on a regular basis, using a medium that is familiar and comfortable for them. While it was a challenge to get Councillors involved and also demands access to a computer and the Internet, it is certainly an innovative method of making links between young people and elected public officials.



Rural Transport Initiative – ROSCOMMON

Like many Comhairlí, transport issues have been a concern for Roscommon Comhairle na nÓg. In an effort to combat this, Roscommon Comhairle has been in consultation with the Rural Transportation Programme to ask that their concerns and needs be included in the Transport Plan for 2009. It is hoped that this will help alleviate the difficulties that young people have in attending Comhairle meetings and other youth events.

Student Council Network – SOUTH DUBLIN

South Dublin Comhairle na nÓg has designed the 'Student Council Network' website (www.studentcouncilnetwork.ie) in order to create a link for young people, going to school and living in South Dublin County, between Comhairle na nÓg and student councils. The idea is to give young people '*a chance to have your voice heard in your school and in your local area*'.

This idea is also linked with South Dublin Comhairle's proposed new election system, whereby each secondary school in the county is being allocated one seat on the new Comhairle na nÓg. A further 15 places are being allocated to youth organisations that work directly with 'hard to reach' young people.

The website is an excellent tool in promoting the Comhairle in secondary schools and for making an automatic link between two forms of active citizenship for young people – Comhairle na nÓg and student councils.

'Making Connections' Workshop – SOUTH DUBLIN

The South Dublin Comhairle na nÓg organised a workshop entitled 'Making Connections', which provided a forum for service providers, County Council officials and members of the Local Sports Partnership to engage with young people. Participants in the workshop considered *Teenspace: National Recreation Strategy for Young People* and discussed the following themes:

- the main barriers and motivators to participation and recreation;
- the single biggest need as regards recreation for young people;
- examples of recreation projects and programmes for young people that work well.

The outcome of this workshop illustrated how young people and adults *can* engage in productive dialogue and meet on common ground.

Political Speed Dating – WATERFORD CITY and WICKLOW

Waterford City Comhairle na nÓg invited local representatives to a ‘political speed dating’ event to encourage communication between young people and elected Waterford City Councillors. This is a method devised by a UK theatre company to encourage and facilitate communication between politicians and young people in an informal way. Like conventional speed dating, each session consists of a series of 3-minute ‘dates’ (or interactions) between the members of the Comhairle and each Councillor. When the gong sounds, regardless of how engrossing the conversation may be, people have to move on.

The young people scored the Councillors out of 10 on how well they listened, answered specific questions and whether or not they would be likely to vote for them. Members of Waterford City Comhairle found it a useful tool for communication and were satisfied that the politicians listened to their issues. Equally, the Councillors said that it was a very useful process; one Councillor even asked if the time for the interactions could be increased to 5 minutes if the event was to be repeated. While this form of interaction cannot replace ongoing and structured inputs into decision-making processes, it is a useful, informal and creative means for young people to communicate their questions and issues to elected officials.

The Bray Electoral area of Wicklow Comhairle na nÓg conducted a similar ‘speed lobbying event’ in which young people had an opportunity to question a School Principal, a member of An Garda Síochána and a Council official.

Agenda Days – DONEGAL

Donegal Youth Council ran a very successful ‘Agenda Day’. The idea of an ‘Agenda Day’ or ‘Dialogue Day’ is becoming more popular in youth participation circles. It is a method of bringing together a wide spectrum of young people from a community to begin a dialogue between adults and young people. The day is essentially youth-led and information from the day is fed back to service providers, with young people continuing to be involved in moving forward the recommendations. The day is a step beyond a consultation, in that young people are given a space to use their voice, but the service providers also hear that collective voice since young people themselves follow-up on the outcome.



Chapter 12

Conclusions

There is simply no denying, or indeed underestimating, the enormous difference for the better that access to considerably more funding (though not vast sums) has made to Comhairle na nÓg throughout the country. The Comhairle Development Fund has enabled each Comhairle to develop in a variety of ways depending on its initial starting point. While some Comhairlí have used the funds to develop innovative ideas to enhance the experience of members and others have employed a part-time worker to drive and better facilitate the Comhairle process, the simple fact that the monies have enabled many more Comhairlí to meet on a regular and sustained basis is perhaps the single greatest achievement of the grant scheme. The development of partnership arrangements with external agencies (such as local youth services or other organisations engaged with 'hard to reach' young people) has also been pivotal in improving the experiences of all the young people involved in the Comhairle and in attempting to engage those who are not.

Indeed, it should be remembered that it is *only* a developed and enhanced Comhairle na nÓg that can make any attempt to involve, engage and empower young people to have a meaningful input and positive impact on the decisions being made – decisions that do affect the lives of young people – in their local communities. It is vital that the development of any initiatives and links with decision-making bodies in the local community remains at the fore in order to ensure Comhairle na nÓg continues as a meaningful youth participation structure.

It is now the challenge for the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs to ensure that the additional funds to Comhairle na nÓg are maintained. It is clear that the Comhairle Development Fund has made a significant and positive impact on the development of Comhairle na nÓg – a development which otherwise would simply not have happened.

Should such funding be secured, it is essential that each CDB then rises to the challenge of ensuring that the additional funding results in a developed Comhairle na nÓg that provides a safe, informal and inviting space for a diversity of young people to become involved, engaged and empowered to contribute their ideas and opinions to local decision-making processes in their communities. To ensure a consistent and high-quality standard is met in each Local Authority area, a set of 'revised guidelines' and 'minimum standards' should be devised. Every young person in Ireland should have access to a structure that properly enables them to have an impact on the decision-making processes at local level that affect their lives, regardless of where they grow up.

Six years after its conception in 2002, Comhairle na nÓg has made in-roads in providing a youth participation structure for young people in Ireland. The Comhairlí that have been continually resourced and supported, and the Comhairle Development Fund of 2007 prove what progress and standards can be achieved with an injection of funding and the drive and commitment to spend it appropriately.

While it is important that Comhairle na nÓg is not the only mechanism used to hear young voices, it is vital that the enhanced funds are continued so that the development of Comhairle na nÓg is prolonged. If the Comhairle Development Fund, and the development that ensued, continues, Ireland could well top the international polls in the provision of a quality local youth participation structure in another six years' time. If this funding and development is not pursued, young people now and in the future will be entitled to ask 'Why not?' The challenge, on all fronts, is ours to meet.





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